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Servants of the rice

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Servants of the rice

by

Audrey McCombs

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing & Environment

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2016

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DEDICATION

To my family

Bruce and Carolyn
Doug and Melinda
Amy, Brian, and Hunter
And to Hannah – I think you would have liked this one
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HOW TO READ MALAGASY NAMES

Most Malagasy names begin with the honorific “Ra-,” although the names of very high nobles and kings often start with “Andria-,” while those of the lower classes start with “I-.” When reading Malagasy names, ignore the beginning and focus on the middle of the word.

- **Ranavalona**, the queen
- **Ratianandrazana**, the general
- **Rasalama**, a Christian covert
- **Ramanetaka**, a noble in exile
- **Andriamihaja**, the queen’s lover
- **Andriamomba**, a conservative noble

Place names almost always begin with “An,” which means “at.” When reading place names, pay attention to what comes after the “An.”

- **Antananarivo**, the capital city
- **Anjahankely**, a village
- **Ambatolehivy**, a village
- **Ambohimanabola**, a village

Malagasy names can be very long, with multiple meaning designators and multiple grammatical particles surrounding and between the meaning designators. The king before Radama has what an English reader will think is an absurdly long name: Andrianampoinimerina. His name can be broken down thus: Andria-nam-poi-ni-merina. “Andria” means “king” or “noble.” “Nam” is a grammatical particle indicating place. “Po” is a transformation of “fo,” which means “heart.” “Ni” is a grammatical particle indicating possession. And “merina” is of course the name of the Merina people. So, translated literally, “Andrianampoinimerina” means “The king at the heart of the Merina people.” But as Hilary Brandt notes in her *Guide to Madagascar*, be thankful that this is a shortened version of his full name:

Andrianampoinimerinandroantsimitoviaminandriampanjaka

Yes, that’s a real Malagasy name.

I’ve included a “Dramatis Personae” with this text. Make friends with it.
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

In the Merina court

- Queen Ranavalona (also Ramavo, Ranavalomajaka): Queen of the Merina tribe of Madagascar, wife to the late King Radama
- Andriamihaja: Lover and unofficial consort of Ranavalona, Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the army, noble of the 12th rank
- Ratiandrazana: Scion of a noble Merina family, keeper of the Ikelimalaza *sampy*, general and noble of the 12th rank
- Ani (also Ramanany): Executioner to Queen Ranavalona
- Raombana: Court secretary, schooled in England by the London Missionary Society for eight years
- Andriamamba: Conservative Merina noble who led the coup that placed Ranavalona on the throne
- Rainiharo: Ratiandrazana’s brother, also keeper of the Ikelimalaza *sampy*
- Rabodomirahalahy and Rasendrasoa: Former wives of King Radama, and close confidants of Queen Ranavalona

Other Merina

- Todisoa: A rice farmer
- Rasalama: David Griffiths’ housemaid. A Malagasy convert to Christianity
- Paul: A Malagasy convert to Christianity
- Ramanetaka: Cousin to Radama, previous governor of Mahajunga, now living in exile in the Comoros Islands

Historical Merina

- Radama (d. 1828): Husband to Ranavalona. Died 1828, at which time Ranavalona ascended the throne
- Andrianampoinimerina (d. 1810): Father of Radama and king before him. United highland tribes under the throne at Antananarivo

Sakalava tribesmen

- Ravalahy: Sakalava noble and governor of Iboina, Sakalava territory in northwest Madagascar bordering Mahajunga, the only Merina city on the west coast
- Ramitraha: Sakalava king of Iboina

Foreigners

- David Griffiths: British missionary from the London Missionary Society
- David Jones: British missionary from the London Missionary Society
- Alidy ibn Saleh ibn Tariq ibn Khalid al-Fulan: Arab slave trader who works the East African slave route
- James Hastie (d. 1827): British Agent and friend to King Radama
- James Brady: Jamacian who helped train the Merina army under Radama in the tactics of modern warfare
- Governor Leutenant-General Sir Charles Colville: Governor of the British island of Mauritius
- Achille Guy Marie de Penfentenio, Comte de Cheffontaines: Governor of the French island of Bourbon
- Commodore Jean Baptiste Marie Augustin Gourbeyre: French Admiral working off the island of Bourbon
Figure: The Merina Empire, Madagascar, c. 1830
Source: Campbell 1988 “Slavery and fanampoana”
INTRODUCTION

I’ve been told I must include with this thesis an introduction “contextualizing” the work. I lodge my protest here, not out of a sense of false modesty, but because, especially for a work like this, too much focus on the author poses a very real danger to the work itself. I am a white, middle-class American writing about a culture radically different from my own. And as anyone with more than ten minutes experience in Western literary criticism will know, this particular combination of author and work kicks up a sandstorm of issues about cultural appropriation, racial privilege, and who has the right to write about what.

I have no patience for these types of debates. All they do is obscure the only question that really matters—is the work true? And with respect to culture and my book, the only people who can answer that question are the Malagasy themselves. It is my hope that this book will be published and translated into French (the colonial language that most urban Malagasy can speak), and ultimately Malagasy (for the vast majority of the population still living in rural areas). If the Malagasy people themselves read the book and say, “Yes, this feels true. Things could have happened this way,” then I have succeeded. If they read the book and think, “This is a fantasy—no one I know would ever act in this way,” then I have failed and this book is all the things it will probably be accused of being.

Of course, some would argue that even if the book fails in that respect, it might not fail utterly. It might still be entertaining. It might still be thought-provoking. It might still draw attention to the real Madagascar—a place that has nothing to do with animated penguins and everything to do with the modern struggles of globalization. Madagascar sits high on the list of places on this earth with the most species in the most danger. If by some miraculous alignment of events this book saves even one species from going extinct, well, you can hurl all the epithets you want at me and I will have no regrets.
But my first concern has always been to write a book that the Malagasy can claim as their own. I have worked hard to do so. I lived in Madagascar for two years, from 2010 to 2012, in a very small village of less than one hundred people of whom four could read or write at any level. I lived in a stick hut with no electricity, cooked my rice on a charcoal fire, and gathered my water from a stream. In the two years I was there, I learned to speak the local language fluently. When people ask me, “What was it like to live in Madagascar?” I tell them it was like going back in time three hundred years. The village Anjahankely makes a brief appearance in the novel—this is the village where I lived.

Throughout the writing of this book I have maintained contact with Madagascar. Since I left the country in March of 2012, two or three times a month I speak with my good friend, Arnaud Richelin, who has a French name but speaks no language but the Antakarana dialect of the Malagasy. He has been instrumental in the development of this book—countless times I’ve asked him over the phone, “What do you think of this? Does this seem right? Is this okay in Malagasy culture?” His will be the first name in the acknowledgments section, and what credibility there is to the book is largely a result of his generosity and patience with my stupid foreigner questions.

I have also been as careful as I can be about my research. I’m including after this introduction a note on sources, so I won’t go into detail here. I will say that I would have liked to have visited the archives in London, Paris, and Antananarivo, but as I didn’t have a twenty thousand dollar research grant, I did the best I could from a small town in the middle of Iowa, with access to a moderate university library, interlibrary loans, and of course the internet. Interlibrary loans saved me—their researchers are wizards at tracking down obscure historical documents—and when this book gets published everyone in ILL will get a signed copy with my thanks. “You helped make this.”

During one of the workshops on an early chapter in this book I said to David Zimmerman, “I’m just trying to get out of the way of the material.” There is an important concept in the Chinese
philosophy of Taoism called “wu wei.” It literally means “without effort,” and is often translated as “the action of non-action.” It’s the idea that one’s actions are not forced, that one is empty of ego and therefore acts harmoniously and quite effortlessly. We’ve all had this experience, in which we lose ourselves in something bigger than ourselves, whether it be music or running or writing or prayer. I have tried to write from a place of wu wei, getting out of the way of the material and letting the Merina court of 1830 use me merely as a mouthpiece.

And this is another reason why I think focus on the author is distracting. When we ask about the author’s place in the world during the composition of a work, we are asking the wrong question.

Most unfortunately, I am not a zen master. (Zen is what happened to Taoism after it was filtered through Buddhism). I grew up in the United States reading books in English that employ Western narrative traditions. I hope to publish in a Western market, and I am as cognizant as I can be at this stage of the expectations, practices, and limitations of that market. Western narrative expectations do not align well with the narrative traditions of many other cultures, Malagasy included, and this tension between my story and my market is one that I think will become obvious as you read the book. It’s perhaps the most difficult thing I struggled with in writing this story. I am very interested in my readers’ perspectives on how that tension plays out.

What bridges this gap between the Western world and Madagascar is the story of Queen Ranavalona herself. Ranavalona came to power in 1828 after the death of her husband, King Radama I. There is a whole history there, reaching back to the time of King Andrianampoinimerina who united the Merina tribes and set about conquering the rest of the Island of Madagascar. His son Radama enthusiastically embraced Andrianampoinimerina’s project, to the point of signing a treaty with the English in which he allowed the London Missionary Society to set up shop in Imerina in exchange for an annual payment of guns. The conservative faction at court grew increasingly unhappy with the
cultural pollution of the Westerners, and when Radama died at an early age from an excess of alcohol and women, the conservative faction helped Ranavalona usurp the throne from the decreed heirs—Radama’s (but not Ranavalona’s) daughter, still a child, and her teenage cousin, whom she was to marry.

Ranavalona reigned for 33 years, from 1828 until she died in 1861. During that time, she managed to hold at bay the two most powerful countries in the world (Britain and France), hungry for Madagascar’s resources and at the height of their imperial powers. It was an extraordinary achievement that could only have been effected by an extraordinary woman, and after her death the island started its inevitable slide into the pit of colonialism. The French invaded in 1883, annexed the island in 1896, and declared it a colony the following year. How did Ranavalona manage to maintain the sovereignty of her kingdom, safeguard the integrity of her culture, and protect the resources of her land? She was brutal—and therein lies the essential enigma of Ranavalona for both the Malagasy and our Western sensibilities.

Gwyn Campbell, without doubt the foremost modern scholar of nineteenth century Madagascar, estimates that during her reign Ranavalona’s persecution of the Christians and forced labor programs depopulated the island by half, and reduced the population of Imerina from 750,000 to 130,000 between 1829 and 1842. Her human rights record is on par with some of history’s most infamous tyrants. And so from our (and the Malagasy’s) post-colonial perspective, what do we think of Ranavalona? Do we cheer her anti-colonialism? Or do we condemn her abuses? How are we to make sense of this woman who is so distant from us in place, time, and culture, but whose legacy still touches us today as we struggle with issues of race, culture, globalization, and neocolonialism? What does it mean to be civilized?

This is a story that demands telling and these are questions that must be asked, but when I first learned of Ranavalona in Madagascar and started looking for people who have told her story, I found, unbelievably, no one. (Keith Laidler wrote the only modern biography, titled *Female Caligula*, and the
book is even worse than the title would suggest.) No one else I’ve ever met outside of Madagascar has even heard of Ranavalona, and the Malagasy themselves are only vaguely aware of her story. I wish someone else would write this book—they’d probably do a better job of it and then I could get on with my life as a conservation biologist. But no one else is writing it, and so here we are one hundred and fifty thousand words and a whole lot of questions later.

In this book, and in the two to follow (which I intend cover the rest of her reign), I hope to pose these questions and allow readers to make up their own minds. This is the job of literature: to ask questions that have not yet been asked, and to draw forth a thoughtfulness that is both new and relevant. It is not I but Ranavalona herself who poses these questions—I am merely her imperfect scribe. How faithfully I have captured her story will be judged by others more competent than myself.
SERVANTS OF THE RICE
PROLOGUE

...In which a decision is made

Antananarivo, 1828

The king is dying. He will be dead. Perhaps a week, perhaps less. And no one else knows.

Ramavo emerges from the Tranovola into the northern courtyard of the palace compound. The silver bells that hang from the Silver House fill the air with their silver song. Ramavo stands at the threshold, listening, and her skin tingles as if dusted with silver chimes. She pauses, facing west, and in a moment that lasts from her ancestors to her progeny the moon replaces the sun in the sky. The golden orb fades and shrinks, the moon swells and brightens until the courtyard, the palace, the whole city of Antananarivo are powdered in silver. The entire world pauses—farmers stooped in the fields, mothers cooking in the kitchens, traders bargaining in the markets, cattle grazing in the pastures, chickens pecking in the coops, birds singing and lemurs soaring in the crowns of the rosewood trees, crocodiles dozing in the lazy shallows, even the rice growing in the paddies—they all pause, quieted by the silver song and the silver light, and even the air—cold, bright, charged—even the air stills, captured by the silver dust. Ramavo stands in the silver moment that reaches back to her ancestors and forward to her progeny, that reaches east and west and north and south to the shores of the Island of Madagascar, and she knows. In that moment of stillness the silver is everywhere and she is connected to everything and she stands at the center of it all, and knows. She knows what no one else knows. The king is dying.

Radama will be dead. Perhaps a week, perhaps less.

The gate from the north courtyard to the south is as smooth under her hand as if it had been dipped in molten silver, and as cold. Ahead of her, from between two of the crowded houses she hears
more bells, but it is only women’s laughter. As she closes the gate the women appear—it is the king’s favorite wife, the foreigner Rasalimo, still young and pretty and wearing her Sakalava salovana tucked up under her large, still-firm breasts. Her matching blue kisaly cloaks her hair and drapes her shoulders and her face is painted today, mason’droany again, yellow and white swirls and stars for a festival the Imerina don’t celebrate. The woman has never been at home in her political marriage, but the one time she escaped it turned out badly, and so she stays and surrounds herself with laughing women so she herself is relieved of the duty. But she laughs when she sees Ramavo, the cast-aside first wife trying to enliven her dull hair and tired skin and old eyes with gaudy French satin.

Rasalimo laughs when she sees Ramavo. Always before the favorite’s laugh has been a silver knife slicing sideways under the first wife’s skin, flaying her at intervals, but today the knife disintegrates under the force of Ramavo’s knowing, falls like dust at Ramavo’s feet, and Ramavo looks down onto the swept dirt of the courtyard expecting to see a mound of laughing silver powder and when she doesn’t she looks up at Rasalimo in surprise. The king’s favorite is confused, then dismissive as she and her women turn without a word and glide to the south gate and out of the palace compound. In a moment not plated with silver it would have been as disrespectful as a slap in the face, the younger women not greeting the old, the junior wife not greeting the senior. But Ramavo’s knowledge is shield and armor, sword and spear, gunpowder in a firing cannon, and in this moment the pretty young woman is just a girl who used to be favored by a king.

The king is dying. He will be dead.

Ramavo walks back to her house just to the north of the Besakana. The Tranovola, the Silver House, has been Radama’s seat of power because it impresses the Europeans, but before Radama the great King Andrianampoinimerina used the Besakana for affairs of state. The Besakana is ancient, and sacred, and empty now. Ramavo does not enter her house, but pokes her head in the door and calls to her
two sister wives, Rabodomirahalahy and Rasendrasoa. They follow her to the Besakana, and Ramavo and her sisters begin preparing rice and a thin *kabaka*, nominally to take to the ailing king.

Her interaction with Rabodomirahalahy and Rasendrasoa strips some of the charge from the air, and the hairs on the back of Ramavo’s arms are beginning to lie back down as she rolls out a *tsihy* mat and sits down on it to think. Rasendrasoa, tossing rice in a sahafa to separate out the rocks, asks her How is the king? and Ramavo almost answers. She almost says, but she does not. In her nose still hangs metallic blood, putrid and moldy flesh, and toward the king creeps a shadow of ebony that has touched but not yet enveloped him, but will. Soon.

Perhaps a week, perhaps less. And no one else knows.

He is attended in his illness by his royal guard, the tsimandos, who are strong and loyal and stupid. The only death they know is the death delivered in battle. They do not know that a man can also die of too much alcohol and too many women. But Ramavo knows this. The daughter of a Merina prince, Ramavo has lived her life among nobles—her uncle also died this way. Ramavo attended him in his descent and still remembers the taste of death delivered by gluttony. In Radama’s room she swallowed and swallowed but still the taste would not leave her tongue.

On the *tsihy* mat she gathers branches of cassava and begins to strip the leaves. Normally she would boil the leaves then pound them into a paste, but today she makes food for a dying king, and so the broth will be thin and only lightly salted. Her fingers work automatically, twisting then pulling the leaves from the stems, and the pile of leaves at her side grows without her even noticing.

Ramavo remembers as a child attending the great kabarys of King Andrianampoinimerina, when the entire population of Imerina would gather in the square of Andohalo to hear the king speak. She sat with her aunts and she could always find her father among the other noble men, his scarlet *lamba* shining with more silver, his place always close to the king. She remembers peanuts roasted with salt
and sugar, and the old king’s voice like the great River Ikopa watering the plains of Betsimitatatra. Feeding the rice fields, feeding the people, growing huge and angry when the ancestors were offended, but warm and playful when there was a story to be told. Twenty thousand Merina when Ramavo was a child, every one of them embraced and scolded and educated by the great King Andrianampoinimerina.

Ten years later, when Radama was newly king and still would suffer her at his side, the square at Andohalo filled with soldiers to receive the blessing of the *sampy*. She remembers the smell of twenty thousand iron spears like pools of blood at his feet, and the taste of male lust choking her like sulfur. Radama expanded the territories of Imerina until his kingdom could no long fit into the square at Andohalo, so he ruled with his armies and the guns he bought with his treaty with the English. Who would have thought such a thin and flimsy thing as a piece of paper could hold such power over the King of Imerina?

To succeed him, Radama named his daughter as soon as she was born. She is to marry his teenage nephew when she comes of age, and though he says she will have sole sovereign power, everyone knows they will rule together, or she will be ruled by her husband. Everyone thinks the issue moot for many years to come. Now, Ramavo imagines the girl child wobbling on the sacred stone of Andohalo, the citizens of Imerina gathered to hear her, but they cannot hear her because her voice is young and small and will not carry past the first row of nobles. Ramavo knows the king’s nephew, who loves the paper of the English missionaries better than he loves the spears and guns of his father. She imagines him at the head of an army and almost laughs out loud at this apparition of bumbling chaos.

Rabodomirahalahy and Rasendrasoa do not notice her silent snort—they are busy fanning the charcoal to start the rice fire burning. They gossip about Rasalimo, about the strange Sakalava taboos she refuses to abandon even though she is married and should properly adopt the customs of her
husband. Rasalimo has not been kind to Rabodomirahalahy or Rasendrasoa, and now is burnt by the fire she herself kindled.

Ramavo hates Rasalimo for hating her position, because Rasalimo has the ear of the king but refuses to speak. If Ramavo could speak, she would say a very many things. She would tell the king that the English are using him—that they feed him alcohol and feed him women and he does exactly what they want him to do. Radama is a weak king who allows his vices to control him. Ramavo has her own vices, this she admits to herself. She loves thick, fatty beef *kabaka*, chicken stewed with mangoes, dried fish from Tamatave fried in oil and mashed with goose eggs. She loves her satin in yellow and red and blue and purple, and her coral comb and gold and silver bracelets that spark like lightning when she moves.

But Ramavo is smart where Radama is not. All the king understands is his own lust, for women and for war. Ramavo grew up at the market; she understands the bartering game, that the first person to name a price loses. Andriamihaja taught her the foreign writing while he was wooing her, and now she understands about taxes and trade. She knows where Radama’s rice comes from, and she would bet her coral comb that the king does not.

But Radama is dying. He will be dead, in a week, maybe less. His heirs are not fit to rule, and the two factions at court will fight for control until the conquered tribes—the Betsileo, the Bezanozano, the Betsimisaraka, the Betanimena—have all thrown off Merina rule, and with it Merina taxes, and Imerina will once again be an impoverished Sakalava vassal state. She, Ramavo, will lose her rice fields, her jewels, her silks and satins, her cattle, her loom, her perfumes, her shoes, and her home.

The Besakana is filling with smoke from the fire, and Rabodomirahalahy and Rasendrasoa are scolding each other for improperly setting the stove. The cassava leaves smell bitter, and the stem she holds is sharp at one end from the machete’s cut. Ramavo presses the point into the pad of her left
middle finger. She hardly feels the pain and watches the red bead grow, then grow bigger than itself and spill down the side of her finger. How many times has she fantasized about reigning in Imerina? Imagined herself holding the scepter and wearing the heavy gold crown? She has always wondered about its weight, wondered how long she could wear it and still hold her head high. She has thought carefully about how she could use the English paper, so full of power, to rule.

How many times? Hundreds of times. Thousands. Every time Radama placates the English, every time the missionaries preach: the ancestors are powerless and must be forgotten. Every time Rasalimo laughs at her: Ramavo humiliated, forgotten. Every time she is silent when she feels she must scream. Thousands of times. Tens of thousands. She and Andriamihaja have made a bedroom game of it. He likes it better when he is king, but she likes it better when he is just her lover. He calls her Ranavalona during these games, “the one kept to the side.”

And now the king is dying. He will be dead. His heirs are not fit to reign, and she will lose what little she has.

Ranavalona would be a better ruler than Radama ever was.

Ranavalona curses and sticks her finger in her mouth, sucking at the blood. Rasendrasoa looks up from the bubbling rice and asks what has happened. Ranavalona stares at her, then tells her it’s nothing, just a scratch. The cassava leaves are stripped and ready for boiling. Rasendrasoa looks at Ranavalona, her puzzled expression a mirror of Rasalimo’s before her. Ranavalona stands up from her place on the tsihy mat. She is distracted. She must see Andriamihaja. She mutters about her finger to Rabodomirahalahy and Rasendrasoa, who protest, What about the king’s rice? But she is already out the door. At the last second she turns and tells them they must not visit the king until she returns. Then she is gone. There is need for haste.
Ranavalona knows that Andriamihaja is ambitious. The whole kingdom knows this about him. She has never asked herself what portion of Andriamihaja’s attentions are for her, and what portion are for himself. She has always ignored the whispers—what good would such a question serve? But now she has a productive question for him, one that demands an answer. And she hurries to his house to ask.

The king is dying. He will be dead. How far will Andriamihaja go to advance his own interests?

She will offer him great expanses of rice fields. She will offer to make him Prime Minister, and Commander-in-Chief of the army. She will offer him *tsy maty manota*, an exemption from capital punishment no matter what his crimes.

Later, when he suggests they enlist Andriamamba, Ranavalona lets him think it was his own idea.
CHAPTER 1

...In which we meet a traveler on the road, and find his place in the large, large world

Antananarivo, 1829

The road Ani walks is rough. He carries a small bundle on his back, some books and jars, his good knife wrapped up in a plain cotton cloth he brought from the last place he lived. Ani walks barefoot on the red earth, muddy and slimy now at the end of the rainy season, pitted with ruts and potholes large enough to swallow a man. The path winds through rice fields stretching south and east and north, an expanse of flooded, cultivated land intruded only by the hill toward which he walks, the hill stretching northwest to southeast, a mile and a half long and half a mile wide rising like a red island five hundred feet above its sea of cropped velvet green. The city drapes itself over the hill, folds itself into the creases and crevices, hangs itself on rough-cut terraces invisible from the surrounding lowlands.

The road runs along a dyke between patchwork rice fields, square and rectangular and triangular, each cleanly bounded by earthen berms and irrigation canals. The rice in the fields grows at slightly different stages, each a different shade of green. Ani tastes the green on his tongue like the flesh of an avocado, rich and smooth and cool. The green of the land is more than his eyes can see, more than his mind can think. The green is the silent growing of the rice. It is a wet green, a melodious green, a green both deep and shallow, rough and smooth, moving and still. Ani thinks the wooden city must have swallowed all the world’s emeralds until the inside of the earth was filled to bursting with green, and now the green has grown through the red skin of the land, covering it like the chromatic scales of a lizard. In the new morning sun, the green of the rice swallows the light, reflecting it back rich, matte, saturated, and various.
Ani walks along the road toward the city. In the flooded rice fields, clouds float puffy and white in the interstices between the young plants. Men and women bend double weeding plots, their clothes tied up above their knees, their legs caked in mud as they step high like egrets to the next row. The expansive, voluminous air hones the light, clarifies it, so the rice in the distance is as sharp as in the fields before him. And still the air holds a bouquet of wood smoke, animal manure, sweat, figs, dust, and the nutty green exhalations of the rice. The chattering and buzzing and croaking of the birds and insects and frogs keep Ani company as he walks alone down the red, broken road. Ahead of him, an oxcart creaks around the more dangerous potholes, the driver yelling meaninglessly to his team, scolding them and urging them on with the tone of his voice alone.

How does one tell the story of this place? Because beneath this slow, pastoral surface, this surface of green earth and air and water, roils the orange fires of Empire. Up in the city, a queen dances for her life, maneuvering and out-maneuvering court factions, religious fanatics, tribal warfare, and two Western powers with armies and navies and designs on her crown. Where is the story of this place? Is it in the rice fields, in the villages, in the oxcart driver as he goads his team? Is it up on the hill, in the palace that crowns the summit? Is it in the slaving dhows anchored on the west coast, or in the 32-gun frigates anchored to the east? Is it in the European courts, with their satin and their gold and their guns? Or with the other tribes of the island of Madagascar—tribes not yet subjugated by the Merina kings, whose capital is Antananarivo, city of a thousand cities.

Let us start with the year, 1829. Greece becomes independent from the Ottoman Empire when the London Protocol is signed by Russia, France, and Britain. A new pope ascends in Rome, and the British Parliament grants a degree of emancipation to the Roman Catholics. The HMS Pickle, a schooner of five guns, captures and liberates the armed slave ship Voladora off the coast of Cuba. Russia is at war with Turkey. In the face of fierce opposition, British Lord William Bentinck passes a regulation
declaring that all who abet *suttee*—the Indian custom in which a wife throws herself onto the funeral pyre of her husband—are guilty of culpable homicide. Andrew Jackson succeeds John Quincy Adams as the seventh President of the United States of America. And The Swan River Colony, later to become the cities of Perth and Fremantle, are founded in Western Australia, securing the western third of Australia for the British.

In Madagascar, in Antananarivo, in the Year of Our Lord 1829, the Merina kingdom has just crowned a new queen. She has been ruling for a year, but the official mourning period for her husband the late king just ended, and the city proceeded with its celebrations. Ranavalona, born as Rabodoandrianampoinimerina during the reign of the Great King Andrianampoinimerina, was crowned in a sumptuous ceremony in which she wore European silks and danced European dances and had a European-style crown placed on her head. Ranavalona, also known as Ramavo and Ranavalo-Manjaka, was blessed by the *sikidy*, the Merina sacred idols. She took a sacred bath and the water with its blessings was sprinkled on the waiting and ecstatic crowd. A hundred thousand bulls were slaughtered for the ceremony, and the citizens of Antananarivo are still feasting on the bounty.

But the road Ani walks has not yet arrived at the palace. He has not yet arrived at the city of a thousand cities, named for the small villages that dotted the hillside before Ranavalona's father-in-law, King Andrianampionimerina, conquered the Merina tribes and took the hill and the city as his capital. The history of King Andrianampionimerina, of his son, the late king Radama, of his wife, the new Queen Ranavalona, of this whole mighty, noble, and tragic family—their history is part of the history of this place; one of the stories that must be told. Their story left an impression in this city, indelible and clear, as a fish leaves an impression in silt turned stone for later collectors to study.

The story of the Merina tribe, of which Queen Ranavalona is its latest scion, can be read in Antananarivo’s seven thousand houses built with steeply pitched roofs, the roofs taller than the walls,
doors always on the western side, a raised board guarding the threshold so that a visitor must step up eighteen inches to enter the house. All of the houses are made of wood planks. Wood is scarce in the central highlands, in Imerina, the land of the Merina, and most houses outside the city are made of stone or mud. But Antananarivo is the capital of the Merina empire, and in accordance with royal proclamation all of the houses within the city walls are constructed of wood. This is but one sign of the wealth of the Merina tribe.

The seven thousand houses jumbled together on the hill can be traversed by two major roads, one east-west, one north-south. Branching from the main thoroughfares like veins on a fig leaf smaller and smaller paths, none of them direct, wind among the houses, for the topography precludes any regularity in the placement of either the paths or the houses. Passage within the city occurs only discursively, and with difficulty, perhaps by means of enormous stones jutting out of a bank, amidst hollows caused by incessant torrents of rain, or across some mass of rock projecting over a precipice beneath. The road Ani walks now, still among the lowlands, is pitted but wide, and his progress will be more difficult once he enters the city.

Within the city, within the houses, men talk business, and women work. David Jones and John Griffith, both ordained missionaries from the London Missionary Society, discuss what the new queen’s stance on Christianity might actually be. She has declared that she will continue the policies of her husband, the late King Radama, and continue to support the work of the missionaries, but these men have been working with the Merina court for long enough—ten years—to know not to trust formal declarations. They are holy men, worried about the salvation of Malagasy souls. They speak in a small house attached to the church at Ambodin’Andohalo. David Griffith’s wife cleans the church, wiping away the incessant dust from the altar and the cross and the lectern and the Liturgy of the Church of England. It’s a task she does not yet trust to the native girls who help her with the household chores.
On the road to Antananarivo, the wheels of the oxcart have become caught in a rut, and the driver dismounts with his stick, grabs the yolk at the head of the oxen, and pulls with all his might. The oxen do not budge.

In another house, closer to the palace, two Swahili slave traders drink rum and argue over the price of a recently arrived batch of slaves. The first trader bought the slaves from a minor Sakalava warlord; they were captured in a raid on the Bara tribe that also netted 231 head of cattle. The trader will sell the cattle to his Merina contacts—the Merina are not rich in cattle—but he can get a better price for the slaves if he sells them for transport to the sugar plantations on Mauritius. He is speaking with a man who works the Mauritius trade route.

They will finalize a deal, but the price will be slightly lower than a year ago, because many traders expect the new queen to repeal her late husband’s edict against the Merina export of slaves. The new queen’s masters (by this he means the military captains who backed her grab for the throne) will want to establish their authority, and so (he thinks) the Merina will be going to war soon, raiding tribes on their borders to enrich themselves and establish positions in the new hierarchy. The Mauritius trader argues that soon the market will be flooded, and his partner is lucky to get the price he offers. The trader who bought the slaves is more skeptical, but they agree on a price that incorporates their uncertainty, and they seal the deal with more rum.

Ani quickens his step to help the driver of the oxcart. When he arrives, he takes the yolk from the driver, and the driver moves behind the animals to hit them with his stick. Ani pulls and the driver flogs, but still the oxen do not budge.

Within the palace compound, three military captains are indeed discussing new raids against the Betsimisaraka tribe and the Sakalava. The Betsimisaraka, whose name means “the great inseparables,” which just another way to say “the undefeated,” call themselves descendents of Abraham, and indeed
they are lighter-skinned than most of the rest of the tribes on the island. The Bestimisaraka are descended from pirates. The east coast of the island of Madagascar provides an unmapped plethora of coves and inlets and natural harbors, refugia for the pirate vessels that plied, and still ply, the Indian Ocean trade routes. Portuguese and French and English and Dutch and American buccaneers resupplied on the east coast, hoarded their loot on the east coast, and sometimes settled down and retired on the east coast, marrying native women and fathering light-skinned children. The Betsimisaraka are descended from these people. The Merina have subjugated them at least three times since the reign of King Andrianampoinimarina, and now the military captains are talking about new raids and the wealth such raids will bring them.

The Sakalava tribe, brave and battle-ready, still have not been conquered by the crown in Antananarivo, even with the guns the late king bought with his treaty with the English. The Sakalava do not recognize the edicts of the late King Radama, and from their strongholds in the west and south still trade freely with the Indian and Swahili slave merchants. The Sakalava are fierce enemies, and the two tribes—the Merina and the Sakalava—have raided back and forth across each others' borders since the time of the ancestors. The Merina military captains eagerly plan a new season of raids, their hands freer now with their new queen on the throne.

ANI pulls on the team with his whole body while the driver beats the rumps of his oxen, yelling at the beasts in the crudest possible language. The oxen take one step forward, then another. The wheels creak in the rut but do not turn, and the cart remains stubbornly stuck.

In the palace itself, the queen is arguing with her closest adviser, Andriamihaja, about the degree to which she should indebt the Merina crown to the Westerners. The queen is a nationalist, and believes the Merina kingdom should pursue policies that support self-sufficiency. She worries about cultural contamination from the new religion. Her reign is predicated on the blessing of the ancestors and the
voices of the sikidy, so undermining native beliefs undermines her authority with her people. She also
deteststhe Westerners ways. She does not believe that the Westerners will give as much as they take in
any treaty she might sign.

Andriamihaja is more sympathetic to the foreigners, especially the British. He is no Christian,
but understands her late husband’s reasons for making the pact that he did. “The shores of this island are
the limits of my rice fields,” declared King Adrianampoinimerina as he set about conquering, one by
one, the tribes of Madagascar. The queen’s counselor Andriamihaja argues that a continued alliance with
the British will help her complete the project started by her father-in-law, and continued by her late
husband the king, to unite the tribes and bring the entire island under one ruler. Andriamihaja also
worries about French claims to certain territories in Madagascar, and supports playing the British and
the French against each other. The queen and her lover argue politics at both the grand scale and the
scale of the minute, the meaning of a day’s delay in responding to a letter from the British Governor
Colville on the Island of Mauritius.

With the sun high in the sky, Ani and the oxcart driver unhitch the cart from the oxen. While the
driver walks the team Ani stays with the cart, packing leaves and brush under the wheels into mud that
reaches past his knees. After a while, they rehitch the animals and resume their pulling and pushing.

Two days sail from the eastern port at Tamatave, on the Island of Mauritius Governor
Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Colville himself sits in his thatched-hut, open-air, hilltop office watching
three plantation wives stroll along the beach, flanked by slaves carrying parasols and picnic items.
Seagulls screech senselessly as they circle the port, and the gritty breeze ruffles the papers on his desk.
He listens to the cacophony of grunts and calls and orders in unfamiliar languages, mixed with the
familiar splash of water on wood. The slap of canvas on line. Below him, black men with shining skin
unload sacks of rice from the hold. The cattle, both bovine and human, have already been driven from
the ship. The Governor sends a private prayer of thanks to his Protestant god that the supplies from Madagascar are still coming. The Island of Mauritius is now almost exclusively planted in monocrop sugarcane, worked by slaves from Zanzibar and Madagascar, and the governor knows that if the new queen cuts off trade, the island could very well starve.

Nearby, just to the south and west of Mauritius, Achille Guy Marie de Penfentenio, Comte de Cheffontaines, Governor of the Island of Bourbon, sits in his office at La Butte overlooking the port at the Pointe de Galets. Penfentenio is in a similar situation as his British counterpart on Mauritius, but his response is less prayerful. With Capitaine de Vaisseau Jean Baptiste Marie Augustin Gourbeyre, Penfentenio plans a naval attack against the Merina port at Tamatave. The two men joke lewdly about teaching the new queen how the Frenchmen do it.

Neither King Charles X in Paris nor King George IV in London have thought of Madagascar in over a month, although their respective Prime Ministers both have letters on their desks awaiting replies.

The shadows now lengthen across the road, and Ani, the driver, and the oxen have failed to free the cart from the muddy rut. Ani and the driver rest together in the deepening shade. The mosquitoes arrive for their evening meal. The driver offers toaka, the local moonshine, to Ani, who takes a drink to be polite.

The driver of the oxcart speaks to Ani in Malagasy, and Ani answers in the same language. How Ani, an Egyptian by birth, knows the language of the Merina is another story, a long story, but that is not one of the stories of this place. Let us just say that Ani speaks and understands the language, not only of the Merina, but of the British and the French and the Swahili traders, too. Ani and the oxcart driver converse, and decide that the oxcart driver will sleep among the rice sacks in his cart. If the rains don’t come tonight—it’s the end of the rainy season and the rains may not come tonight—the road may be drier tomorrow, and he may be able to free his load. A bit of pasture nearby will suffice for the oxen.
The man himself may not eat, the rice in his cart is for sale in the city, but he has a bit of *toaka* left to keep him fortified. The man tells Ani not to worry—this close to the capital he won’t be molested on the road. Ani leaves the man with a handful of rice for his supper, packs up his few belongings, and takes his leave. He continues walking toward the hill, toward the city and the palace of Queen Ranavalona.

Each of these people—the British missionaries, the Swahili slave traders, the Merina military captains, the queen, her lover, the British and French governors of their respective islands, the British and French monarchs of their respective empires—each of these people is part of the story of this place. Their histories are the history of this place, their pasts and the pasts of the past make this place what it is now, standing on a precipice looking out into a sea of fog. These people, these histories, theses stories, are forces that swirl and coalesce like pressure systems, forces global and mighty, forces local and mundane. What kind of reign will be the reign of Queen Ranavalona? Will she be a cyclone, or a spell of good weather?

Ani has many peculiar talents, one of which is that he can feel the forces of justice, the pressure systems of order and chaos as they seethe and swirl and sometimes battle. Ani feels these forces coalescing here, in Antananarivo, and he has come in the hopes of influencing the climate. This queen, this place, this point in time, when everything is at stake, when the world's zeitgeist writ large will be played out here, on this island bounded and buffeted by Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, Ani is drawn to them as a judge is drawn to a senate, as a shipmaster is drawn to the roiling sea.

The Merina say that their history begins with Ibonia, Iboniamasiboniamanoro, “he of the clear and captivating glance,” who demanded to be betrothed to Joy-Giving Girl while still in the womb of his mother. We will have occasion to speak of this history, too, in the pages that follow, for the Merina—the rice farmers and the oxcart drivers and the weavers and the witchdoctors—they have their own history that doesn’t speak of queens or slave traders or Christian priests. Ani did not ask the oxcart driver about
Ibonia, but he will. The oxcart driver will tell him about his wife in the village, his mistress in the capital, his eight sons and his six head of cattle and the taboos he inherited from his ancestors. The oxcart driver will tell Ani the story of Ibonia while his wife complains that she has no daughters to help with the household chores. But those conversations also are still to come, ahead of Ani on his broken road. In the meantime, in the darkening day, he continues his climb to the capital.
CHAPTER 2

...In which we meet the queen and her counselors, the executioner discusses foreign methods of execution, and a conversation about the nature of justice is diverted

Antananarivo, 1829

Red blood glares underneath the translucent obsidian skin of Ratiandrazana’s face, the deep, dark scar above his eye like a black snake writhing with his anger. Andriamihaja laughs in Ratiandrazana’s face. Someday, Andriamihaja may grow tired of provoking Ratiandrazana—he’s too easy, the man enjoys his own anger too much—but that day is not today. Andriamihaja inhales to jab at the general again, but the queen touches his arm and tells him, “Leave it.” The nobleman smiles and nods to the queen. He’ll take the point he scored and be satisfied.

Andriamihaja leans in close to the queen. The three of them sit on a tsihy mat in the queen’s private chambers in the Besakana. Built in the traditional Malagasy style as a single open room with a central post supporting the steep grass roof, the floor of the house is carefully swept dirt, the walls vertical wooden planks. The queen’s sleeping mat lies on the northeast wall of the house, the hearth opposite it in the northwest. To the south of the hearth the main door faces west, while to the north a window with an open shutter admits the smells and sounds of the nearby cattle pen. Thus visitors to the Besakana are constantly reminded of the queen’s wealth in cattle.

The queen and her two counselors have been sitting in the northwest corner for three hours, discussing what to do about the Sakalava town at Ikongo. Andriamihaja knows, and he knows that the queen and Ratiandrazana also know, what the decision will ultimately be. They must attack the town and loot it. Villagers from the petty kingdoms surrounding Ikongo nominally owe their allegiance to the
crown at Antananarivo, now to Queen Ranavalona since her husband Radama died. But many villagers have taken the death of the old king as an opportunity to switch their allegiance to the Sakalava warlords who promise them better protection and lower taxes. In the year since the old king died, Ikongo has established itself as a refuge for those fleeing Merina rule. Ikongo’s strength grows, and must be checked.

Andraimihiaja doesn’t actually disagree with Ratiandrazana about the need to attack the town. Both men are seasoned war veterans who led many raiding campaigns under Radama’s rule. Ratiandrazana wears only a loincloth and a *lamba* loosely draped across his shoulders, and his body bears the visible scars of those campaigns: the rope above his eye, a round knot in his left side where a bullet from a French gun almost killed him, less pronounced slashes on his chest and arms. Ratiandrazana is an ugly man, squat and strong, his small eyes always narrowed, his bulky mouth always frowning. His face and his curly hair resemble more the Antakarana people up north, their ancestry mixed with the African tribes on the mainland to the west. But despite his looks Ratiandrazana is the senior scion of a long line of *andriana*, nobles of the Merina tribe who resemble most their ancient Indonesian ancestors—straight black hair, almond eyes, skin like the pallisander tree rather than the ebony.

The beauty of the Merina people shines through Andriamihaja, who smiles easily and often, flatters women, respects men, and continually charms the queen. He wears spotless white breeches, a French military jacket with gold epaulettes, and shoes small enough to fit a European woman. As he leans toward the queen now she holds her place on the mat, neither reaching toward him nor backing away. Andriamihaja is the queen’s Prime Minister and the nominal Commander-in-Chief of the army. Both he and Ratiandrazana are warriors of the 12th rank, but while Andriamihaja holds the title and has proven his bravery in battle, it is Ratiandrazana who the professional soldiers respect and fear. The
Merina men who fight with machetes, spears, and British guns love Andriamihaja but look to Ratiandrazana to summon forth their ferocity and raw power.

The two men don’t disagree on the need to attack Ikongo. But Ikongo is well-fortified, and while the army has plenty of officers trained by Radama’s British counselor James Hastie—officers more knowledgeable, more skillful, and more experienced in the tactical use of firearms than anyone else on the Island of Madagascar—the army is in need of rank-and-file soldiers. These rank-and-file soldiers will be conscripts, drafted by government decree as a labor tax paid to the queen. The problem over which the queen’s counselors now argue involves the source of those draftees.

Ratiandrazana says, “We should draw conscripts from the schools.”

Andriamihaja makes a face at Ratiandrazana. The battle-scarred general has never been good at seeing the bigger picture, thinking in the long term. Ratiandrazana doesn’t understand that people will stop sending their children to the schools if they fear military conscription. Or maybe, Andriamihaja thinks, Ratiandrazana does understand, and that’s his point. Ratiandrazana himself is illiterate—writing is a corruption introduced by the vahaza that the conservative Ratiandrazana despises along with the vahaza superstitions and strange morals and customs. Andriamihaja understands the advantage of literacy, but the schools serve many purposes besides basic literacy. The schools bring the wider world into the small island of Madagascar, into the smaller kingdom of Imerina.

A thought washes through Andrainamihiaja like water across a stone, and it is now, already a year into Queen Ranavalona’s reign, already a year since Andriamihaja, Ratiandrazana, and Andrainamamba placed Queen Ranavalona on the throne, it is only now that Andriamihaja understands this important thing about Ratiandrazana: the general doesn’t see or care about the outside world. For Ratiandrazana, the vahaza exist only in reference to their influence here in Imerina; they might as well blink out of existence when they leave the island, then blink back into existence when they arrive on
their ships with their guns and their jewels and their books and their treaties. For Ratiandrazana, indeed, the schools are merely a good place from which to draw conscripts for the military.

Andriamihaja makes a face at Rainjohary and says, “If we continue to draft from the schools, they will eventually fail.”

Ratiandrazana spits at Andriamihaja, “Let them fail.” The general turns to the queen. “Your Majesty, we must attack Ikongo. We must bring the villages back under Merina control—you are losing rice and labor tax, and the Sakalava are growing stronger at your expense. When we take Ikongo we will take their guns, we will take their cattle, and we will take the Sakalava as slaves.” Ratiandrazana looks pointedly at both the queen and Andriamihaja, dressed in rich silks and satins. “There is potential for great wealth here.”

The queen sits balanced between the two men. She says, “Ny teny ifamaliana mahamasina ny mpanjaka. ‘A word well discussed makes the sovereign powerful.’ Ratiandrazana, I have reassured the vahaza missionaries that they can continue educating my people, teaching them useful things.”

Ratiandrazana argues. “What useful things do they teach? They teach our people strange superstitions. They teach our subjects to forget our ancestors, to hate our idols, to ridicule the words of our diviners and healers.” Ratiandrazana’s family has been the keeper of the Ikelimalaza idol since the time of Ibonia and the vazimba, and it was the Ikelimalaza idol that publicly blessed the ascension of Ranavalona to the throne. “Tanin’ andriana tian-konenana, ka satan’ andriana tsy harahina. ‘They dwell in the sovereign’s land, but don’t obey the sovereign’s laws.’ Draft the students of the schools into the army, put them to good use capturing Ikongo, and let the schools close.”

Ratiandrazana is taking aim at the thing that stands silent at the center of this argument: The old king Radama’s treaty with the British. Radama abolished slave exports and allowed the London Missionary Society to set up schools in exchange for an annual payment of guns, ammunition,
gunpowder, and coin. Radama wanted the British guns in order to finish his father Andrianampoinimerina’s work of uniting the tribes of Madagascar. But Radama also wanted the British entrée in the global community. Radama wanted to stand across from King Charles X in Paris and King George IV in London and call them both brother.

*There is irony here,* Andriamihaja thinks. Ratiandrazana venerates the memory of Radama’s father Andrianampoinimerina, and wants very badly to fulfill the great king’s promise that “the shores will be the limits of my rice fields.” Ratiandrazana would subjugate the Betsimisaraka, the Bara, the Sakalava and the eighteen other tribes who grow rice on the island of Madagascar. But Ratiandrazana’s vision ends at the shoreline while Radama’s extended to the horizon. Ratiandrazana is an elitist: he sits at the top of the tribe that he will place at the top of all the other tribes, at which point he will be content.

Ranavalona answers evenly. “You would have me repudiate Radama’s treaty with the British. Close the schools, take the Sakalava as slaves and sell them.”

Andriamihaja is surprised. Whispers in Ranavalona’s court hint that she might break Radama’s treaty with the British, restore the slave economy to Imerina, reject the payment of guns and gold, exile the missionaries from Imerina. Everyone—the noble families, the *vahaza* missionaries, the Arab slavers, the kings of other tribes—everyone has been watching and waiting to see what she will do. This is the first time she has spoken directly of the treaty. It is a woman’s prerogative to speak directly—Merina men prefer the more respectful, more polite indirect style of speech—but Ratiandrazana is not a great speechmaker and he takes his cue from Ranavalona. He has been waiting a year to say what he has to say, and now he says it simply. “Radama has turned his back on the world. Hastie is dead. You are not bound by this treaty, and Imerina is better off without it. Tell the British that they can keep their guns, we will find them elsewhere. And send the *vahaza* back to their cold, gloomy land.”
Andriamihaja watches the queen closely. He knows her intimately, knows the cast of her hand, the tilt of her head, the curve of her shoulders and of her lips. He knows the crinkles around her eyes, the almost-permanent furrow of her brow. The queen is not young. She is not beautiful. She is portly from excess, with feet like a duck’s and hands like a laborer’s and a mercurial nature that baffles and infuriates the people close to her. She was Radama’s senior wife, older than he, and ignored by him for younger fare. Andriamihaja knew her when she was just Ramavo, when she was frustrated and powerless and had no outlet for the exuberance that filled her to overflowing, no escape until he took her to his bed and gave her passion free rein. Andriamihaja watches the queen react to Ratiandrazana’s insistence, and remembers from a year ago.

Ranavalona’s emissaries, two lesser wives, presented themselves at the Besakana after visiting the noble Andriamamba. Andriamihaja sat at a window watching Ranavalona pace the floor. For the past hour she had been wearing down the tsihy mats, marching randomly around the room, unable to stop, unable to focus even on a simple path across the floor. In the hour before this one, to distract her, Andriamihaja told her stories of fantastic creatures: Of the songomby, an animal as big as an ox and fleet of foot that eats men. The Betisileo people in the south think the horse is a songomby come from abroad. He told her of the seven-headed fanany, a creature like a water-snake that grows from the intestines of deceased nobles. He spoke of the kinoly, with red eyes and long nails, who are no longer like the living even though their whole body is like that of a human being. The kinoly are said to be constantly thieving, and when anyone leaves out cooked rice or other food, they take it.

To pass the time Andriamihaja told Ranavalona these stories—Ranavalona who was not yet queen, who on the morrow would be queen or would be dead. In the hour before the storytelling, right after Ranavalona sent Rabodomirahalahy and Rasendrasoa to Andriamamba, Andriamihaja tried to take
Ranavalona to bed—an excellent distraction, he thought, to take her mind off her fear. But she would not have him, and so they fought, flinging proverbs and poetry at each other like spears. She fired her terror at him like cannon shot, then came after him with her fists until he caught her and held her and they crumpled to the floor. She lay at his feet while he told her stories. When she could stand his talking no longer, they drowned in the silence, waiting for the women to return with news from Andriamamba.

He watched her shred the tsihy mats with her French satin shoes.

When they arrived, Rabodomirahalaly and Rasendrasoa reported Andriamamba’s answer with the formality of a people who have no written language, who remember spoken words with an accuracy lost to the more literate races. Andriamamba was displeased and annoyed at the cowardice of Ranavalona. He said that she is not worthy to reign, and that if he had not gone so far he would desert her, and set up instead the lawful heir of Radama. But as he has gone so far he will proceed, and they will succeed, for everything was prepared for the terrible event of tomorrow. He said the relations of Radama knew nothing of his death, and there would be no obstacles to declaring her queen the following morning. She should lock the doors of the Besakana and not open them again until he, Andriamamba, arrived on her threshold the following morning.

Ranavalona cursed the women and their message, and sent them to the back wall of the Besakana to prepare rice and kabaka with strong toaka for her and Andriamihaja to drink. Andriamihaja bolted the door to the Besakana, and when he turned around Ranavalona was standing behind him, so close he almost knocked her over. She was shorter than he, and stout—he still thinks of her as solid like a mountain, the rolls of her flesh like ridges and valleys, ground fertile for grazing and planting. The vahaza describe mountains that spit fire, and he thinks of her this way, too—explosive, fickle, and dangerous. He leaned back against the door but she pressed into him and said, “I am going to die.
Tomorrow we will fail—don’t ask me how I know, but I know. Radama’s family will discover our plan, and I will be murdered, and I am afraid of death.”

Andriamihaja was a veteran of many battles, and knew the black vortex of fear. He knew that courage must be summoned, it must be drawn forth from the breast, beaten from its lair with drums and threats and violent acts, and so he grabbed her fleshy arms in his iron hands and kissed her hard on the lips, then picked her up and shoved her against the door so that her face was pressed into the carved wood. He held his body against hers so she could not move as he untied the rope that kept his breaches around his waist. She lifted up her skirts, satin and lace and cotton petticoats, cursing him as she spread her legs and he grabbed her hips and thrust hard inside her, hurting her so that the pain overcame her fear. He tore into her flesh, beating back the terror with physical force so that there was no room left for anything but blood and pain. It was over in a matter of minutes. He left red stains on her white petticoats as she leaned, recovering and ignoring him, her back against the Besakana door.

Andriamihaja crossed the room to where his coat and weapons lay. He pulled his knife out of its sheath and strode back to Ranavalona. The blade glinted in the sun, but there was no answering spark from her empty eyes, and she faced him blankly. He gently lowered her to the tsihy mat and sat cross-legged in front of her, the knife cradled in his lap. He removed his shirt in one smooth motion, and with his other hand, just as smoothly, he drew the blade across his breast. The blood was nearly invisible against his black skin. He swiped a line with his thumb, then reached out and traced her high, sharp cheekbones, and said to her, formally, “I will never leave you. I will have no woman except you.”

She slapped him then, and he grabbed her hand and kissed it because finally there was fury in her eyes.
Watching her closely in the Besakana, what he sees in her now is not fury. Now, she is impatient with this topic, with the bickering between her two closest advisers. She has formally opened the subject of the treaty, but the problem will not be resolved today. They will worry the topic of the British treaty until it is frayed around the edges, until it becomes thin in patches, until holes appear from the fingering of it by the queen and her court.

Andriamihaja speaks against Ratiandrazana, offering a different solution to the problem of army conscripts. He says, “Your Majesty, it is the end of the rainy season and soon the rice harvest will be in. Many villagers will be idol. Impose a labor tax on your subjects—each village must send one man for every ten people in the village to serve in your army.”

Ratiandrazana says, “One in ten! It’s a heavy tax. Too heavy. The fokonolona won’t stand for it, and you will have more defecting to the Sakalava. Yes, the Noble Andriamihaja’s plan will make the Sakalava kings Ravalahy and Ramitraha very happy indeed! Take your conscripts from the schools, Your Majesty. The students of the vahaza are already lost to you, bewitched by the foreigners and their blasphemous ways.”

Andriamihaja starts to speak again to answer Ratiandrazana’s words, but the queen quiets him with a look. She pauses, lets the silence settle, then speaks into it with a controlled calm that Andriamihaja is starting to see more frequently in her. She says, “Noble Ratiandrazana, you are correct. We must attack Ikongo, and to do that we must find conscripts for the army. I will send the missionaries reassurances that I will uphold the British treaty…” Ratiandrazana’s face hardens, but the queen continues and the general does not interrupt. “I may change my mind. But for now I will tell the missionaries that they can continue teaching in their schools and worshiping in their churches. We will take some conscripts from the schools, but allow the nobles to send slaves in the place of their sons. For
the rest, we will impose a tax of one man for every fifty people in the villages of Imerina, and one man for every twenty-five people in the villages of our vassal states.”

The queen looks at Ratiandrazana and Andriamihaja—her expression does not ask for their approval, but they both give it to her anyway. Andriamihaja says, “Andrian-drainazy tsy manampanjakana; andriana kozabe tsy monina amim-bahoaka. ‘A sovereign too gentle has no authority; a sovereign too harsh does not dwell with her people.’” He thinks that this is a good solution, for now. The problem of the treaty can wait, at least until the end of the raiding season when new slaves arrive in Tana, spoils from the military campaigns. The British payment of guns and gold will arrive from Mauritius at around the same time, and Queen Ranavalona will need to decide if she will accept the payment or if she will sell the slaves. But that is a problem for another day.

The queen stands and both her counselors stand with her. She says, “So. Now.” She smiles playfully at both men. “Do you want to meet my new executioner?”

Andriamihaja is eager, but the blood rises in Ratiandrazana’s face again, and his anger only improves the queen and her lover’s humor. No one knows anything about the new executioner. He simply appeared in the court gossip one day last week: Have you heard about the new member of court? They say he’s as tall as ravanala tree, and as savage as a crocodile. They say he eats the children of the vahaza! Ratiandrazana has been asking about his credentials, his connections, his family, but all he’s been able to learn is that the man recently arrived alone on one of the slaver’s ships, and set up a household near the Rova in Tana.

Ratiandrazana reported this information to the queen this morning and very shortly thereafter, seemingly coincidentally, a slave appeared to announce the arrival of the executioner at the Tranovola, to present himself to the queen. He has been waiting these several hours while the queen and her
counselors discuss the problem of Ikongo. But waiting is nothing to the Merina for whom time is like water in a stream—sometimes it flows slowly, sometimes quickly, but there is always more of it as well as pleasure to be had in the watching of it flow by. Ratiandrazana is angry that he cannot discover more about this man, but Ratiandrazana is always angry, about everything. Andriamihaja is intrigued, and inclined to like a man who has so vexed the noble general. The queen, followed by one counselor smiling and one counselor scowling, leaves the Besakana and in a swish of flowing satin crosses the Rova compound to the throne room at the Tranovola.

The Tranovola in which Ani has been waiting is a two-story building with a wrap-around veranda on both floors. When he arrived, Ani was lead through the ground floor, currently being used as a storeroom, up a flight of wooden stairs onto the second floor. There he was told to wait, and has now had time to explore both the large main hall as well as the two narrower rooms that flank it on its east and west sides. Painted on the walls of the smaller rooms are brightly-colored murals in the French Épinal style. A king stands on a high hill in the middle of the Island of Madagascar while other kings scattered over the island kneel to pay him homage. Rice farmers wade knee-deep in velvet green paddies, planting, harvesting, threshing and carrying their wares to sell at the city perched on a red hill in the background. Men and boys cut down enormous trees at the edge of a forest while others light fires and others still herd cattle onto the new pastureland. A woman is assaulted by rocks, waterspouts, winds, thunderbolts, and hail falling from the sky as she battles a great stone and chases a giant flying locust. Ani likes the paintings—he likes how innocent they are, how hopeful.

The windows in the Tranovola are glazed, and Ani wonders about the glazier, where he came from, if he still lives in Tana, and what they will do to replace the glass if it breaks. Silk brocade curtains drape scarlet and heavy on either side of the windows and cover the doorways that lead to the main hall.
The smaller rooms contain very little furniture—a round table and a few chairs, a cabinet holding tarnishing silver tableware and silver candelabras. But the main hall shimmers in polished silver light. Mirrors embedded in the walls range in size from a Spanish piastre to the height and width of a royal bullock. Glass chandeliers suspended from the ceiling on iron chains spill sparkling candlelight that reflects off the shining surfaces. Silver wallpaper flocked with white Baroque curls plasters all four walls, while here and there hang brightly-colored tapestries from Holland, Ani thinks, or Flanders.

The room is small for a throne room, twenty feet long and sixteen feet wide without its east and west attachments. At the north end of the hall a small throne—what would serve as merely a chair at a royal dining table in Europe—squats under an oversized canopy of scarlet velvet. A menagerie of statues in alabaster and bronze bring together predators from three continents, animals that no native of the island of Madagascar has ever seen. Madagascar, whose most dangerous wild animal is a crocodile, which hosts no venomous snakes, and where only lemurs fear the cat-like fosa climbing through the tree canopy at night. Ani strokes an alabaster hippopotamus between its eyes and remembers a time when the goddess Tauret would protect women in childbirth.

From the windows on the south wall of the great hall Ani overlooks the entire city of Antananrivo, its oddly-proportioned houses set along the winding, chaotic ways. Beyond the city stretches the great flat plain of rice fields watered by the Ikopa River. Smoke from cooking fires rises from the city, and even in this glassed-in house Ani can smell the soft cooking rice. Ani is thin and quite tall, six feet five inches, with skin the color of chestnuts and eyes in the shape of almonds. Barefoot, he wears a simple loincloth and a yellow and green lamba made of rafia fabric tied around his chest. He washed his feet thoroughly before entering the room, and crossed the threshold with his right foot first. He stands at the window with his arms folded around himself like the wings of a bird, his hard frame carved and polished as if from the wood of an ancient cedar tree.
Ani runs his finger across the windowsill and his fingertip comes up red with dust. He touches the dirt to his tongue, an old habit, and the earth of Antananarivo tastes of bones—the bones of strange animals, the bones of the ancestors, the bones of villagers’ backs as they stoop to harvest the rice. Dust motes in the light beams, the only snow Madagascar will ever see. From his perch at the top of the hill, Ani hears the rustle of silk as a sickle slices the rice from its stalk. He hears women chattering as they gather water from a well. He hears the squawking of a chicken as a man with a dull machete saws slowly through its throat. He hears the tinkling of silver bells caressed by an innocent breeze. Ani stands at the window, perched and still, listening to the rhythms of the city while he waits for the queen and her retinue.

She crosses the courtyard under a scarlet parasol and followed by two of her women, four slaves, and two counselors. Ani positions himself so that he can greet her as she enters the second story room, and when she arrives, he bows low. The clipping of her heels stops in front of Ani and she tells him to rise. “You must be the new executioner,” she says.

Ani straightens himself but keeps his eyes on the ground. “As Your Majesty pleases.”

One of the queen’s counselors wears European-style shoes and stands close to her. The other one walks with bare feet and stands behind and off to the side. Ranavalona turns to her companion. “Andriamihaja, this is my new executioner. Executioner, this is Lord Andriamihaja, Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the army.”

Ani thinks, So this is the man. He turns to the queen’s lover, “It is an honor to make your acquaintance, tompolahy.” He keeps his eyes on the ground, but he can hear the man cock his head to one side. Ani can smell the man’s smile, the openness of it, the arrogance and ambition. This is a man who was born low and raised high. Ani understands better now the city gossip. The queen leans against Andriamihaja, her arm through his. Ani feels the force of Andriamihaja’s presence—the queen’s lover is
a man of personal power. He imagines the arguments these two must have: broken china, broken bed frames, broken promises.

The queen turns to her unshod counselor and makes the second introduction. “This is Lord General Ratiandrazana, whose father was a great friend and ally of my father King Andrianampoinimerina.” She uses the term “father” loosely, clothing herself in honor. Ani has heard the story. Ranavalona’s biological father was also a great friend and ally of King Andrianampoinimerina. To reward him the king adopted Ramovo as his own daughter and married her to his son and heir, Radama. But her ancestors are not the ancestors of Andrianampoinimerina nor of Radama. Her family is not their family, and her tombs are not their tombs.

But the queen still speaks, and Ani returns his attention. “Ratiandrazana is a warrior of the 12th rank,” she says. Ani bows again as Ratiandrazana examines him openly. The man knows precisely Ani’s reach with a dagger and a spear, and is a careful judge of both Ani’s strength and speed. Ani assesses the man in turn, although less obviously, and thinks that he would not like to be in a fight with this man. Ratiandrazana is strong, and fast, and his scars tell their own tale about his seasoning as a warrior. The general scowls at Ani and does not speak to him. Ani keeps his bow until the warrior turns his head away.

The queen takes a long look around the room, at the thick dust falling through the close air. She says, “Let’s walk. It’s too hot in here.”

And so the queen and her retinue back themselves down the stairs, through the first-floor storeroom and out into the courtyard overlooked by the veranda. From outside, the Tranovola, the Silver House, shimmers in the afternoon light. The walls flash and sparkle in a hundred places, from the mirrors embedded in the exterior walls, the silver nail heads that hold the planks and shingles down, the
silver studs on the gable ends and door posts, the silver bells hanging from the roof eaves. Radama built the Tranovola with the help of a Creole merchant from Mauritius by the name of Louis Gros. It is not the primary state building—that is the Besakana—but it is the building in which he received foreigner ambassadors, missionaries, tradesmen, and *vahaza* of all kinds. Ranavalona continues this tradition.

Standing in front of the Tranovola with the queen at his side, Ani is reminded of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. He feels as if the Tranovola doesn’t quite exist, that if he were to reach out to touch it, it would prove a mirage, or an illusion of sparkling white light like the Chinese “fire flowers,” dazzling for a moment then gone. Ani thinks of animals that are easily distracted by shiny objects, and wonders if this building is a shiny object designed to distract, or ensorcell, foreigners. But as he stands next to the queen and stares at the silver house, the queen draws his attention to the raised house-like structure just to the north of the shimmering Tranovola.

She says, “This is the tomb of the great Radama, who has turned his back on the world.” A small house rests on three stepped levels of gray stone. The queen gestures with her knuckle to the lower level, and Ani spies a small trap door set very close to the ground. “There” she says, “is where we will enter the tomb, when the diviners say the time is right for the *famadihana*.” Ani doesn’t recognize the word, but decides to let it go. He sees that the small tomb-house on top of the stepped platforms is decorative only, a miniature version of the Tranovola with a thatched roof and an incongruous veranda but lacking the mirrors and silver. The king’s body lies underground. Ani thinks of the great pyramids of his homeland, tombs for ancient kings, and discovers an unexpected bond with this Merina culture. Here, a man’s mausoleum is important. This is the queen’s point, and he takes it.

But she is not yet finished. The queen leads Ani and the rest of her retinue along the east-west fence at the south side of the courtyard. The fence is about twenty feet high, the palisades united by crossbeams on the top. Large spears with their points painted yellow like gold stab at the sky above the
fence. The queen arrives at a gate near the western end of the fence, and passing through the gate they face a line of seven wooden houses. Ani sees that the fence they just passed through is an internal fence, dividing the palace compound into a north section and a south section. The north section, from which they just came, is mostly open courtyard and includes the tombs and the Tranovola. This south section is about twice the size of the north section and its grounds far more crowded with structures. The line of wooden houses they now face are old, built in the traditional style with steep roofs taller than the walls and arranged close together with their gable peaks aligned.

The queen stands in front of the northernmost house and says, “This is the tomb of the great King Andrianjaka, built two hundred years ago. He was the first of the Merina kings, who captured Analamanga from the vazimba. He founded Antananarivo, established the twelve sacred hills that make up Imerina and the Merina tribes, and built the Rova here. He was the greatest Merina king in two hundred years, until my father Andrianampoinimerina united all the Merina tribes under the crown at Tana.”

She continues walking to the next tomb to the south and says, “This is the tomb of Andrianavalonibemihisatra, son of Andriamasinavalona and King of Antananarivo.” The next tomb she names, “Andriamponimerina, son of Andriamasinavalona and King of Antananarivo at the time of Andrianampoinimerina’s birth. She walks down the line: Andrianjakanavalomandimby, oldest son of Andriamasinavalona and King of Antananarivo; Andriamasinavalona, great-grandson of Andrianjaka and King of Imerina; Andriantsimitoviaminandriandehibe, grandson of Andrianjaka and King of Imerina; and finally Andriantsitakatrandriana, son of Andrianjaka and King of Imerina. She says, “These are the ancestors of Radama, and I am their mouthpiece. They have blessed my reign.”

Now at the southern end of the line of tombs the queen turns to Ani and asks, “Who are your ancestors, Executioner? What is your name?”
Ani gives her a small bow. “My ancestors are not nearly as exalted as yours, Your Majesty.” He catches a flicker of something, a puff of discomfort, from behind him among the retinue, he thinks from the handsome counselor but it goes by so fast he can’t be sure. The queen doesn’t see it. Ani continues. “I am a simple man. My name is simply ‘Ani.’”

The queen puts her hand over her mouth and giggles, and her women join her. Even her counselors smile. The queen points with her knuckle to a place far off on the eastern horizon and says, “Any?” The word sounds exactly like his name. She points to a different place. “Sa any?” And a third place. “Sa any?” The Merina are all openly laughing now, and Ani laughs with them, finally understanding. His name in the Merina language means “over there,” and she is asking “There? Or there? Or there?”

She turns to face Ani and says, “That will not do. I can’t have my court laughing every time I call my executioner. From now on your are ‘Ramanany.’” She nods to herself, satisfied, and Ani gives her another short bow. It will do, he thinks.

The queen begins to stroll again, this time toward a large building to the southwest. She says, “This is the Besakana, where I live and where I conduct internal matters of state. It was the residence of our first king Andrianjaka, and has been home to every Merina king since that time. It is where my husband Radama turned his back. You are not permitted to enter the Besakana.” Ani bows again. The building is the largest he has seen on the compound except for the Tranovola, and is built in the traditional Merina style with plank walls and a thatched roof twice as high as the walls, and gable posts extending above the roof ridge half as high again. It is a simple house, like all other houses in Tana. The grandeur comes from the scale of the building rather than the style.

The queen turns around and gestures to a house behind them to the north, southeast of the Tranovola. She says, “That is the Mahitsiełafanjaka, another building forbidden to you. It is the seat of
the ancestors’ spirits. There my ombiasy perform their divinations with the sikidy, and there the rooster is sacrificed at our annual festival. Many of our sampy make their home in the Mahitsy.”

Rainjohary breaks in. “Many, but not all.”

The queen makes an indulgent face at Ani. “Many, but not all. The family of Ratiandrazana are the keepers of the Ikelimalaza idol, our most important sampy. It is housed in their village of Ambohimanabola, so you need not fear it here. But Ikelimalaza is not the only sampy with power, and it would be dangerous for you to enter the Mahitsy without permission. The idols would become angry, and would be revenged upon you.”

Everyone in the party adopts a brief, respectful silence, and Ani refrains from commenting to show his respect. After a appropriate pause, Ratiandrazana enters the conversation in earnest. He asks Ani directly, “You are a foreigner here. Are you familiar with the execution techniques we use in Imerina?”

Ani is familiar. He adopts a tone of professional competence and says, “Capital crimes in Imerina include murder, treason, sorcery, arson, sacrilege including tomb robbing, manufacturing base coin, acting deceitfully in the sovereign’s name, and selling slaves off the island. Military crimes that carry the death penalty are desertion and retreating after a battle has started. Common criminals are usually speared in the loins, or may be beheaded. It is forbidden to shed noble blood, so andriana are executed by suffocation. The punishment for sorcery is being thrown from a cliff. The punishment for a military crime is immolation.” Ani bows to Ratiandrazana, who bows back.

Ratiandrazana asks his next question. “Tell me, you must be familiar with execution techniques that are new to us, that are not currently used here in Imerina?”
Ani looks to the queen, wondering if he must answer this question. This is a conversation he’s had too many times, with too many people, and it makes him uncomfortable. He dislikes discussing his profession with amateurs, and the topic smacks of voyeurism of a particularly odoriferous kind. The queen turns away from Ani and Ratiandrazana and begins to stroll to the west, past the Besakana. Ani hears the grunting of cattle, and tries to avoid Ratiandrazana’s question. “Indeed, tompto. I have had the privilege of serving many rulers, in many places.”

Ratiandrazana waits for more of a response, but Ani pretends he hasn’t understood. A patient silence falls between them, each waiting for the other to speak as they walk with the queen to the cattle pens. To the west of the Besakana a great pit has been dug in the earth, fifty feet square and five feet deep, within which about twenty cattle mill about. The queen and her party walk up to the edge of the pit and stand there, gazing down at this small sample of the royal wealth. Finally, a bit perturbed, Ratiandrazana tries a different tack. “You have a difficult job, I think. More difficult than most people realize.”

Ani tries to one more time to deflect the conversation. “I think my job is neither more nor less taxing than most others, but of course I am very close to it.” He is aware that the queen and Andriamihaja are listening intently to this conversation, although they pretend that they are not. Ani wishes he understood what was at stake.

Ratiandrazana speaks more slowly, as if he were talking to a child. “I think you must first be a technician. You must know where and how to strike a blow. This is the most basic level of competence. But there is artistry in killing as well. And an element of showmanship. At an execution, you must please the crowd, and you must always serve your monarch. If your monarch commands a swift, painless death, that is of course what you must deliver. If justice demands suffering, prolonged suffering, then you must deliver that as well.”
Ani grasps his word “justice” like a knife he can use to cut through the tangles of this conversation. Ratiandrazana has touched on a topic Ani holds central to his work: the requirements of justice versus the lust for revenge. He turns away from the cattle pen and faces Ratiandrazana more directly. He says, “I wonder, tompko, whether justice ever demands suffering?”

Ratiandrazana laughs out loud, and startles the cattle in the pen. Three or four of them laboriously push their bulk to their feet as Ratiandrazana asks Ani, “What are you talking about?”

Ani feels like he has suddenly landed in the muck at the bottom of the cattle pen, not knowing how he got there or how to extricate himself. He answers the literal question Ratiandrazana has asked, not wanting to guess at what’s underneath his actual words. “Begging your pardon, tompko. My profession is a legal one—I work inside the law. And for some crimes the law demands death. But does the law, does justice, ever demand a prolonged, painful death? Death is the ultimate punishment—is suffering before death necessary? Or is it merely... redundant?”

From his tone, Ratiandrazana is as frustrated with this conversation as Ani. “You are a stupid foreigner. How is it that you speak so fluently, but don’t understand what’s being said to you? To answer your question: of course justice demands suffering. Her Majesty is the justice of her people, and if she demands suffering then suffering is just. But that’s not what we’re talking about. We are talking about new methods of execution. For example, these Christians. I hear that they pray to an image of their god being tortured to death? A god whose body has been hung on a beam of wood?”

Ani sees that he cannot avoid Ratiandrazana’s question, and puts aside his hope for a meaningful discussion of the nature of justice. He adjusts the folds of his lambda over his legs and feet, and concentrates on forming the answer he will give the general. “This is true, tompko.”

Ratiandrazana laughs again. “It’s ridiculous! Gods don’t have bodies, and they don’t die. If they did, they wouldn’t be gods. But the white people’s customs are barbaric and incomprehensible, and I do
not want to discuss them now. What I want to know about is this method of execution. A person hung on a beam of wood. Tell me about it.”

The muscles of Ani’s face settle into a familiar, professional mask. “Of course, tomoko. It is an ancient method of execution, most often called ‘crucifixion.’” He uses the Latin word. “There are several variants. The method depicted by the Christians involves an upright beam and a crossbeam of wood. Nails are driven through the condemned’s hands or wrists, fixing him to the crossbeam. Sometimes only one upright beam is used, sometimes two beams in the shape of an X rather than a T. Sometimes the person is tied to the beams, sometimes nailed.”

Ratiandrazana’s eyes come alive at his description. “And how long does it take a person to die like this?”

Ani remembers a man lying down naked on a cross with his arms outstretched. Ani is hammering a long, rough nail into his wrist. The hammer rings as it hits the head of the nail, bones crunch under the blow, the man screams, and a gush of blood fouls Ani’s clothes. He pounds the nail again with the hammer, three more blows and the nail is firmly seated in the wood. Ani moves to the other wrist, more crunching, more screams, more blood, and the other nail is set. The man is a political prisoner who has committed no actual crime. Soldiers lift the crossbar so the upright beam is vertical, and the man hangs from the nails in his wrists. The cross jolts violently as it drops into the prepared posthole, and the crucified man screams again and loses consciousness. One of the soldiers throws water on him, and he revives. This man suffers for six hours before he finally dies; Ani watches him the whole time. The man dies with words of forgiveness on his lips.

From behind his mask of professionalism Ani observes Ratiandrazana carefully, judging his character, and sees that the general is the type of person who enjoys the suffering of others. He has known many people like this, and he recognizes them quickly. “A person can live anywhere from
several hours to several days after crucifixion, depending on his health and whether or not other methods are used to hasten his death. Sometimes the prisoner is stabbed, and bleeds to death. Sometimes his legs are broken, and he dies from the shock of it. If he is left alone, he can last for days, and may die from thirst, from the elements, from animal attack, or from the failure of his body to withstand the pain.”

Ratiandrazana finally shows his hand, and Ani understands what this conversation has actually been about. Ratiandrazana’s face crinkles in an unfamiliar expression of excitement. He turns to the queen and says, “Your Majesty, how beautiful would it be to execute the Christians by their own methods? They will hang, in public, where all of Imerina, all of Madagascar, might see and understand.”

Andriamihaja, who has remained uncharacteristically silent through this exchange, turns away from the cattle pen and faces Ratiandrazana. He says in a too-sweet voice, “Are you executing Christians now Ratiandrazana? I thought it was only the queen’s prerogative to pronounce a sentence of death.” He smiles a too-sweet smile. “I don’t think Her Majesty has sentenced anyone to death for being a Christian.” Andriamihaja turns to Ani, who very much wants to be out of this conversation.

“Ramanany,” Andriamihaja says, “Is being a Christian on the list of capital crimes in Imerina?”

Ani, who would rather be down with the cattle, decides to settle his attention on the queen. She is outwardly ignoring the conversation, and Ani cannot read her reactions. He answers Andriamihaja but speaks to the queen. “No, tomeko, it is not.”

Ratiandrazana says to Andriamihaja, “Not yet.”

Again, Andriamihaja inhales to respond to Ratiandrazana, but the queen waves her arm in a rustle of yellow satin and the two nobles bite back their quarrel. She picks up from the ground a large green leaf and begins to tear small chunks out of the edges, very precisely, very methodically. Without
looking up from her work, she says, “Ramanany, do you see the cattle in the pen? The one that is closest to us, the red one with the white markings, do you see its ears?”

Ani looks, and notices that the ears of the bullock, and in fact all the ears of all the cattle in the pen have been cut in an elaborate design resembling a head of broccoli. The queen finishes working at her leaf and hands it to Ani. She has fashioned the leaf into an extremely accurate replica of the ears of the cattle. She says, “This is the mark of royal cattle. Only my cattle have their ears cut this way.” She looks at Ani directly for the first time since she met him. “So there can be no mistake.”

Ani bows low. “I am Your Majesty’s instrument.” A breeze picks up from the west and blows the smell of rich manure and close-kept cattle into Ani’s face. The queen is inscrutable to him—she has shown no favoritism to either of her counselors that he can see. Ani understands Ratiandrazana’s fear of the foreigners. Ani guesses that Ratiandrazana is acting merely from instinct and a sense of self-preservation, probably nothing more than a crude fear of what is different. But Ani knows Ratiandrazana’s instincts are solid in this case. Ani has seen what the white missionaries have done, what the European imperialists have done, to native peoples in Africa and Asia. Ratiandrazana is right to fear the vahaza, to want to fight them and drive them from his land. But Ratiandrazana is brutal. He is a man who enjoys the suffering of others. Ani looks at the queen. He looks at soft Andriamihaja and hard Ratiandrazana, and thinks, She will need to be guided. Carefully. Subtly. He hopes there is a path to be navigated between Scylla and Charybdis.

Ani feels as if he has dodged a flight of flaming arrows. He wonders when the barrage will resume, and from what direction it will come.
...In which a rice farmer prepares for the harvest, and a man loses a wife

Anjozorobe, 1829

Todisoa feels his wife roll over and rise from their sleeping mat at the hour of hitan-tsorat'omby, when it is just barely light enough to see the cattle in the fields. He dozes, listening to her step softly around the dark house. Hollow scratching as she pulls lumps of charcoal from a basket, then a small crunching as she sets the charcoal in the hearth. She dusts the hearth and blows on the coals from last night’s rice, and then the house is silent for few minutes as she waits for the fire to bloom. Todisoa listens to the breathing of his sons, still sleeping. When he can feel the warmth from the fire, his wife rises from the hearth and takes a water pot from the northeastern wall, the place of Alahotsy where household utensils are kept. She pads across the length of the house and leaves through the western door, off to the stream to gather water for the cistern at the foot of Todisoa’s sleeping mat. Todisoa feels a glow of warmth for his wife who knows how to move quietly in the morning.

Theirs was a good match. Todisoa puts out of his mind the news of the mpikabary last night, and lingerers in the moment many years ago when he took for his wife the daughter of the village elder. They were both practically children—she had just reached marriageable age, he was a fandroana or two older. But he had known her since they were both still carried on their mothers’ backs, and he had waited for her, hoping. So when the village gossiped that she had reached her maturity he spoke to his mother, who found a mpikabary to talk to the girl’s parents. The news was favorable, and he was pleased.

The news last night from his son’s mpikabary was not favorable, but his son does not yet know. Only Todisoa and his wife know, and it is Todisoa’s place to break the news. Todisoa needs to let things
settle inside himself first—the rice is at a critical stage and he must encourage the birthing of the grains. He must not call down hail or a thunderstorm with careless behavior from any member of his family. His son will have to be patient.

His wife returns with the water, the earthen pot balanced on her head by a small ring of grass. Using both hands to lift the heavy pot, she pours the water into the cistern. When the rice is not pregnant, she will throw the grass ring into the fire in the evening then cover it with ash to keep the coals. But now it is fady: tsy fanao ny manao halana hatao otrikafo, rehefa bevohaka ny vary. Do not put a grass wreath into the fire in the evening when the rice is ready to give birth—it will make the rice field tangled, and the harvest will be difficult. For a similar reason his wife is vigilant at this time to keep straw off the floor of the hut. Todisoa’s wife is careful about their taboos, and Todisoa loves her for this as much as her ability to keep quiet in the morning.

The east is now light, and it is the time of mifoho-olo-mazoto, the hour when hard-working people are awake. Todisoa smells the burning charcoal as it reheats last night’s rice, watery and sweet. He rolls out of bed at the same time three of his sons also rise. His third, fourth, and fifth son are out in the cattle pastures sleeping with Todisoa’s six head of cattle. His two youngest sons are still at his wife’s teet, and sleep with them on the shared mat. She fed the baby before she got up, and now it dozes with a stomach full of milk. As she cooks the rice, Todisoa’s wife withdraws and replaces spoons and cups from the willow basket hung on the east side of the north wall, at the place in the house corresponding to Alahotsy. Today is the first of two Alahotsy days, the Vava ny’Alahotsy. Like the basket from which utensils are constantly withdrawn and replaced, throughout this Alahotsy day there is no peace or stability, so today’s character is uneven, unstable. It’s a good day for the work Todisoa has planned. Todisoa feels the need to greet the morning today, so he leaves the hut before he breaks his fast, and his sons and his wife will wait to eat as well.
The village of twenty households is up and moving. The chickens scratch a living in the dirt for themselves and their chicks; daughters collect eggs from the small lean-to chicken coops. Women return from the stream carrying pots of water on their heads. Papa ny’Dola harnesses Todisoa’s oxcart to his two bulls, his sons rattle the metal chains of the yoke, the oxen bray mindlessly, the oxcart creaks with age. Todisoa will get a chicken from the city for loaning Papa ny’Dola the oxcart, as long as the rice sells. The rice will sell. All of Imerina is in the midst of the hungry season, when last year’s rice is running low and this year’s rice is not yet harvested. Villagers go hungry and sell their rice at high prices to rich nobles; Todisoa is a strong man and can live for many days on only a little rice. The money he earned from his last trip into the city was spent on hasina for the mpikabary for his son. It was money well spent. Papa ny’Dola’s cattle are sick, and he needs to buy medicine or a charm from the ombiasa. So Papa ny’Dola goes to Tana today to sell his rice. And the chicken he brings back will be only part of Todisoa’s return—wrapped up in the chicken is hasina, too: an acknowledgment from Papa ny’Dola to Todisoa of superior social station and closer proximity to the ancestors. The chicken is an offering as well as a price.

Today is the Vava ny’Alahotsy, the lightest of all the destinies, a day of motion and unevenness. Todisoa will drain his rice fields, moving the water out of the paddy to allow the rice to dry for a week before it is cut and harvested. Todisoa inhales the morning as he urinates into a ampanga fern—he smells chicken droppings, dew, smoke, water, earthen houses and human beings. To the north his ancestors lie quietly in their tombs. To the east the sun has just broken into the morning, and it is the hour of Vaki-maso-andro. His stomach rumbles, and he returns to his house to eat a little and allow the rest of his family to eat as well.
Todisoa and four of his eight sons walk along the irrigation canals to their rice fields, about half a mile outside of the village. Before Andrianampoinimerina united the Merina tribes and built his capital at Antananarivo, the vast plain below the city was mostly marshland flooded by the great Ikopa River. Todisoa remembers clearly when, as a small boy, he and his brothers and his father helped build these canals. The subjects of the great King Andrianampoinimerina jacketed and tamed the river, controlling its waters to create the miles of rice fields that now the subjects of Ranavalona tend. Their work was a tax, a hasina, a labor of love that they offered to the greatest king the Island of Madagascar has ever known. Andrianampoinimerina gathered the disparate peoples of Imerina into one family with his sacred person at its head—father and priest and ruler, protector, the pillar standing between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors. He clarified and codified the hierarchy within which each person knows his place, knows to whom he owes offerings and from whom he receives them.

Andrianampoinimerina communicated the will of the ancestors and instructed his subjects so that his sons and daughters would become prosperous and thrive.

Todisoa walks along the little path that separates the rice fields of his neighbors. White egrets splash for insects and fish in the still-flooded fields. The wind today is from the south, cool and dry as it tickles the laden tillars and they sway heavy and happy in response. The path Todisoa and his sons walk is about nine inches wide and rises six inches above the floor of the neighboring fields. Along the side of the path little rills carry water from neighboring canals which join with other canals that eventually connect with the river. Todisoa remembers as a child working for several dry seasons on these canals, and thinking of the tall foreigner he met on the road he is proud of his Merina family and the things they have built. He thinks that perhaps nowhere else have a civilized people like the Merina manipulated the land and water on such a scale so as to benefit all the people in the kingdom.
Andrianampoinimerina was a good father to his people, and the Merina prospered because they respected the taboos. Todisoa respects the taboos, and because he has pleased the ancestors (and if he continues to please the ancestors) his rice crop this year will be a good one. He will never say this out loud; he will never tempt calamity in that way. The problem about his son and the girl he wants to marry—this could tempt calamity. Todisoa must handle it carefully. The rice crop is very sensitive now and the timing of this bad news is difficult.

No one knew, not even the mpikabary who knows so well the ancestors of both Todisoa’s family and the family of the girl. But the children’s vintanas are crossed. The two met at the Zoma market, Todisoa’s eldest son with his brothers to buy a new iron spade. The girl sat with her sisters selling lambda she made with her own hand. Todisoa’s fourth son is mischievous, and as a prank dropped gooey banana fruit into her sister’s neat braids. The girls yelled at them and the boys ran, but the eldest son went back afterward and by way of apology brought them a big durian fruit he had cut from his father’s tree. After that Todisoa’s eldest son visited Andahalo two or three times a week, bringing back gossip for the family about the court and the new queen’s reign. And last week he asked his mother to make arrangements with the family of the girl. Todisoa knows the girl’s family—respectable, from the village just to the east of Todisoa’s. Their rice paddies and ancestral tomb are close to his.

Todisoa’s son puffed up his chest when he brought back gossip from the court. Todisoa isn’t very interested in the goings on of his betters, but listening passed the time on days when it was fady to work in the rice fields. His son sat on a fat root under the big fig tree in the village and told the news from Tana as nearby women winnowed rice and men sat and smoked or snorted snuff.

Todisoa’s son said that there is a fight at court between the nobles who want to let the vahaza stay, with their schools and their guns and their pretty things, and the nobles who are afraid of the vahaza, who think that the foreigners will make the queen forget the customs and taboos of her
ancestors. The nobles who hate the vahaza helped the queen onto her throne after her husband turned his back on the world. (When he said this, everyone looked at the ground and squirmed a little, because everyone knows that Radama named his daughter to succeed him, not his wife Ranavalona, but no one ever, ever talks about that.) Todisoa’s son hurried on: Since the vahaza-haters helped the new queen, people think she will send the vahaza away. But everyone also knows that the queen is in love with the noble Andriamihaja, and he helped her get the throne too, but he likes the vahaza and wants them to stay. So people wonder if the queen will listen to her lover, or to the other powerful nobles who want the vahaza sent away.

One of the women pounding rice said, “Maybe she will make up her own mind.” Some people laughed, but some nodded their heads thoughtfully. Todisoa nodded his head thoughtfully, remembering stories of the vazimba people ruled by queens, who lived in Imerina before the king Andriamanelo conquered them and drove them into the forests. Todisoa wonders what it will be like to be ruled by a queen instead of a king. Maybe there will be no difference, he thinks.

Todisoa remembers the day Queen Ranavalona was crowned. He had never seen such a thing before, such a procession through the city. A cacophony of thumping drums and clapping hands and trilling women and screaming children and braying oxen and squawking chickens and the air so thick with sound he felt like he was breathing in water. On the hill above Adohalo twenty cannons fired twenty times and Todisoa cowered at the pounding that shook the earth beneath him. He was terrified, dazzled and awed, proud to be living at a time when such marvels were possible. Listening to his son under the fig tree, Todisoa remembers the great kabary Ranavalona spoke at her coronation. “I will not change what Radama and my ancestors have done; but I will add to what they did. Do not think that because I am a woman, I cannot govern the kingdom. Never say, she is a woman weak and ignorant, she
is unable to rule over us. My greatest solicitude and study will always be to promote your welfare, and to make you happy.”

Todisoa is a humble man, and does not presume to question the ways of his betters. But Todisoa knows that Ranavalona can’t lead the soldiers like Radama did, so she will have to rely on men. And that’s the proper way of things anyway.

Todisoa’s older son also said that there are people in the Betsileo country conquered by Radama who are refusing to pay the rice tax to Ranavalona, and have started to pay the local Sakalava king instead. Todisoa’s son said that the queen means to send an army to Ikongo after the rice harvest is in to collect the tax. He also said that Ramanetaka, Radama’s general in Mahajunga who escaped the queen when she sent men to kill him after she took the throne—Ramanetaka has become a king on one of the small islands of the Comoros to the north of Madagascar. Todisoa’s son wisely stopped talking there, but everyone knows that Ramanetaka was Radama’s kinsman, and therefore has more of a right to Ranavalona’s throne than she does (and this is why she tried to have him killed). So everyone under the fig tree wondered if a kingdom on a small island will be enough for Ramanetaka, or if he dreams about a kingdom on the Island of Madagascar, too.

Todisoa’s son brought this news from Tana over the course of several weeks, during which he courted the girl selling lamba. There is an old man in the village who knows the ancestral lines of most of the families in the area. He is also a good speaker, artful with his proverbs and poetry. He is often employed by families to make inquiries about marriage, and he agreed to approach the girl’s family on behalf of Todisoa and his wife. Last Thursday was the fullness of Adijady, Vontona ny’Adihady, a good day for the laying of foundations, and so the mpikabary spoke to the girl’s family on that day. Adijady’s place in the house is next to the window shutter, on the north end of the western wall. It is a place of firmness, and things that begin on this day will be solid and lasting.
But the children’s *vintanas* are crossed. Todisoa’s eldest son was born on the first day of *Alahasady*, *Vava ny’Alahsady*, although fortunately on a Friday, and not on a Monday or a Tuesday. *Alahasady*’s beginning is like the jaws of a dog tearing up a piece of meat, or like the bird *papango*, which rips to pieces whatever it has in its talons. This destiny is a good one, and children born on this day become eloquent and bright. But it is also a dangerous *vintana* because at least twice in the future the child will stab either himself or someone else. To remove the danger of this destiny, Todisoa and his wife spoke with an *ombiasa* when their first son was born. The sorcerer went into the forest and found a forked twig in the shape of an ox horn. He sharpened one of the prongs of the twig and blunted the other prong, which made the sharp one less dangerous. He then placed the twig in a pot of water that had been boiled with secret charms. When he was done, he gave the twig to Todisoa and his wife to keep with the baby, and Todisoa’s eldest son carries it now with other charms in a little *ody* bag hung around his neck.

Neither Todisoa and his family nor the *mpikabary* knew that the girl’s *vintana* is *Adalo*, and when the girl’s family informed the *mpikabary*, everyone slumped in disappointment. *Adalo*’s place in the house is on the western part of the northern wall; it is the place of honor for visitors. *Alahasady*’s place in the house is on the eastern part of the south wall, near the *sahafa*, the winnowing pan. A line drawn from the boy’s destiny, *Alahasady*, to the girl’s destiny, *Adalo*, crosses through the center post of the house. Their *vintana* oppose each other, and therefore marriage between them is taboo. *Vintana* makes them enemies, constantly at war with each other—they would injure each other and can never be united.

Some say that people with opposing destinies have such different characters that they could never be happy together. Todisoa doesn’t know about that—he is not so interested in people’s characters. But he knows that opposing *vintana* will anger the ancestors and draw calamity down on his
house, his family, and his rice fields. His son’s marriage to this girl would be a disaster. Todisoa walks along the little dyke next to the rice fields and thinks, *Ny fitia toy ny ketsa, ka raha afindra dia maniry.* Love is like a young rice plant, when removed to another place it grows. His son will find another girl.

Todisoa and his sons wade calf-deep through their rice field to reach the place where they will breach the little dyke that keeps the paddy flooded. His rice, ready to harvest, is the most beautiful thing in Todisoa’s world. He pauses for a moment and reaches his hand into the brown water, feeling where the plant roots itself into the earth. This plant produced five tillars, and Todisoa runs his hand up the smooth, fibrous stalks. Even laden and bowing with dusty, opalescent grain, the tillar reaches to Todisoa’s waist. He runs the rice grains through his hand, rubs the silky nubs with his thumb, and thinks of proverbs that compare things to the rice. “A lie is like the first rice: it lasts for a time, but not for the whole year.” “Don’t speak of unripe rice in front of the ripened rice,” which means, Don’t speak ill of people in front of their friends. And one of his favorites, about speaking well in public: “Words are like young rice plants: those which are far apart are added to.”

But while other things might be like the rice, the rice is only like itself. It is the first thing; the thing to which all other things are compared.

Once, in a public speech during Radama’s reign, Todisoa heard a foreigner compare the mature rice grains to little nuggets of gold. The foreigner called them “golden earrings on an elegant woman.” Todisoa would not trade his pregnant rice for an equivalent number of little gold nuggets, nor for an elegant woman. Wading through his rice field, caressing his rice with his own hands, Todisoa feels a fullness in his chest, pride like the day his first son was born. For this rice is not just food for his family: it is a life lived in accordance with his ancestors’ taboos, a life lived honorably and well. It is his labor and his family’s labor and harmony between the ones who came before him, his ancestors, and the ones
who will inherit, his sons. It is the connection between the past and the present and the future. The rice is
the effect, and all his actions and his ancestors blessings are the cause.

Todisoa’s eldest son stands next to him in the rice field. He knows his place, and does not ask his
father any questions. They take up their shovels and together they begin to dig.
CHAPTER 4

...In which the ravages of the fever threaten the missionary community, and the executioner makes new alliances

Antananrivo, 1829

David Griffiths, the senior missionary with the London Missionary Society in Antananarivo, stands dripping at the threshold of Ani's house. The rain streams through the streets like the hushed feet of running children. Impeccably polite, Ani opens his door wide. “Mister Griffiths. Please come in.”

The minister’s skin is pale, his thin lips bloodless, and dark, puffy shadows hang from beneath his eyes. His curly, graying hair is unkempt and plastered to the side of his head. But behind his misery hides a robust man, strong and hardy, his round face lined with well-placed wrinkles. He crosses the threshold with a sigh of what Ani can only interpret as surrender. Ani takes his coat and invites him into the sitting room of the small wooden house. The minister’s robes, an incongruous gray of moral ambiguity, smell of soap and rain, but underneath Ani smells a man who has not bathed in several days. Ani says, “Please make yourself comfortable while I ask my man to make us tea.”

Two chairs newly upholstered in thick purple brocade and a small wooden table furnish the room. Minister Griffiths arranges himself in one of the chairs, fidgeting with his hands, crossing and uncrossing his legs. A sumptuous carpet hangs on one wall, depicting in oranges and yellows a trading scene from what looks like ancient Egypt. Lamps and candles of local manufacture augment the flat gray light from the two open windows. The effect is formal but cheerful, cozy with the gently drumming rain outside.
Ani returns from the back of the house and seats himself in the other chair. Before he can say anything, the minister compliments him on the carpet. “It's beautiful. Is it silk?”

“Yes. I had it commissioned before I left. Do you recognize the scene?”

“I don't. What is it?”

Through long experience, Ani knows that the minister needs somewhere to put his eyes, something to talk about to help him move past the overwhelming discomfort that comes from sitting across from an executioner. Ani arranges his parlor to put civilized people at their ease. “It’s a trading expedition the Pharaoh Queen Hatshepsut made to the land of Punt about three thousand years ago. The scene is painted on one of the walls of her temple, back in my homeland in Egypt. It's said she brought back the most fragrant incense trees, and planted them in the courtyard outside her rooms.” Ani closes his eyes and inhales, remembering. “Her clothes and hair smelled of myrrh.” He opens his eyes and smiles at the minister. “She said that their perfume helped her when she was struggling with a difficult decision. The spice invigorated her, kept her focused. And the trees helped her remember how much larger the world is than just Egypt. That beautiful things can also come from outside the Nile River Valley.”

Ani pauses while his servant brings in the tea on a service made of real silver and translucent bone china. Sparkling cubes of sugar nearly overflow the painted bowl, the teacups rattle lightly in their saucers, and the aroma of black Indian tea brushes past the men. David Griffiths relaxes into his chair. “Proper tea,” he sighs.

“Proper tea.” Ani returns his smile. “I'm afraid that now the carpet serves the opposite function for me. It reminds me of home.” The servant leaves and Ani pours the tea from a pot with a swan-neck spout. It's true that the carpet reminds Ani of home, but it reminds him also that beautiful things can come from outside the Nile River Valley. He knows that he must be reminded of this on occasion.
The minister is soothed by the tea and the sugar. Ani wonders if someday he will have to execute David Griffiths. Ani knows why the minister is here—he has heard the rumors running through the city, running on hushed feet like the rain—and to smooth the conversation Ani broaches the subject gently. “I’ve heard that your wife is very sick. I’m sorry. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

The minister sets his teacup in its saucer and looks at the floor. “She has the fever and the auge. It’s very bad.” His eyes wander to the window, to the deadly, falling rain outside. “At first she just had the fever, it would come in cycles, every two or three days, she would be hot to the touch and then shivering with cold. We tried to make her comfortable, giving her blankets or cool baths, and she ate and drank a little.” One of the candles wavers in a puff of air, and Ani watches the minister watch the dancing shadows. “She was like this for two weeks, and we thought she would recover—most do who only have the fever.” Griffiths raises his eyes and really looks at Ani for the first time.

Ani reassures the minister. “Yes, it’s been my experience that most recover who only have the intermittent fever. But I take it your wife’s condition has worsened.”

Griffiths takes a sip of tea. With steady hands he replaces the teacup in its saucer. “She’s very bad now. Delusional. Sometimes she thinks I am her father. Our girl, Rasalama, was tending her yesterday and she started screaming, thinking she had died and gone to a hell populated with dark-skinned savages. Rasalama was understandably upset. My wife said some very cruel things.” Griffiths pauses for a moment. “I’m an educated man, but it’s hard not to think that the devil is in her.”

Ani answers, “Mister Griffiths, you are an educated man. You know that the cause of your wife’s illness is not the devil, but a poison in the atmosphere that hangs over this island. Do not give in to despair. The causes of Mrs. Griffiths’ illness are natural, not diabolical, and so we have hope that a natural remedy may effect a cure. What have you tried?”
“When she started worsening, I bled her. Every evening for four days I administered an anodyne antimonial draught, and when that didn’t help, I started her on mercury. For a week she continued to worsen. Our girl Rasalama begged me to see the diviners to ask the sikidy—I’m afraid her faith in Our Lord is not as strong as I had hoped.”

“Beliefs learned from childhood are difficult to suppress, especially in times of crisis.” Ani sits erect and tastes tannins from the tea on his tongue. He smells the sugar in the bowl and honey from the beeswax candles.

The minister speaks resigned, matter-of-fact. “Yes. Well. I agreed to allow one of their healers to apply a vapor bath, with water steeped in local leaves. He fed her as much rice as she would take, and as much rice-water as she would drink, which was little enough in any case.”

“And still she worsens?”

“And still she worsens.” David Griffiths looks with empty eyes at the carpet on Ani’s wall. “My colleague Mister Jones tells me I must prepare myself. I pray that the Lord will send us a miracle, and she will recover. She is in God’s hands.”

“Mister Griffiths, do you know the Arabic saying, ‘Believe in God, but tie up your camel’?” David Griffiths smiles wanly, and Ani continues. “So. Do you have available here the bark of the chinchona tree? It grows in the western mountains on the southern continent of the Americas.”

“I have heard of it. I’ve heard that sulfat of quinine produced from the bark can sometimes help with the fever. But there is no source of chinchona bark here that I know of.”

“The Chinese also use a tincture of artemisinin from their ching-hao tree. It was effective in several severe cases I’ve seen.”

David Griffiths is not a tall man. Standing at five feet three inches, he’s tough, and strong, and carries the determined air of a hard-working man. Ani senses that he can be stubborn when not guided
by the angels of his better nature. Only stubbornness and determination in the face of great desperation
would send a minister of London Missionary Society to the court executioner, a heathen besides, to
consult on his wife’s illness. Ani finds a kind of respect for David Griffiths. Sometimes, not frequently,
but occasionally a person will see that Ani’s familiarity with the human body can be used to heal as well
as kill. In David Griffiths Ani recognizes a man of unusually pragmatic temperament and strength of
character. He begins to understand why the Christian mission in Imerina has been as successful as it has.

Ani offers before David Griffiths can ask. “I have some connections with the traders here in
Tana. I will see if I can procure either sulphat of quinine or tincture of artemisinin. I cannot promise that
I will find it, but I will try.”

David Griffiths looks like a drowning man who has spied a floating tree. He exhales with relief.
“I am in your debt. I will write to the Governor in Mauritius, also, but I fear that even if they have a
supply available, by the time it arrives it might be too late.”

“Yes. I will go to the traders now. Will you allow me to call on you and your wife later tonight?”

This is Ani’s price: the minister must receive the executioner into his house. David Griffiths’
brow furrows infinitesimally as he balks, but he hides his reaction quickly and answers with grace, “Of
course. Please. I am in your debt.”

Ani smiles, puts down his teacup, and rises. “Then perhaps you should get back to your wife.”

The minister stands also, turns toward Ani and holds out his hand. The executioner towers over
the minister. Ani grips the minister’s hand firmly and looks the other man in the eye. David Griffiths
looks relieved. Ani thinks, It’s a beginning. “Until tonight, then.”

“Until tonight.” Griffiths collects his coat and steps out into the rain.
The room in which Mrs. Griffiths struggles reeks of sweat and urine and blood and pain, the air foul and thick with the woman’s madness and the man’s fear. Everything is damp—the bed, the bedclothes, the woman’s skin—and the wooden walls and furniture are swollen with moisture. As Ani enters the room, the minister’s wife thrashes on the bed, moans and lashes out with a weak arm at the Malagasy girl sitting next to the bed holding a bowl of yellow, bitter-smelling water and a damp cloth.

The girl looks up to see Ani come in and her face registers a complex series of emotions: relief, fear, respect, hope, humility, and finally submission. She stands up and leaves the room, keeping her head bowed. She must duck past the minister on her way out. Ani moves to the shuttered windows and opens them, and even though he draws the curtains against the night and the rain, the air in the room begins to move.

Ani sits by the bed and takes the sick woman’s hand. She is wrapped to the chin in malodorous bedclothes, the sheets stained with dark patches of sweat, bile, and blood. Her eyes roll up toward the ceiling and Ani sees that blotches of yellow surround her pupils. A thin line of drool spotted with flecks of blood escapes from the corner of her cracked lips. Small, pussy eruptions dot her chin and cheeks. She moans, then hisses as she tosses her head violently twice, her eyes vacant, caught in a delirium dream. Ani reaches under the sheet and clasps her small, hot palm between his two hands, and she quiets a little, closes her eyes. Ani places the back of his palm on her cheek and feels the fever ravaging her brain. He imagines tiny worms twisting inside her head, feasting, laying eggs, bursting forth to repeat the cycle of malaria infection.

From within his *lamba* Ani withdraws a cloth pouch about the size of a mango. David Griffiths stands behind him holding a wooden goblet of rice water. Ani reaches for the cup, and asks, “Will she be able to drink?”
Ani spent the afternoon negotiating with two Arab traders in Tana. Before today, he knew of them, but had not yet called on them or been introduced. They of course knew of him. From them, Ani was able to procure a quantity of chinchona bark powder sufficient to cure the minister’s wife, if she is strong enough to swallow, if she survives the next few days. In addition to the actual cost of the medicine—not insignificant but well within Ani’s means—Ani now owes the two Arabs a favor. All three are more comfortable now, for in purchasing the quinine Ani entered the shadow market of Antananrivo’s court society, where the currency is favors, secrets, and introductions. Where wealth is measured in the number and strength of one’s allies. And where battle lines are drawn based on family ties and social slights. Ani made three allies today: the minister and the two Arab traders. If she survives, he will be able to count the minister’s wife as a fourth.

David Griffiths hands Ani the goblet of rice water. “It’s hard for her to drink.”

Ani takes the cup and measures a spoonful of the powder into the murky water. The dark, bitter bark dissolves as he stirs, and he asks the minister to help his wife sit up. David Griffiths sits on the damp, stinking bed next to his delirious wife, and with a gentleness that surprises Ani, reaches under her wracked body to prop her up. He murmurs soothingly under his breath, and she submits to his manipulations. Ani hands the minister the cup, Griffiths holds it to his wife’s lips, and to the unspeakable relief of the two men she takes a small sip, and swallows. Her eyes staring into nothing, she says in Welsh, in a little girl voice, “It’s bitter, father.”

David Griffiths tips the cup to her lips again, and replies soothingly, “I’m sorry. But you must take your medicine.”

Ani feels he is intruding on an intimacy, and quietly leaves the room. He seeks out their maid, the girl Rasalama, whom he finds kneeling at the side of her own bed, praying to her Christian god. She hears him and gets up, asks him in Malagasy, “How is she, tompko?” Ani hates the tompko form of
address—it means, literally, “my owner,” and is a constant reminder of the slave economy of the Merina. In everyday speech the term has lost its actual meaning, and is now merely the polite form of address to a superior, but it nettles him every time he hears it and he knows he must work to let go of his discomfort. Part of him doesn’t want to.

Ani answers the girl. “She’s taking medicine, and that’s a good sign. But she’s far from out of danger.”

The girl answers, “I pray for her. And for the minister.”

Ani instructs the girl to build up the fire, to wash all of her mistress’ clothes, all of the bedclothes, all of the rags they have used during her sickness, and to hang them over the fires so that they dry properly. The girl protests that the minister will suffer in the heat, and Ani tells her to use the cooking hut. “It will be uncomfortable to cook for a while. Perhaps you can make arrangements with the neighbors.” But the clothes must be dry, Ani insists. “I will send you some sweet-smelling herbs. Pack the bedclothes in a chest with the herbs, then switch everything out tomorrow evening so that all of the linens in her room are fresh.”

The girl nods. Ani thinks she is perhaps fourteen years old, small and undernourished on a diet of rice and leaves and not enough meat and eggs. Well-defined muscles in her shoulders and arms speak of hard physical labor pounding rice, washing clothes, carrying water from the public fountains. She faces him with humility, her eyes always on the ground, and in the slight convexity in her back, a rounding that protects her heart, Ani senses an unnamed guilt. He wonders if she feels old guilt for abandoning her ancestors for the Christian god, or recent guilt for abandoning her Christianity for the native healer. Ani thinks, probably both, and feels a sudden, surprising, and familiar wave of compassion touch him. Ani knows with certainty that the girl is in danger. A formless danger, far away, out of focus, so vague that he cannot speak of it. He cannot warn her. He touches her cheek and gives her a smile instead.
Ani hears the minister call him from the bedroom and leaves the girl to her labors. David Griffiths sits in the chair next to the bed, holding the cup. His wife lies on her back, apparently asleep. He hands the goblet to Ani who looks immediately at the contents and sees that it’s empty. Griffiths smiles at Ani and says, “There’s hope.”

Ani doesn’t reply directly. “Give her one spoonful of the powder mixed first with water, then, when she can take it, a little sweet wine. The powder is very bitter, and whatever you can do to make it palatable will be a favor to her. Give it to her once in the morning and again in the evening. The amount in that sack, it will be enough.” Ani doesn’t say, One way or another. The woman is very sick, and the illness has reached her mind. Even if she survives she may be a simpleton hereafter. Or she may make a full recovery. Ani thinks this woman must be a strong woman, to have survived and thrived here in Madagascar for as long as she has. An unusual woman, with a strength of character to match her husband’s.

David Griffiths nods, but says again, “There’s hope.”

Ani bows slightly, and takes his leave.
CHAPTER 5

...In which we meet the court secretary, and learn of the manner in which King Radama died

Antananarivo, 1829

Griffiths and Raombana drink bets-a-betsa out of tiny cut-crystal glasses, and they have reached the stage of the afternoon when their posture is relaxed and their tongues are loose.

“Listen to this,” Raombana says. He removes a piece of paper from a small bundle next to him on the table of David Griffith’s sitting room. The room is extraordinary, probably unique in Madagascar. It is furnished and decorated entirely in the English style, with comfortable upholstered chairs, an overstuffed couch with elegant curved arms, and small cherry-wood tables strategically arranged. Though unlit this afternoon, lamps with colorful cloth shades and tassels warm the space, while a blue and gray carpet depicting a hunt covers the wooden floor. Inside this room, David Griffiths and Raombana can almost forget that they are in Madagascar. If the air in the room wasn’t so muggy, so full of the smells of boiling rice, chickens, and unwashed people, if from outside the room didn’t intrude the sounds of women pounding rice and men yelling at oxen, indeed Griffiths and Raombana could imagine that they are back in England, or in Wales. Inside this room, the two men speak to each other in English.

Griffiths waves his hand at Raombana as the Merina man starts to read from the paper in his hands. “Don’t. I don’t want to be accused of spying, and you don’t want to be accused of revealing state secrets.”

Raombana opens his mouth to reply, but stops at the unobtrusive entrance of Rasalama, Griffiths’ maid. She says to the minister, “There is a man here to see you, Father. It’s the man who brought the medicine for Mrs. Griffiths.” Minister Griffiths sighs, then relaxes his face into a smile. He
says to Raombana, “It’s the queen’s new executioner. Have you met him?”

Raombana is surprised and says, “No, I haven’t. Is he in the habit of calling on you?”

Griffiths says to Rasalama in Malagasy, “Please invite him in.” Then to Raombana he says in English, “I’ll introduce you.” Today is the third time Ani has made a social visit to Griffiths in his home, and on the previous two occasions also Griffiths was entertaining men placed highly at court. In the back of Griffiths’ mind a half-formed idea emerges, and he begins to suspect that this executioner may be sophisticated in the ways of an aristocratic court. Griffiths wonders if Ani is having his house watched. The thought forms and takes root, but Griffiths sets it aside for later consideration as he stands to greet his visitor.

Ani ducks through the threshold and smiles at the two men at the table. Raombana also stands, and Griffiths says formally in English, “Ani, this is Queen Ranavalona’s Court Secretary, the noble Raombana. Raombana, this is the queen’s new Executioner, Ani.”

Raombana bows slightly and says in perfectly-accented British English, “It is a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Ani looks surprised, but returns the bow and says, “And you as well, sir.” Griffiths’ laugh is mirthful and friendly. He waves his red-haired hand at the two men and the upholstered chairs and says, “Sit down, please.” Ani makes himself comfortable in the room as gregarious and as gorbellied as its owner. Raombana is sinewy and angular and sits with an outward self-confidence unusual in a Merina man. He wears his hair short, in the style of the late king Radama who imitated his British adviser James Hastie. Raombana’s clothes are from a western tailor, of good quality and excellent fit. Griffiths says, “Raombana traveled to England with his brother when they were both boys. They lived and studied under the guardianship of the London Missionary Society for eight years. He just returned to Tana last
year.” The Welshman teases the Imerina noble good-naturedly. “Raombana speaks the King’s English better than I do.”

Raombana laughs with Griffiths and says to Ani, “I miss England sometimes. This ruddy Welshman is the closest thing to English culture within a hundred miles.” Raombana points the rim of his glass at Griffiths and Ani smells the weak alcohol made from fermented coconut juice. Griffiths pours Ani a glass, then raises his own and says, “To England.” His tone is not altogether reverent. Neither is Raombana’s when he replies, “To the queen.” They both look at Ani, full of humor, and Griffiths is suddenly very curious to know who or what Ani will toast. Where does this man’s allegiance lie? Ani lifts his own glass and says in his native tongue, “To life,” but which he translates for the men as, “To your health.” Griffiths and Raombana grunt identically—it’s a bland response—and they all drain their glasses.

As Griffiths pours a refill for the men, he nods his head at the paper Raombana still holds. He says to Ani, “Raombana was about to share some of Ranavalona’s state secrets. But I stopped him.” He concentrates on filling Ani’s glass and says in a mock-serious tone directly to Ani, “I prefer your and my relationship to be an entirely social one.” As he finishes speaking he looks up under his thick blond eyebrows with a bemused smile, dissipating any potential weight his words may have carried.

Raombana breaks in, “And as I was just about to explain to our respected minister here—”

Griffiths interrupts him, “Before you were interrupted—”

Raombana continues, “Yes, before I was interrupted, I was about to explain to the good minister Griffiths that I was merely going to share a single sentence with him. A sentence so perfectly written that it demands to be shared. And I promise that it contains not a single state secret.”

“Hah!” Griffiths says. He takes a sip from his glass and says, “Well, then. What do you think, Ani? Should our court secretary share this perfect sentence as it fell from the perfect lips of our most
perfect sovereign? Should we allow him to place all our lives in danger?"

“There would be some difficulty with a death sentence pronounced on the court executioner.”

Ani says light-heartedly. But he remembers a time when he narrowly avoided exactly that circumstance. It was a long time ago. Ani was not careful enough when he collected a prisoner’s story, and the king was both more cunning and more bloodthirsty than Ani realized. Ani is wiser now. More careful. And a better judge of character.

Raombana laughs, “We’re safe then!” He looks at Griffiths, his expression lively but the tilt of his head hinting at a something deeper. “Minister Griffiths, I assure you that you will be most happy to have heard this particular sentence.”

Griffiths catches the tilt of Raombana’s head. He, too, laughs and says, “Well, then. Go ahead.”

Raombana turns to Ani and asks, “Do you speak Malagasy?”

Griffiths answers for Ani. “Oh yes, he speaks the words. He just doesn’t understand the meaning most of the time.” Griffiths and Raombana exchange a comically exasperated look that carries with it the entire culture that Ani does not, in fact, understand. Ani chuckles good-naturedly and says in the language of Imerina, “Unfortunately, the good minister is correct. I do understand the words. But I am still learning your taboos.”

Raombana picks up the paper and says, “Never mind. This is from Her Majesty to one of her army captains, now the garrison commander at the port city of Foulpointe. Aza mikabary olona foana hianareo fa ny lalana fodia na atreho fa zaho mandre ny anareo hoe manao kabary aty koa atsaharo izany fa aza atao.”

Griffiths whistles under his breath, but Ani fails to see the poetry in the words. He translates aloud into English: “‘Do not make pronouncements freely, for just as the roads return to my presence, I
hear your words here. So do not do it.’” He looks at Raombana and says, “As Minister Griffiths suggested, I understand, but I do not understand.”

Griffiths looks at Raombana and says, “See what I mean.”

Raombana snorts and takes a sip of his besta-betsa. “You explain it. So a vahaza will understand. It’s no longer my responsibility to explain things to vahaza.”

Griffiths laughs again and looks at Ani. He adopts the tone of a master tutoring a journeyman, and says, “It sounds like she saying, ‘Idle talk will be punished.’ And she is saying this. But behind her words is both God and the crown. The word ‘lalana,’ which you translated as ‘road,’ can also mean ‘law’ or ‘permission.’ Fodiana, ‘to return,’ comes from mipody, which also refers to a finch that damages rice crops and whose wings are a brilliant scarlet, the color of royal authority. ‘My presence,’ atreho, contains in its various forms the idea of meeting face-to-face in order to answer as a witness in a trial. Its provincial meaning, well-known to the governor to whom this letter will be sent, connotes posting one’s self as a sentinel. Finally, the words that you translated as ‘pronouncements’ and ‘words’ both come from the term kabary. Here, they carry the idea of speaking authoritatively.

“So what this single sentence actually says is, ‘I, the queen, have the sole authority to make law through my words. If you attempt to speak in my name your words will return to me like a bird of great destruction. You will be tried and punished. Though I am far away, I stand like a sentinel over you. Do not think that because I do not see you speaking in a kabary conference that I am any less capable of hearing exactly what you say. Take heed! Do not make law in my name.’”

Now it’s Ani’s turn to whistle under his breath. He lifts his glass, stares briefly at the murky white liquid, then drains it. Looking up, he says to Griffiths, “I wouldn’t want to be the governor who received that letter.”
But Griffiths and Raombana are having their own conversation with their faces and with their eyes. Ani reviews the sitting room—generous, comfortable, at ease with itself—and thinks about the hidden effort and expense of the appointments. Griffiths nominally responds to Ani’s comment, but his expression conveys something to Raombana that only the two men catch. Griffiths says, “Yes. That sentence very effectively imposes her authority, doesn’t it?”

Raombana drains his own glass and says, “Yes it does.”

Ani understands that these men would prefer to speak in private, and in fact the real purpose of Ani’s visit has been fulfilled. He has met the Merina court secretary who studied in England. He doesn’t wish to alienate either of these men by overstaying his welcome. Ani can be patient—he will not learn everything in one day. So he takes his cue to change the subject and makes his excuses. He says to Griffiths, “I came to check on your wife’s health. How is she feeling?”

Griffiths looks at Ani, not quite glad to be rid of him but grateful for the man’s tact. He says to Raombana, “It is to Ani that we owe my wife’s recent recovery from the fever.” Still speaking to Raombana but looking at Ani, he says, “We are greatly in his debt. He almost certainly saved her life.”

Ani says simply, “It was my honor to be of service.” No one speaks for a moment as the spectre of delirium and death hangs in the air. Dust motes whirl above the gray and blue rug. Finally Ani says, “Is she well enough to receive visitors?” The last two times he visited, the minister’s wife was still not fully recovered.

Griffiths says, “Well enough? Hah! I can’t keep her in bed. She’s in the chapel now ‘fixing’ the ‘mess’ my long-suffering housemaid created while she was sick. Please, go see them.” The merriment is back in Griffiths face. “Your visit will be a relief to all concerned, I’m sure.”

Ani laughs, “I will do that, then.” He stands, but this time the other two men don’t. Ani bows to Raombana, “It was a pleasure to meet you, sir.”
Raombana lifts his glass to Ani and says, “And you as well.” He drinks, and Ani takes his leave. Raombana and Griffiths continue to talk, and drink, for several more hours.

Raombana returns to his house at the hour of *mena-masoandro*, when the sun is red in the western sky. He tells his wives and his children to eat without him, and sits down at his desk. The small table and chair are located in the place of *Alahamady*, on the northern end of the eastern wall. It is a place of power, the destiny of kings, and its color is royal red. His house is one of only a few in Antananarivo with a desk, and visitors comment on it frequently. But for Raombana the desk is primarily an instrument and this evening he lights a lamp and sits down to think. He thinks of the conversation he had with Minister Griffiths. He thinks of England, of Richard II and Henry IV. He thinks about power and where it comes from, both in theory and in practice. He thinks of his own usurper queen Ranavalona.

Raombana thinks that Ranavalona cannot hold or wield power in the way that Radama did, or in the way that Andrianampoinimerina did. Radama’s power was martial—he stood at the head of the army on many of his campaigns. Radama’s power was in Hastie’s Western-trained military. Andrianampoinimerina’s power came from sheer force of personality. He conquered, rewarded the men who helped him, killed the men who opposed him (including his own son), and assumed the mantle of God-King. Andrianampoinimerina was like the earth itself—he was the foundation of everything, infinitely strong, and he shaped and molded his people to his will. One does not argue with the earth; one merely submits.

Radama was Andrianampoinimerina’s son, and Radama’s daughter and nephew were to reign after him as king and queen. But the royal line, Andrianampoinimerina’s ancestral line, was broken when Ranavalona killed the nephew, banished the daughter, and usurped the throne. Where does her
power come from, then? From Radama’s ancestors, who are not her ancestors? From the nobles who helped her gain her throne? Who rules Imerina?

Raombana thinks about these things, and about the letters he transcribed for the queen this morning. He thinks about the language in those letters, the implied threats, the subtle but effective assertion of authority. In those letters he sees the beginnings, the merest hints, of a different kind of power. Ranavalona could be what the English call an “administrator.” She could turn the teaching of the missionaries on its head, use the written word to impose her will at a distance. This is something no king in Madagascar has ever done before. Ranavalona could use writing to rule. Her power could come from pieces of paper.

Raombana thinks about this, and decides he will watch, and wait, and see. He thinks about power and where it comes from, both in theory and in practice. Raombana decides to write about the beginnings of Ranavalona’s power. He will write in English because it’s safer that way, but thinking about power and where it comes from, Raombana begins to write of Ranavalona-Manjaka’s origin. He smooths his paper, sharpens his pen, dips it in ink, and begins to write a history.

This is how Queen Ranavalona came to her throne....

I.

King Radama was sick in the Tranovola at the palace, and his oldest wife Ranavalona went to mamangy, to visit him while he was sick. After observing him and speaking with him for some time, she understood that he was mortally ill, and this woman who presented herself as mild and agreeable secretly conceived of the idea of taking the throne when he died.
After her visit with the king, she spoke with two of Radama’s other wives—Rabodomirahalahy and Rasendrasoa—who were close to her and under her influence. She sent the two of them to Adria\(m\)amba’s house, which overlooked the south side of the palace as Adria\(m\)amba was from an old and noble family. Adria\(m\)amba was known through the court to be brave to the point of rashness, and afraid of no one, and had enjoyed the favor of both Andria\(m\)ampoinimerina as well as Radama because of his skill and soldier-like manners and appearance. Adria\(m\)amba fought nobly in the civil wars that ultimately brought all of Imerina under the sovereignty and dominion of Andria\(m\)ampoinimerina.

It was to this brave man that the two wives of Radama, emissaries of Ranavalona, spoke about Ranavalona’s ambition to take the throne. The two wives told Adria\(m\)amba that if he helped Ranavalona achieve her ambition, she would bestow high honors and great lands upon him once she was secure on the throne. Adria\(m\)amba was swayed by their arguments, and instructed them to return to Ranavalona and tell her that he agreed to lead the conspiracy and set the plot in motion.

Adria\(m\)amba called to his house two men whom he knew would help him effect the plot. The first man was the young and ambitious head of the king’s aidecamps, Andria\(m\)ihaja. Several years before King Radama died, Andria\(m\)ihaja carried out secret orders from the king to deceive and murder a Sakalava noble. Andria\(m\)ihaja was swiftly promoted for his cleverness and usefulness to the king, and in less than five years was promoted from the 2nd Honor, or the rank of private, to the 9th Honor, or rank of Full Colonel and Head Aidecamp. Andria\(m\)ihaja was the first man that Adria\(m\)amba called as a co-conspirator for the plot to take the throne.

The second man Adria\(m\)amba called was Ratiandrazana, an aidecamp of the prince Ramanetaka and greatly favored by him. Ratiandrazana was also known for his bravery, because at one
time he had burst on a body of Sakalava and driven them away from a well that they had besieged outside of the town of Mahajanga. Ratiandrazana, armed only with a spear and a shield, killed two or three of the enemy, and was himself wounded above one of his eyes. The rest of the Sakalava were so astonished at his daring that they fled, staying away long enough for the garrison at Mahajanga to draw water from the well. Ratiandrazana was the second man that Andriamamba called as a co-conspirator for the plot to take the throne.

These three men—Andriamamba, Andriamihaja, and Ratiandrazana—closeted themselves in Andriamamba’s house overlooking the south side of the palace and hatched their plot to usurp the throne from the lawful heir. They spoke together for three days, and finally, the evening of the 20th Asorotany 1828, their plans were set. King Radama died the next morning, on the 21st Asorotany 1828.
CHAPTER 6

...In which we meet a slave trader and his cargo, and more alliances are made

Mahajunga, 1829

In the port city of Mahajunga, on the northwest coast of the island of Madagascar, a corpse washes up on the beach. The tide played with it for a while, lifting it onto the sand then dragging it back out to sea, like a cat playing with its food. Or like a slight-of-hand artist, prestidigitation, now you see it, now you don’t. But the sea is fickle, and when it grew tired of its game it left the body high on the filthy sand and then ran away with the tide, off to other, possibly more dangerous games.

The flies find the corpse immediately. Swarming around the body, houseflies and blowflies land on the open eyes, crawl into the mouth, the nose, the vagina, and the anus, the flies’ bodies shimmering in iridescent blue and jeweled green, their eyes flashing red in the sun. Females deposit eggs to fill the body’s cavities, and the larvae hatch immediately, a squirming mass feasting on soft tissue and the fluids leaking from the corpse. As they feed, the maggots excrete their own fetid juices, liquifying the flesh, and soon flesh flies and corpse flies are devouring the semi-liquid substrate—the rotten meat, the corrupted organs. Carrion beetles squirm from beneath the sand, attracted to the banquet of writhing worms and stinking, bloated flesh. An hour after the body settled on the sand, the corpse has become a writhing mass of maggots and crawlers, its putrid gasses hanging stagnant like a low fog on the beach.

The beach at Mahajunga is prime habitat for flies. Bodies wash up in groups as slaving dhows dispose of cargo too wasted to sell, dumping their losses before they offload and pay the per-head duty charged by the port authorities. Mahajunga, like most cities on the island of Madagascar, has no sewer system, so the city’s waste ends up at the port, turds and rotting garbage bobbing thick around the ships
in the tide. Swahili traders built slave barracoons that now line the beach just above the normal high tide mark—the waste from these cells adds to the filth on the sand. Every breath is a mouthful of thick, nauseating rot. Alidy knows his wife will be furious this evening; he will come home reeking of corruption, and she will have to scrub his clothes twice and pack them in herbs before they will again be suitable to wear. He will have to sleep in the cooking hut—even after scrubbing and scrubbing his body and his hair, still the stench will cling.

Alidy hates this part of his job, the inspection of merchandise when it lands. But if he doesn’t oversee it personally, the dockmaster and the quartermaster will cheat him. As he stands on the docks he covers his mouth with a cloth and tries not to focus on the foul vapors, but the air is filled with the buzzing of flies. Underneath the ear-chafing drone, heavy chains rattle as manacled feet slap the wooden dock, laborers curse in five different tongues, and occasionally the crack of a whip splits the heavy air like an ax splits a log. Alidy knows that somewhere out there the sea murmurs, whispering secrets to the sky, but he cannot hear it here at the port. What he hears, what fills his ears like maggots filling the mouth of the corpse, is the incessant, inescapable buzzing of flies.

The flies are the worst at the beach and in the slave cells in the barracoon. In one cell, five slaves—three men and two women—squat listless on the shit-covered floor, flies pecking at their eyes, noses, mouths, their many oozing sores, the exposed nipples of the two women, the tips of the men’s penises. The slaves no longer notice the flies; they are in a sense already corpses. Four of the captives, their hands tied behind their backs, are secured to the ceiling beam by a hemp cord wrapped around their necks. One of the men lies pressed under a heavy wooden log, the junction of two branches forking at his neck so that he cannot move and can barely breathe. These slaves are Alidy’s slaves, destined for sale in Tana, and so they have been fed enough to keep them alive. Still, just by looking an anatomist could name every bone in their bodies.
Alidy gathers his merchandise as it is offloaded from the dhow: three more female slaves from the interior of the African continent. He pays the port master his duty and tips him a bag of tobacco from Tana. With the ship’s captain he talks at greater length, making arrangements for the next shipment, giving him letters for his agents in the mainland ports of Ibo and Quissanga. For the captain he has a bottle of French wine from Tana.

When he finishes his business on the dock, he personally marches his slaves to the barracoon, where he inspects them before handing them to the quartermaster to load into the cell with the others. All three will fetch a high price, he thinks. One is younger—perhaps fourteen years old—he will sell her to an Indian bachelor he knows in the city who is looking for a maid. The other two, probably in their early twenties, will go as house slaves to noble Merina families. All three are reasonably healthy, with thick hands and most of their teeth. The brand burned lightly into their arms in Zanzibar, identifying them as his, will fade in a month or two.

His merchandise secured, with one hand holding the cloth over his mouth and the other swatting at the infernal flies, Alidy leaves the docks for the market, located slightly inland and away from the worst of the stench. He will leave for Antananrivo soon, and he has room for one or two more slaves in his caravan. At the market he will see if there’s anything worth buying. This afternoon is also the time set for his *fatidra* with a new supplier, the Sakalava noble who rules the land of Iboina in northwestern Madagascar. He considers the Sakalava version of the blood oath as barbaric as any he has encountered—he much prefers the Europeans’ paper contracts—but he understands the importance of it to his work here. Still, he is looking forward much more to the drinking afterward than to the ceremony itself.

The slave market is an open-air building held together with stone support beams and a wood-plank roof. It stands like a yawning mouth among the smaller market buildings, all teeth on the outside,
dark and hot within. Clouds of flies swarm at the entrance, blown out of the building by slaves with large raffia-palm fans. Alidy and his bodyguard step through the swarm and into the shadows, pausing for a moment to let their eyes adjust. Alidy inhales fully for the first time since he left his house this morning, and mutters a prayer of gratitude to his god for the respite from the vermin.

Inside the market house, two pens squat on either side of a raised platform. One pen holds laborers—strong-backs destined for the rice paddies and fanompoana, government forced labor. The other pen holds women and children. A wooden screen rises in the back of the female pen, where potential buyers can inspect the women in privacy. Young boys sometimes disappear behind that screen as well. A bored quartermaster leans against a pillar, watching the captives, chatting occasionally with the browsers and buyers. The market is busy today with the newly docked cargo—perhaps fifteen buyers mill within the tradehouse, inspecting the thirty or so slaves chained in the pens.

Alidy approaches the quartermaster, palming a silver piastre as a cadeau, a gift that lubricates his work here. The two chat briefly about the state of the rice crop, until the quartermaster nods his head toward the screen and tells Alidy he’s been saving one for him. Alidy raises his eyebrows—the quartermaster knows him well enough to know that his interest is purely business, that he scorns the tourist thrill—but he follows the quartermaster to the back of the pen and ducks behind the screen.

Chained to the back of the pen by a manacle around his ankle is a young man, perhaps sixteen, of uncommon dignity and grace. The slave stands tall, as tall as the quartermaster. High cheekbones frame his wide nose and full lips, voluptuously curved, and Alidy, who normally suffers from no such desires, suppresses a sudden urge to trace the slave’s features with his fingertips. Huge bright eyes challenge him to follow his inclination. The slave’s long fingers clasp themselves at his groin as he tries to preserve his modesty. His body is wasted from the journey, starvation, and disease, but he holds himself with an
elegance that belies his recent torment. Alidy thinks, *He was a prince of his tribe*. A remote tribe, a savanna tribe judging from the opaque ebony of his skin, but a prince nonetheless.

Alidy digs five *piastres* out of his bag and hands them to the quartermaster. “What’s his temperament?”

The silver disappears into the quartermaster’s *lamba*. “Proud. But manageable.”

Alidy pushes the slave’s hands away from his groin. Yes, he thinks, a find. He scrutinizes the youth again, from his shaved head to the cracked soles of his feet, then turns and looks at the quartermaster. “Rough him up a little. Bruise his face, especially, and maybe a rib so he can’t stand up straight. Nothing permanent. Some dog shit on his private parts, I think.”

The quartermaster smiles. Alidy thinks the man enjoys his job perhaps too much, but business is business. “Thank you, Rasoloson. I know a woman who will be very pleased.”

The quartermaster does as he’s told, and when the youth stands on the auction block, the buyers don’t pay him any special interest. Alidy buys him for a fifth of what he could sell him for in Tana. But this youth is not for resale. This youth will be a gift. He will need to be broken, en-mannered, taught some of the language. But this youth is destined for the palace.

As Alidy walks from the market to his house he avoids certain streets, certain sections of the town. He does not look up at the fortress on the hill although he feels its presence always like an iron yoke across his shoulders: heavy and hard, rubbing certain spots raw so that unconsciously he moves around imperfectly healed sores. Today is a day for the future, but even still, or perhaps because—because Alidy is a merchant and the future must be bought with the past—today Alidy is conscious of his burden. He drags behind him the weight of the past. And as he walks through the streets of
Mahajunga avoiding certain areas and not looking at the fortress on the hill, he remembers a day almost seven years ago, the day that brought the future of his past.

Alidy met in person Radama’s general Ramanetaka and his British counselor Hastie in 1824 when Radama’s army invaded Iboina. At that time, Mahajunga was still a Sakalava town, ruled by the great Sakalava chief Andriansolo. Alidy was supervising at the dock, loading a shipment of cargo, when Ramanetaka and Hastie arrived with a company of soldiers and ordered him and two other merchants to cease their trade. They declared Mahajunga for Radama, and said, effective immediately, Radama’s prohibition on the exportation of slaves applied to all commerce in Mahajunga.

Alidy asked, respectfully sir, what he was supposed to do with the fifty-two slaves that were already half loaded onto his dhow and for which a buyer was anxiously waiting on the Island of Bourbon. One of the other traders told Ramanetaka that he had a ship waiting to dock on the tide, and would he prefer that the ship merely sit at sea until all aboard died? To this the great Ramanetaka replied that it was king’s intention to promote the interests of everyone engaged in lawful commerce and industry. However, feeling himself entitled to have his laws completely obeyed, it was his desire that any persons not native to the country and not inclined to conform to his edicts should avail themselves of the earliest opportunity to remove themselves from his shores.

Alidy and the other trader, both of whom were born in Mahajunga and had lived their whole lives there, exchanged a look and left Radama’s men to their business. They retired to the dockmaster’s house and made arrangements to have their cargo smuggled through the dock late that night. After relating the story to his wife and sons that evening, his sons became incensed. They were furious that Radama, an interloper from another tribe with delusions of grandeur fed by the British agent Hastie and his access to guns, could march with six thousand soldiers into one of the most important ports on the
Indian Ocean trade route and completely disrupt the lives and livelihoods of the Swahili, Arab, Indian, British, French, American, Sakalava and even Merina residents of the town.

But that’s exactly what Radama did. While the king and the larger part of his army chased the Sakalava king Andriansolo around the northern territory of Iboina, the rest of his army, under the command of Ramanetaka, built a fort on a hill above Mahajunga and occupied it with a force of eleven hundred men. Radama ultimately subjugated Andriansolo and returned to Tana, leaving Ramanetaka as governor of Mahajunga. Commerce in Mahajunga adjusted and Alidy continued his trade, although he and his sons worked nocturnally more than they had before.

The following year Mahajunga revolted against Merina rule. Ramenetaka suppressed the revolt with his army on the hill and burned the town in retaliation. Alidy lost… Alidy leans against the stone wall of the alley through which he walks and does not think of what he lost. He places his back against the warm stone as his knees fail, and he slides down onto his heels and he feels the hot sun on his face and the white sun in his eyes and he does not think of what he lost. He thinks of the slave in the market today with newly bruised ribs, and his breathing hurts him as if his own ribs were broken. Six years later, and still he feels as if his own ribs were broken. Alidy breathes shallow through his mouth and stares at the ground until he recovers himself, then he slowly pushes his way back up the wall. His clothes are spotted with soot, for the building that supported him was one burned in the fire, and still traces of the revolt linger.

After the rebellion most of the Sakalava fled to the north to escape the Merina government. The Arabs who could afford to leave emigrated to Zanzibar, Comoros, Ibo, and Mozambique. Mahajunga, the mighty port of ten thousand souls, lay dying with only eight hundred Muslim residents, barely enough to fill one of the three mosques in town. Alidy’s wife begged him to leave, to return to the house
of her brother in Damascus where their daughter was being fostered. But Alidy is a pragmatic man and saw opportunity, and so he stayed. He stayed in his stone house in the black smoking ruins and he helped rebuild. He smuggled slaves and traded legitimate and grew very rich.

And now Alidy, dressed in rich cotton robes soiled with the filth of the port, the filth of the market, and the filth of the street, deliberately looks up at the fortress on the hill. Ramenetaka is not there anymore. Ranavalona tried and failed to have him killed when she took the throne; he escaped to an island in the Comoros. Still, Alidy looks up at the fortress and spits a fat, wet curse into the dust of the street, damning Ramenetaka who now lives like a king in exile with his wives and his slaves and his wealth. And with that, Alidy is done. He has summoned the past, and now he gathers his history to himself and tucks it away in his expensive but soiled robes. He has paid for the future that will begin today, and it is enough. It is enough, and more than enough, and Alidy gathers his robes around him and walks a careful path back to his house and his wife.

At the hour of amitotoam-bary, when the sun has reached into the house and touched the place where the rice-morter stands, Aliday arrives at the courtyard of Ravalahy, the Sakalava noble to whom he will bond himself in an oath of blood-brotherhood. The main house faces the path, flanked by old ravenala trees forty feet high. The tree’s distinctive flat crown, 10-foot long fronds fanning out symmetrically in two dimensions, waves in the afternoon breeze. Alidy was born in Mahajunga, but he remembers in his soul the ground from which he came. The desert is Alidy’s blood, and he knows that if you stab a knife into the bark at just the right place, water will spill from tree. Enough water to save a dying man. Alidy venerates the trees with a reverence that borders on the sacred, and he brushes his hand across the trunk of one as he walks to the door of the main house.
Three smaller houses sit in the swept red dirt behind the main house. Children run screeching through the compound, chasing each other with sticks. Ravalahy has three wives that Alidy knows of—the two minor wives share a house and all three cook in the smallest hut. Ravalahy’s senior wife, dressed in her best silk *lamba*, carries a huge pot of rice to a *tsihy* mat set in a clearing among the houses in the shade of the *ravenala* trees. Four men sit around the mat: Ravalahy, two other Sakalava whom Alidy does not know, and the *ombiasa*, the witchdoctor who will perform the ceremony. Alidy himself is accompanied by his bodyguard as well as his caravan manager, two men as close to him as any in his life. Three to three, Alidy thinks with satisfaction. The numbers don’t really matter, but it’s an auspicious beginning.

The men sitting on the *tsihy* greet Alidy’s party, and after settling themselves they speak together of the rains, the rice crop, and the prices of slaves and honey. They avoid any mention of the specifics of Alidy and Ravalahy’s trade agreement—the ceremony has not yet been performed, and the men are superstitious. Instead, the Sakalava ask for the news from Tana, about the new queen’s reign. They are skeptical that a woman can rule the Merina, and are looking for signs of weakness. Alidy reminds them of their own Queen Ravahiny, and warns them not to underestimate Ranavalona’s ferocity.

Alidy speaks of Ranavalona's court, and of two men especially that he knows will interest the Sakalava. The first is Ratiandrazana, a member of an old, noble Merina family and the keeper of the Ikelimalaza *sampy*, or holy idol. About ten years previous, during the reign of Radama in Antananarivo, a force of Sakalava led by Ravalahy besieged this very town, Mahajunga. A troop was sent to guard the well outside town in the hopes that the Merina garrison would expire from thirst. Ratiandrazana, armed only with a spear and a shield, burst into the body of Sakalava and single-handedly drove them away from the well. During the skirmish, he killed two of the Sakalava and was himself wounded above one
of his eyes. The rest of the Sakalava were so astonished at his daring that they fled, staying away long enough for the Merina garrison to draw water from the well.

When Alidy talks of Ratiandrazana's place in court, Ravalahy tells this story with some wry humor—ten years has removed the sting of defeat, and he curses the cowardice of his own body of troops. He admires Ratiandrazana's bravery and boldness in battle. Alidy informs the Sakalava that Ratiandrazana was one of three men instrumental to Ranavalona's rise to the throne—without his help, she would not now be queen. Ratiandrazana is one of the queen's closest advisers and most trusted military leaders, in addition to being the keeper of one of the Merina's most important religious symbols. Ravalahy frowns at this. Ratiandrazana is a dangerous man, and a dangerous enemy.

Alidy also speaks of Andriamihaja, the queen's lover. Several years before King Radama died, Andriamihaja carried out secret orders from the king to deceive and murder Ratsimikiotoka, a Sakalava noble related both to Ravalahy and the Sakalava King Ramitraha. Andriamihaja was swiftly promoted for his cleverness and usefulness to the king, and in less than five years rose from the 2nd Honor, or the rank of private, to the 9th Honor, or rank of Full Colonel and Head Aidecamp. When King Radama died, Andriamihaja ensured that the news was held back for three days, giving Ranavalona and her allies enough time to effect her seizure of the throne.

Without Andriamihaja's and Ratiandrazana’s help Ranavalona would not now be sitting on the Merina throne. Alidy shares the court gossip: the queen seems to be in love with Andriamihaja—she favors him enormously, and while she takes other men to her bed, it is he to whom she turns in times of difficulty. The court is a-buzz with rumor, for Andriamihaja is sympathetic to the westerners, and the queen is not. In these two people the forces of external influence struggle, and many people watch and wonder how it will turn out. Many people worry that it will come to a bad end.
The Sakalava laugh at this. Ravalahy hates Andriamihaja for the part he played in the assassination of his noble relative, and curses both Andriamihaja and the queen. He says, Radama kindled the wrath of the ancestors when he invited the white men and their religion into the Merina court. Now the Sakalava wishes them eternal strife dealing with the arrogant, sacrilegious westerners.

The men talk until the hour of *tafapaka*, when the sun’s rays reach the eastern wall. An hour and a half before sunset, the *ombiasa* begins the preparations for the ceremony. At the southwest corner of the *tsihy* on the bare red earth he sets a *sahafa*, a round, flat pan used to winnow rice. On the *sahafa* he places the fried intestine of a bullock, seven dry straws of grass, a dead locust, some cow dung, a little earth from the bottom of a dried well, a sun-bleached lemur bone, gunpowder, and a musket ball. Once arranged, the men stand up, and with a mighty thrust the *ombiasa* spears the center of the *sahafa* so that it and its contents are pinned to the ground. He takes the chicken he has brought for this purpose, holds it on the ground next to the *sahafa* between Alidy and Ravalahy, and slits its throat carefully. The chicken still lives; its blood pumps out onto the earth, darkening it, spreading a shadow that has nothing to do with the dying sun. Alidy smells iron and dirt. The *ombiasa* speaks, and Alidy and Ravalahy echo him:

“Bear witness now to this blood covenant. Should either of us prove disloyal to the sovereign, or unfaithful to each other, then perish the day, and perish the night. Awful is that, solemn is that which we are now both about to perform!”

Alidy and Ravalahy grip each other’s eyes and don’t let go. The *ombiasa* steps up to Alidy, who pushes aside his *lamba* and bares his breast. With the same knife he used on the chicken, the *ombiasa* cuts Alidy at the mouth of his heart, his *ambavafo*, the center of his chest. Blood wells up and spills over, drips in a red line down his olive skin. Alidy does not flinch. The *ombiasa* gathers the blood on his fingers, reaches down into the *sahafa* and smears the blood on the fried tripe.
“The things in the sahafa bear witness. If we do not keep our promise we will be like the seven dry straws, or like a locust that has been killed, or as earth from a dried up well. If we cease being friends, or if we betray each other, our bones will lie on the earth until they are dried and bleached. If we break this covenant we will be killed in war and our bodies eaten of by wild birds.”

The ombiasa cuts Ravalahy at his ambavafo, squats down and smears the blood on the tripe, mixing it with Alidy’s. The Sakalava’s eyes do not move from Alidy’s, his muscles do not tense. The fowl, its heart still beating, lies still. The ombiasa reaches over and with its feathers still on carefully slices open its abdomen. He reaches inside the bird and pulls out the warm, wet liver, placing it on the sahafa next to the blood-smeared tripe. He slices both the tripe and the liver in half and orders the two men: “Eat.”

Bowls of rice have appeared, and the two men take the bloody organs in their fingers and lay them on top of the rice. They sit back on the tsihy and eat. The space around the Sakalava’s house has quieted, the children herded by their mothers, and Alidy hears the low murmurings of neighbor families gathering behind thin slat walls. Coas call from the trees in evenly-spaced notes. The liver is slimy sand in his mouth, but he chews it carefully and swallows. He takes a handful of rice to wash it down. The tripe is oversalted like all native food, and the salt heightens the metallic seasoning of the blood. Still, Alidy chews the rubbery intestine, grinding it between his teeth until it’s a pulpy, mineral mass in his mouth. He lets it sit on his tongue for a moment, his eyes meeting Ravalahy’s. I am this kind of man, he thinks at the Sakalava. The noble warrior’s expression does not change, and Alidy swallows the blood-smeared tripe.

While the men are eating, the ombiasa withdraws the spear from the sahafa. He places it on the ground, its shaft pointed toward the two men, its sharp tip pointed away. He flips the sahafa over and pours cold water on top of it. The ceremony is finished.
The other two Sakalava, Alidy’s men, and the ombiasa sit on the tsihy in the warm evening air and finish the meal of rice and boiled cassava leaves. Alidy opens a bottle of toaka from Tana, and he and Ravalahy discuss business until the hour of maneno-sahona, when the frogs croak. Ravalahy will now only deal with Alidy in matters of trade, particularly the sale of slaves and cattle won on raids. In accordance with a decree from the old king Radama, the Merina do not export slaves, but the Sakalava, who have never been conquered by the highland tribe, sell captives freely both to the Merina tribe as well as to the east African slave traders. With this blood brotherhood, Alidy has secured a monopoly on slave exports in the northern territory of Iboina.
CHAPTER 7

...In which the court secretary admires the queen's use of the written word, and we learn more of

Radama's reign

Antananarivo, 1829

Raombana pauses on his way back home to watch a chameleon make its slow way across the road. He has just come from worshiping at Minister Griffiths church, and Antananarivo settles around him in the cool winter afternoon. The chameleon moves its right front foot forward, touching it briefly against the ground. It dislikes what it feels and pulls its foot back. Pausing for a moment, it reaches its foot forward again, and tenuously places its fused toes on the dusty street. Finally it commits its weight, and starts again with its left back foot. Advance, retreat, advance, retreat, advance and commit, and then the next leg. At this rate, it will take the chameleon as long as Griffiths’ sermon to cross the cobbled street. Raombana doesn’t mind. He is in a slow mood today as well—tentative and careful—and the chameleon reminds him of the great many ways of being in this world.

Watching the chameleon, Rambana of the proverb: Ataovy toy ny dian-tana: jereo ny aloha, todiho ny aoriana. Be like the chameleon: look forward and look behind. The chameleon’s two eyes swivel independently so it can look both in front of itself and behind itself. But the proverb is of course metaphorical, reminding Raombana to be aware not only of the present, but of the past and future as well. Look to the future and look to the past. Writing his history, Raombana has been thinking about the past, mostly the recent past. But Griffiths’ sermon today turned his thoughts to the deep past: to the beginnings of the Merina empire, and the vazimba queens who ruled before the Merina kings.
Tradition holds that before the Merina settled the high plateau it was populated by the native people of the island, the *vazimba*. Small and hairy and barely civilized in the eyes of the Merina, the *vazimba* were ruled by queens, the last of whom were Rangita and her daughter Rafohy, reigning at Imerimanjaka. It was the tradition of the *vazimba* to fragment their lands by dividing the succession among sons, but Rafohy, who had two sons, decreed instead that her succession would pass first to the elder then to the younger son. The elder son, Andriamanelo, was the last of the *vazimba* and the first of the Merina kings. He was the first to use iron weapons, and to the people he conquered he introduced divination by *sikidy*, traditional circumcision, and the Arab calendar. He also inaugurated the custom of assassinating other possible claimants to the throne—his brother was put to death by the people “to please the king.”

Andriamanelo’s son Ralambo inherited his father’s expanded kingdom and moved his capital to Ambohidrabiby, which he had inherited from his mother. Through wars of conquest he extended his lands; it was he who named his country “Imerina”: the land where one can see far. His successful campaigns were attributed at least in part to the royal talisman Ikelimalaza, which in one battle caused huge hailstones to fall and kill many of his enemies. Ratiandrazana’s family have been the keepers of the Ikelimalaza idol since Ralambo’s time. Andrianampoinimerina and his son Radama are direct descendants of the *vazimba* queens Rangita and Rafohy and the first Merina kings Andriamanelo and Ralambo. Ranavalona is not of the same family, and thus she has broken a royal line that extends back twelve generations to the very founding of the Merina people.

Griffiths today in his sermon talked of the nature of women. From women, he said, we learn that humility is strength. Women nurture the children, care for the elders, and provide for the family the essentials of life: food, water, and clothing. Women keep the house in order. They minister to the sick, suffer the pains of childbirth, and in them only are the Merina people fertile. A virtuous woman does not
run a household by decree, but is bound by the wishes of her husband. And here Griffiths made his most important point: women embody that most Christian of virtues, love.

In the small church with its white walls and smooth wooden pews, Raombana could practically see Queen Ranavalona standing in front of the minister with her head bowed receiving his admonitions. Griffiths painted a picture of how a woman might rule in a Christian country: virtuously, anomalously, powerlessly. Queen Ranavalona as Mother to her People. Griffiths was looking toward the future.

Now, watching the chameleon cross the road, Raombana thinks to look toward the past. The women who ruled before the Merina kings were not women who might rule in a Christian country. The *vazimba* queens were not powerless. They were not anomalous. And they may or may not have been virtuous. But still they ruled. And Raombana remembers that he need not look as far back as the *vazimba*. Radama’s bloodiest domestic conflict was against women—women who protested the cutting of the sovereign’s hair.

In Andrianampoinimerina’s time, it was the tradition of Imerina men to wear their straight hair long, plaited by their women according to their social station. But the British agent Hastie, plying the king with drink, one day convinced Radama to cut his hair short in the European fashion. A group of women sent a petition to the king, entreating him to grow his hair long again because no sovereign in Imerina had ever had his hair cut short. The women did not expect the king to accede to their request, but they thought he might thank them for having, in the simplicity of their hearts, advised him not to deviate from the ancient customs of the sovereigns of Imerina.

But to Radama, the women’s petition smacked of sedition—of rebellion and treason against the king. His response was to cut off the heads of the ringleaders so that their hair would never grow again, then leave their bodies to be eaten by dogs in the presence of the rest of the demonstrators. The survivors were flogged severely, and some died shortly afterwards. How to explain the brutality of Radama’s
response? Remembering this incident from less than ten years ago, Raombana thinks about women and men and power, and a thought occurs to him. Men fear women. Griffiths fears Ranavalona, and so he attempts to emasculate her. Put her in her place. The purpose of his sermon was to defang female sovereignty, to render something potentially threatening as essentially feminine. Standing by the side of the road, Raombana thinks, *Perhaps above all things, men fear a powerful woman.*

Raombana has been lulled into a comfortable contemplation watching the deliberate progress of the chameleon, but suddenly the animal puffs itself up and its skin darkens. Both eyes swivel forward, and faster than Raombana can see, its tongue flies out, catches an insect, and disappears back into its mouth, its tiny teeth masticating its unseen meal. Shakespeare said that chameleons feed on air, and though Raombana knows this is not the case, he could not prove it with evidence from his own eyes. Be like the chameleon, look to the past and to the future. Move carefully and deliberately until you spot your prey, then strike faster than the eye can see.

Raombana leaves the chameleon to its meal and makes his way back home. He is tired with this thinking about the problem of women and power, and decides that tonight he will write about Radama. He will write about how Radama ruled—warlike and with an army at his back. Radama ruled like a man, and tonight Raombana is more comfortable lodging himself in the company of other men.

In the year 1820, when the treaty was renewed between Radama and the English Government, the regular soldiers of King Radama amounted to a battalion of 1,000 men trained under the instruction of Mr. Brady. At the suggestion of Mr. Hastie, the English Agent, the army was in 1821 increased to 12,000 in number, for Mr. Hastie advised the king to increase his army and with them endeavor to conquer the whole island for himself. Mr. Hastie advised the king to place garrisons at the
different ports and provinces of Madagascar, in order that no more slaves may be exported out of Madagascar.

The king obeyed the counsels of Mr. Hastie, for the Englishman plied the king with rum, brandy, and other European liquor. The rum and brandy given him by Mr. Hastie was in large part responsible for making the king renew the treaty of 1817, and now again being plied with rum, brandy, and gin by the English agent, the king hearkened to his counsels, and formed a large army to conquer the whole island. The garrisons which he planted, owing to the bravery of the provincial people and the unhealthiness of the low countries, caused the deaths of thousands and thousands of his finest and bravest troops. And the placing of these military garrisons was the curse and misery of the provincial people, for the officers of these garrisons oppressed the people with with greatest hardships conceivable in order to extort money and riches from them. Fired with just rage at their oppressors, many of them rebelled and waged continual wars with the garrison soldiers, to their own misery and the misery of their oppressors, and thus thousands and thousands of these poor and oppressed provincials were murdered, and their wives and their children reduced to slavery and taken up to Imerina, and their property confiscated.

Radama wished his soldiers to be be invincible, for he heard from Mr. Hastie of the bravery of the soldiers of Bonaparte, Wellington, and other officers. So he determined to pass a law which would make his officers and soldiers fight with the greatest bravery and fury against their enemies, no matter how numerous. One day at a general assembly of his officers in the palace, the king secretly spoke to an inferior officer by the name of Ramiraho, a noble and a sergeant of the 4th rank. The king told Ramiraho to propose to the great officers a new law: to burn alive any officers and soldiers who
*miamboho lehilahy*, that is, turn their backs on the enemy for the purpose of running away when they are fighting.

Inspired by the looks of the king who took notice of him and who continually smiled at him, the young coxcomb rose and stood up in the midst of the officers. To the astonishment of all (with the exception of the king), he proclaimed with a loud voice that he is but a young man, and that although he is only a sergeant of the 4th rank, still he is as brave as any of the great officers of Radama. In the presence of the king and all the officers he proposed a new law to be added to the military laws, namely, to burn alive those who in the future would be so base as to *miamboho lehilahy*. The great officers were thunderstruck at these words, which appeared horrible to them, for each conceived that the unhappy fate of being burned alive might fall on them.

The king also appeared to be thunderstruck, and as no one answered Ramiraho, the sergeant rose up again, and recited the names of all the great officers such as Ratiandrazana and Andriamihaja and Andriamambo and Ramenetaka. He said that they were not worthy of being made into great officers because they dare not accede to the proposal made by him, and consequently ought to be degraded and reduced to inferior ranks. This sergeant of the 4th rank said that since it was he who first made the proposal, that he ought to be made the First General of His Majesty.

Radama now spoke, and said that he did not thoroughly understand Ramiraho’s proposal. The king asked him to repeat it and said that if the proposal was good and would help bring under his subjugation the whole of Madagascar, he had no doubt that his officers and soldiers would accede to it joyfully. For, Radama said, he was certain that they wished nothing more than to bring under their control the whole of Madagascar. Ramiraho repeated his proposal, and from the smiling looks of
Radama it was plain to all the officers that the proposal met with his approbation, and some even suspected that it might have originated with the king.

The great officers therefore attended closely the words of the young man, and suspecting that the king was going to accede, they unanimously agreed to the sergeant’s horrible proposal to burn alive without any respect of person whatever officers and soldiers should *miamboho lehilahy*. The proposal received the sanction of the king, who cunningly said to them, “The proposal originated from you, and not from me, and therefore those who will be burnt alive are burnt by you, and not by me, who only yielded to the above law because you all wished for it. Therefore collect all the officers and soldiers and inform them of the new law.”

All the military was therefore collected on a certain day and the new terrible law was made fully known to them, and after the promulgation of the law a great number of cattle were given and distributed to them, that by eating them, they may for a time relish the law, which threatens the burning alive of a vast number of them.

The military law just described tended greatly to the vanquishment of Radama’s enemies, for the officers and soldiers, however inferior in number to the enemies, dared contend with them, and generally the victories were on their side because they fought with the greatest desperation and utter contempt of death. For they knew that they would be burnt alive in the most miserable fashion if they fled from the enemy. Such was the great bravery and fury with which they fought that their enemies often considered them to be madmen, and often flew away from them without daring to come in contact with them even though they were ten or twenty times more numerous. For it was often seen, ten officers and soldiers rushing upon one hundred or two hundred enemies, defeating them in a great slaughter.
But it must be stated that the above law has been the cause of the burning alive of hundreds and thousands of soldiers and officers during Radama’s reign, and the reign of his successor, for often times by the determined valor of the provincial people in the defense of their wives, children, and property, they have defeated detached bodies of officers and soldiers, and the survivors were ordered to be burnt alive for *miamboho lehilahy* and not defeating them.
CHAPTER 8

...In which In which the executioner and the queen discuss the nature of her reign, and Ani gets to work

Antananarivo, 1829

Ani has been summoned to the palace, not for an audience with the queen, but to perform the services for which he came to Imerina. Yesterday evening a messenger arrived at his house: a man has been convicted of tomb-robbing, a sacrilege and a capital crime across the Island of Madagascar. As is her prerogative and hers only, Ranavalona delivered the ultimate sentence, to be carried out this morning. Now a soldier has arrived to escort him to the palace and the execution grounds.

This man will be Ani’s first real work for the queen. As is his habit, after the messenger arrived yesterday evening Ani went to the guard house where the prisoner is being held. Ani spoke at length with the man—he took his name and his story. It has been a long time since Ani executed a common criminal, and this man is of the most common kind. A simpleton, and brutish, with drowsy eyes and the last two fingers of his left hand lost in an incident he would not describe. His clothes were rotten, his hair matted, his feet filthy, and from his toothless mouth issued the stench of mouldering flesh. He did not have much of a story to give to Ani, but still Ani took his name and added it to his collection. Ani did not tell the man the exalted company his name will now forever keep—in the end, the people who owned those names are all equally dead. But Ani saved the little anecdote the man did share, about a time when he was a child and his mother scavenged the shells of a hen’s egg and fashioned a tiny shield for a wooden soldier with which the simple child played. The man cried like the child when he told Ani how the eggshell shield broke and the little wooden soldier thus died.
Ani and his escort wind through the tiny paths of Antananarivo as they join like headwaters a larger path and a larger, until they walk along the north-south thoroughfare, climbing to the crest of the hill. They approach the Rova, the palace compound, from the north, the direction of *adalo* and *alohotsy*, of beginnings and endings. North is the direction of strength. A long staircase leads to a gray stone gateway with thick pillars and a heavy lintel, into which is set a large square looking-glass. The gateway interrupts a wooden fence of pointed pickets that surrounds the compound and buildings within. Reflected from the looking glass, a beam of concentrated sunlight spots the pavement outside the gate. To enter the palace, they must face their own reflections, pass through the light and not be burned.

Ani’s escort nods to the two guards slouching outside the gate, their bayonets leaning against the gray slate pillars. The palace courtyard is deserted. To Ani’s left rises the Tranovola, the Silver House. According to Griffiths, it is the largest building on the Island of Madagascar and the only two-story dwelling in Imerina. The wrap-around veranda on the second floor serves as a proscenium from which the queen delivers royal speeches to crowds gathered in the courtyard below. Today the palace glimmers silver among the wood and stone in which it’s set, and silver bells shower delicate polyphony onto the blessed heads of those who reside within the compound’s walls.

Ani’s guide leads him south about fifty feet to the back of the courtyard, where they stop at a small wooden house nestled into the southeast corner of the courtyard fence. The west-facing door is guarded by a soldier wearing a threadbare *lamba* and informally but expertly handling a spear. Ani alone steps across the threshold into the palace armory. The tomb-robber, the blasphemer, is a common criminal and so will be speared to death in the traditional manner. Now, Ani looks for a suitable spear.

The iron spearheads are of serviceable quality. Ani could improve the craftsmen’s skills, but has no desire to be conscripted into forced labor by the government. Skilled metalworkers are in high demand. Ani scrutinizes the fifty or so spearheads, fingering the edges, examining their shine, tasting the
metal for impurities. He chooses two—the hardest and the sharpest, the ones most likely to keep the point he will file into them. He picks a shaft that is straight and polished smooth from use, then carries the spearheads, the shaft, and a file outside the small building to a flat stone silky from years of polish.

He squats down in front of the sharpening stone, carefully lays the spearhead at the edge, and begins to work at it with the file. This piece of iron was smelted in the countryside by placing ore in a pit furnace fitted with a piston bellows. The furnace temperature wasn’t quite hot enough, and the smelter left dark impurities in the metal, weaknesses along which the spearhead will break. The ringing of the file as he scrapes the edge echoes in the courtyard behind him, mingling with the tinkling of the silver bells. The morning is bright and warm, the air full of smells, jasmine and cooking fires and cattle from the pens at the back of the Rova. For the man Ani will meet in an hour’s time, it is a fine day to die.

His body lost in the rhythmic work of the file, Ani hears a commotion behind him from the Tranovola. The guard grunts at him, so he sets down his work and stands to face the palace. The queen has emerged with a small retinue: her counselor Andriamihaja, several servants and bodyguards, and three of her ladies. One of the servants holds a scarlet parasol over the head of the queen, the color clashing uncomfortably with the rich purple of her corseted satin gown. Andriamihaja wears a coat, waistcoat, and breeches of European style, with gold-braided epaulets and gold chevrons sewn up the sleeves. His bicorn hat sports a ruff of lace as white in the sun as a spot of moral purity.

The queen, chattering to her counselor, approaches the armory. Ani is on his knees with his forehead on the ground before she’s in conversation range. He hears the queen laugh, the tenor of her counselor teasing her about something, he can’t tell what, maybe a private joke, then the clipping of their heels stops and she tells Ani to rise. “I have work for you today,” she says.

Ani pushes himself to his feet but keeps his eyes on the ground. “As Your Majesty pleases.”

“Walk with us,” the queen says to Ani. “Your work can wait an hour or two.”
Ani answers, “Of course, Your Majesty,” although he knows that she does the prisoner no favors by prolonging the inevitable. Ani straightens and falls into step behind the queen, next to Andriamihaja. They follow the east-west fence at the south side of the courtyard. Ani has not seen the queen or her lover since the day he presented himself to her—the day Ratiandrazana pressed him about methods of execution, the day Ani pushed too hard on the topic of justice. Ani’s stomach churns a little remembering.

Andriamihaja is remembering, too, and says to Ani, “You impressed the Noble Ratiandrazana with your professional expertise. The general speaks very highly of you.” Andriamihaja says this in such a way, and the queen reacts in such a way as to make Ani understand that Ratiandrazana does not, in fact, speak highly of Ani. Ratiandrazana hates foreigners on principle, but Ani was too clumsy in their last conversation and now he has repair work to perform. Ani does not like Ratiandrazana, but he does not want him as an enemy. He says to Andriamihaja, “The Noble Ratiandrazana is too generous in his praise.”

Andriamihaja laughs and says, “Don’t worry. The Noble Ratiandrazana is always too generous in his praise of foreigners.” The queen glances at Andriamihaja with a subtle look of warning, and the nobleman changes the subject. Still light-hearted, he asks the queen, “Shall I entertain our new friend with a story, Your Majesty?”

Ranavalona’s laugh is almost a giggle. She turns to Ani and in a mock whisper says, “The noble Andriamihaja is a great storyteller.” To Andriamihaja she says loudly, “Yes! Entertain us!” Andriamihaja turns backwards so as to face the queen and her party, and begins his story as they walk along the inner fence.

“Back in the time of the ancestors,” he says, “all the birds that fly above the ground agreed to choose a king.” The nobleman extends his arms like wings and flutters around the queen and her ladies.
The queen laughs and swats at his arm, but he ducks out of her way. “So they called a great fivoriana, and all the birds were required to attend.” They arrive at a gate near the western end of the fence. With a great flourish, Andriamihaja opens the gate and motions for the queen to enter, as if she were approaching a place where a great meeting was to be held. The queen steps through the gate and Ani follows, then the queen’s ladies and finally Andriamihaja.

Andriamihaja grasps one of the queen’s women by her shoulders, spins her around and away from the rest of the party. “But the owl didn’t go to the choosing because he was helping his wife take care of their newborn.” The girl giggles and stands to the side of the party with her hands planted in defiance on her hips. “So the birds decided that, for the insult, the owl would thereafter be their enemy.” Andriamihaja mimes throwing spears at the girl. “They agreed that if they saw the owl they would try to kill him, but if they couldn’t kill him, they would kill his wife and children.” Andriamihaja leans in close to Ani and says to him in mock confidence, “This is why the owl doesn't come out during the day: because if the other birds see him they will fight with him and try to kill him.”

Ani smiles. He cannot deny Andriamihaja’s charm, but he wonders how this story about choosing a king will end. They stroll to the right of two small buildings with west-facing doors as Andriamihaja continues his story. “After the birds decided about the owl they argued for a long time about who should be king.” Andriamihaja hops around mimicking many birds arguing together. His expression flicks from excited to angry to meek to pompous as he imitates the different birds. “At one point the eagle named himself king.” The nobleman scrunches his face so that he looks as cruel as possible, puffs out his chest and throws his arms out wide so that he seems three times as big as he actually is. “But most of the rest of the birds weren't happy with this because the eagle is too brutal, and if he sees another bird he will pounce on it and snatch it up.” Andriamihaja pounces on another of the queen’s ladies and pretends to chew on her neck. The queen swats him hard and he backs up, half
bowing, and two of the women gasp as he almost falls into the cattle pen behind him. He throws his arms out clowning his almost-fall and exaggerates catching his balance, and the women together laugh at his antics. Ani catches his breath, also thinking he might fall amongst the horned cattle, but then Ani smiles again. *He’s good.* Ani is interested to know this man better, to discover how much of this fool’s act is real.

Andrimihiaja leaps up onto one of the posts supporting the fence that surrounds the cattle-pen dugout. He perches on the post, balancing on one bent leg, his chest and head high. He dons an expression that Ani thinks might actually be genuine—an expression of ease, and generosity, and friendliness. He says, “So the birds finally agreed that the *drongo* should be king, because he has a beautiful face,” Andriamihaja indicates with a sweep of his arm his own face, “and a long crest,” he draws his hand up from his forehead indicating an elegant feathered crown, “and he is able to make many different calls.” Andriamihaja straightens up, balancing now with both feet on on the fencepost. He throws his arms out wide again to finish his story. “From that time on, the *drongo* has been king of all the birds.”

Andriamihaja drops down from the fence to the laughter and applause of the entire party. The queen kicks at him playfully, and says to Ani, “My counselor likes to show off. He should learn some humility.” But she is smiling as she says it, and she is as entertained as the rest. Slipping her arm through Andriamihaja’s, the queen moves the party to a gate in the western fence of the palace compound. Andriamihaja opens the gate and allows the party through. They step out onto a stone coping raised five feet above the public road and extending six feet out from the fence. Steps lead up to the gate, but to the north and south the stone platform is grassy and shaded by the old trees growing within the perimeter of the palace. The queen has led them to an expansive view of Tana and the rice fields in the valley below. Now, in the beginnings of the dry season, the harvested fields lie fallow and stubbled in
the valley, a patchwork of parchment, gold, amber, and brass shot through with a memory of green, like copper verdigris.

The queen descends the steps, leaving the Rova for the public street below. Her servants walk before her, clearing the street for her passing. She explains to Ani that she wants to see the public market. “My counselors tell me,” she says, “that at the market can be bought these things and those.” She lists items off on her fingers. “Eggs, beans, honey, chickens, raffia thread, tobacco, silk, cotton, oil and saffron and ginger. My counselors keep me informed of the price of a kapoka of rice. But I want to see these things for myself. How am I to manage the prosperity of my people if I don’t understand the market?”

Andriamihaja hoots. “Oooooh! Don’t let her fool you, Executioner. She just wants to go shopping!”

The queen’s ladies laugh, but Ranavalona swats at Andriamihaja, playfully but hard. She snaps at him, “Be quiet. I’m talking to Ramanany. I already know what you think.” The public market is not far from the Rova, and the royal party has reached the first scattered stalls of the metal workers. Men display their wares bare or in baskets set on raised boards, and the morning sun reflects sharply off of iron pots, axe heads, spades, handcuffs, chains, spearheads, knives, chisels, planes, nails, hammers, and saws. Three stalls sell nothing but bars of wrought iron, ready for the smith. Ani inspects the raw iron discreetly, judging what he can of its quality.

But he is also engaged in the royal banter and smiles at both the queen and her lover, easily softening the edge of her retort. He says, “Perhaps it is a bit of both, Your Majesty? Perhaps today you are both a sovereign and a woman?”

The queen sighs wistfully. “I do miss the market.” She leans over at Ani, confidentially. “I was quite the master bargainer, you know. I could always get the best price of things.” She stops at a stall
and picks up a pair of scissors, delicate and ornate, designed for sewing. She fingers the handle and brushes the blades with her thumb, testing their sharpness.

Ani laughs lightly. “With your charm and beauty, Your Majesty, I’m sure that’s true.”

“Oh, I was not ‘Your Majesty’ then. Just Ramovo. Disregarded chief wife of the great King Radama.” She says it neutrally, but Ani tastes bitterness on his tongue. The stall keeper is bowing as low as he can and Ani sees that his knees are shaking under his *lamba*. Andriamihaja notices too, and deftly, tactfully, speaks in place of the queen. He asks the man, “How much for this pair of scissors?”

The man, with his eyes glued to the ground, gestures in the general direction of the royal party and says, “Please, take them. A gift to Her Most Sacred Majesty. May she live for a hundred years. May the palace be filled with her grandchildren. My humble wares are not worthy, but please, take them as a gift.”

Andriamihaja shoots a look of knowing frustration at Ani, but address the merchant kindly. “You are too generous. But the queen desires most that you answer my questions. How much do you sell these for? From whom did you purchase them, and for how much? They are clearly of foreign manufacture—what is their provenance?”

The man answers Andriamihaja, “From a French trader, *tompko.*” The man is knowledgeable, however frightened. He tells Andriamihaja the name of the ship that delivered these goods, at what port they landed, their assessed value at the port, the tariff charged by the port master, the name of the merchant whose caravan brought them to Tana, the price he paid the merchant, and how much he hopes to sell them for. Ani, Andriamihaja, and the queen all perform math, Ani in his head, the two Imerina counting on their fingers. The queen and Andriamihaja exchange a look that reaches back to a conversation Ani was not privy to.
But then the queen smiles. She tucks the scissors away in a pocket in her satin dress, and says to the man, “The Living God blesses you and thanks you for your gift.” She wears on her face a satisfied smile, and for a moment she is alone, savoring her triumph over her past. Ani watches her, this woman who will never again have to bargain in a marketplace. The merchant stops shaking and accepts her blessing humbly, gratefully—finally he is in a position he understands.

The royal party wanders through the market and Andriamihaja asks his questions. They stop for spices: ginger, saffron, turmeric, cloves, red and black pepper, vanilla, cinnamon, garlic, and salt. Ani closes his eyes and inhales the spice, and he is transported to other places, other times, and his throat closes in a sudden wave of longing. They stop for foodstuffs: beef, mutton, fresh and dried fish, eggs, milk, beans, sugarcane, sweet potatoes, yams, manioc, plantain, lemon, pineapple, corn, and honey. The queen’s subjects fawn over her, the bold ones thrusting their wares at her, “Hasina, Mother! A blessing!” Sometimes she accepts their offerings, and licking her fingers clean of sticky sweet potato she bestows blessings as she moves through the market. They stop for livestock: oxen, sheep, chickens, geese, ducks, and slaves. The queen’s women ogle over imported jewelry—beads, earrings, and Arab trinkets—and the queen makes them pay for what they take.

Finally they come to the section of the market where the weavers sell their wares, and the royal party moves through an explosion of color. Fat glass jars hold powdered dyes in their bellies, the colors as exuberant as a Chinese circus. Tables draped in American printed cottons and European shawls in blue and white line the narrow walk. Silks shimmer and ruffle in the breeze, their colors impersonating things that would never otherwise be found together: sand, smoke, chocolate, chestnut, caramel, raspberry, plum, lavender, aubergine, turquoise, violet, avocado, sage, olive, absinthe, lime, canary, tangerine, salmon, and rose. Onyx and pearl, silver and gold. The Arab silk merchants bow deferentially
to the royal party, but they are not as free with their offers of *hasina*. Andriamihaja asks his questions, and they are not as free with their answers, either.

Past the silk merchants, past the imported dyes and cottons and prints they come to the place where local women sell local cloth spun from local material. Rough *lamba* and fine made from the young leaves of the *rafia* palm. Common fabric for common people. Cotton here, too, and when Ani fingers the best he knows it is just as good as the best cottons from his homeland, Egypt. Ani buys a long length of undyed cotton, paying what he considers a fair price that is nonetheless much more than what the seller expected. She gives him a little extra, as *hasina*.

The queen’s women admire the local cloth and compliment the women who sell it. But one girl, sitting with her sisters, bursts into tears when one of the queen’s ladies comments it would make a find wedding *lamba*. Astonished, the lady asks the girl’s sisters what she said to offend, and the eldest apologizes, embarrassed. She explains that the girl is in love with boy whom she cannot marry—their *vintanas* are crossed and it is taboo. All the queen’s ladies gather around the unfortunate girl, and they and her sisters try to comfort her. Andriamihaja nudges Ani’s arm and says, “Women’s work.” He leads Ani, the queen, and her servants away from the scene and back to the road that leads to the palace.

Andriamihaja falls into step next to Ani and and the queen and the three of them together ascend the hill back to the Rova. In his playful storyteller voice, Andriamihaja says to Ani, “Her Great Majesty and I are engaged in a debate.” Ani senses trouble despite the nobleman’s tone, and though he keeps his expression light, he does not reply.

“One of us—and I won’t tell you which of us—thinks that a woman cannot rule a country alone. That she needs allies in the form of strong men. This person thinks that a woman should stand in the background, attend to the family and let the men make the decisions. The other of us thinks that while a woman may not rule in the same way as a man, that she can rule just as effectively. That she will not
necessarily, not just because she’s a woman, be seen as weak by, say, neighboring tribes, or far-away states. In short, one of us thinks that a woman can be as strong as a man, although perhaps with a different kind of strength.

“You have some experience with other countries, with other rulers. Tell us, what do you know about female sovereigns? Can a woman really rule a state as great as Imerina?”

Ani knows the correct answer to this question, and gives it without hesitation. “I am certain that Her Most Revered Majesty, who is loved by her people and blessed by her ancestors, will reign in prosperity for many, many years.” In fact, he is certain of nothing regarding this queen or her reign. But he is relieved that the problem was so simply solved.

The queen laughs out loud, and swats Andriamihaja’s arm. “I told you he was a good monkey! Not very smart, but smart enough, it seems.” She tilts her head at Ani, coy, and he gives her a neutral smile. They have arrived at the western gate to the palace. The queen turns to one of her servants and motions for a tsihy mat and pillows to be set on the stone coping outside the wall of the Rova, then settles herself on it and invites the two men to sit. The scene laid out before them is significant—the whole lives of the Merina in miniature: houses, roads, fountains, markets, irrigation canals, gardens, and most important the rice fields and the tombs. Ani knows the view works both ways. Just as they can see the city and its people laid out before them like an offering at table, so too can the inhabitants of the city look up and see the Rova watching them like a mother watching over her children. The palace defines the Merina people as much as any other part of their lives: the Merina are the people who live beneath the Rova. The queen takes in the view for a moment, a sated and satisfied smile on her face, then says to Ani, “Ramanany, tell us about other women who have reigned in prosperity for many, many years.”

Later, Ani realizes he should have seen this question coming. But he was distracted by the view and its meaning; he was gauging the queen’s response to her power. This queen is an unsettled sea, and
he has not yet found his sea legs. Her question takes him by surprise. His diaphragm tightens at the sharp stab of a very old and imperfectly healed wound. He smells myrrh, and feels fine, translucent linen against his cheek. He bows deeply to the queen and her consort to hide his reaction, but he knows he has made himself vulnerable.

The queen and Andriamihaja exchange a look. “Ahhhh,” she says. “I am not the only queen our dear executioner has known.” She does not say in what sense she thinks Ani knew this past queen—her meaning is clear. Her coy look is back, less playful, more probing. Ani’s impulse is to withdraw quickly and with as much grace as he can manage, but instead he tries to turn the conversation to his advantage. He has been made vulnerable. Perhaps he can use this.


“Was she a queen?”

Was she a queen? She was the greatest queen who has ever lived. He lets Ranavalona see the effort he takes to control the passion in his voice. “She was. Like your noble kings Andrianampoinimerina and Radama, the two kings before her were warriors who expanded their lands and conquered the neighboring tribes. She was a builder, who stabilized the country and consolidated the power of the throne.” Ani pauses, remembering. “The country prospered under her leadership. Justice ruled, and the people were fat and happy.”

Andriamihaja thinks of the sinewy figures populating the market below them. “I’m picturing a country of fat, happy people. It’s a strange image.”

The queen is lying down on the woven mat, her head in Andriamihaja’s lap. “Was your queen surrounded by men, all telling her what to do?”
“Of course, Your Majesty. I think all monarchs suffer their advisers.” The two Merina laugh.

Now Ani has shown them something of him. Perhaps they will show him something of themselves. “Has Mister Griffiths not told you the story of the English Queen Elizabeth?”

“I don’t speak with Mister Griffiths,” the queen states flatly.


“The next time you talk with him, ask him about Elizabeth. She was one of the country’s greatest rulers, and she ruled alone, with no husband. This was when England was only a tiny island, smaller than Madagascar, and not the great empire it is today.”

“She made her island strong?”

“She did. Ask Mister Griffiths about it.” Ani knows that she won’t.

“I’ll let my advisers ask him about it.”

“There are other women. In a country called Russia, far to the north where it is very, very cold, a woman named Catherine ruled for thirty-five years. She wielded an army, but mostly she strengthened and protected her own culture. She died about twenty-five years ago, and Russia is greater now than it was before she took the throne.”

Ranavalona is poking Andriamihaja under his chin, as if to say, “I told you so.”

Ani fingers absently the good cotton cloth he bought in the marketplace. Andriamihaja watches him for a moment, musing. Finally he asks Ani, “Why are you here, Ramanany?”

His tone has turned quiet, and Ani is not sure what he’s looking for. “Sir?”

“The British and the French never stop reminding us of the greatness of their kings. For Her Majesty, as is proper, her people are her whole world. But we have the luxury of seeing beyond the limits of Andrianampoinimerina’s rice fields. You are a man of the world. Why are you here, in this court, and not working for one of the great kings?”
“Or one of the great queens!” Ranavalona insists playfully.

“You Majesty is a great queen.” What Ani means is, Your Majesty has the potential to be a great queen.

“Stop being a monkey,” she laughs. It’s an invitation to intimacy. Ani is on the verge of charming her. She is in a mood to be charmed. “I’m not a great queen yet. I am merely at the beginning of my long and prosperous reign.” The queen is still laughing, mocking him good-naturedly.

Ani smiles, and now is the moment. Now the ground is wet and warm, and now he will sow the seed. “Your Majesty is a great queen.” This time it is his voice that adopts the sing-song of the storyteller. “You are like a weaver at her loom, just beginning to build the cloth of your reign. Everyone around you is telling you to chose this color, work that pattern. Some people say your stitches are too tight. Others say your warp is uneven. That your thread is too fine, or too course. Powerful outsiders wonder aloud why you weave at all. Let us make this cloth for you, they say.” Andriamihaja frowns a little at this, but Ani continues.

“You are Rabodoandrianampoinimerina, daughter of Andriantsalamanjaka, friend to King Andrianampoinimerina. You are Ramavo, wife of Radama, late King of Imerina. And you are Ranavalo-Manjaka, blessed by the ancestors and Queen of the Merina. You were born to weave this sacred cloth, and it will be beautiful. It will be the blessed lamba of Imerina, and you will incorporate in delightful and unexpected ways the thousand different threads of the people of this land. You may decide to include the foreign thread of the vahaza, or you may decide to exclude them from your work. But the lamba will be beautiful—woven with tradition, skill, and strength of character. Why am I here?” Ani pauses for effect. “I am your humble servant. I am here to sit at your feet and learn.”

Ani is mostly telling the truth. He is speaking of his hopes as if they were certainties. He is reversing the roles of teacher and student. And he does not mention that he is the keeper of a similar
cloth, tattered and travel-worn but still beautiful, still shimmering with the justice of her reign. He does not say how he yearns to help with the creation of another, to work himself subtly into its weave. But even with all that he leaves unsaid, he is mostly telling the queen the truth. If only wishing could make it so.

The Merina value skillful oration, and the queen is moved. She sat up while Ani was speaking, a sign of respect, and now she tightens her grip on Andriamihaja’s arm and leans into him, looking steadily at the executioner. In the silence that follows his speech, she turns her head to Andriamihaja and says in a stage-whisper, “I like him. If he performs well today, let’s throw a feast for our new executioner.”

Ani feels Andriamihaja’s scrutiny, gambles on boldness and meet his eyes. *I am not your enemy*, Ani thinks. Andriamihaja’s face, so easy with its expressions, blossoms with brotherly love. He has won them both over, at least for the moment. Ani wonders how long this favor will last. But for the moment he will not squander their good opinion. He bows low on the *tsihy*, touching his forehead to the ground. “If Your Majesty will excuse me. As you have pointed out, I have work for you today.”

The queen waves him away, and as her servants pack her accoutrements, he returns to the palace grounds, where a spear and a spearhead await his attentions.

At the very south end of the city the “white village” Ambohipotsy clings to thick, bare granite. Hardly a tree or shrub grows on this scrabble ground, and the houses resemble the people who live in them: bent and dreary. The narrow ridge runs not wide enough for two oxcarts to pass, and terminates at a flat plot upon which no house has ever been built. Step off the square, and you will plunge four hundred feet down a sheer cliff. The square is the execution ground, and here Ani stands, sentinel, waiting for the condemned.
Ani is invisible. When he is at work, eyes pass over him. He is an empty space, a void in the world, for who has the courage to look death in the face? The spectators, the nobles, the soldiers—they all distract themselves with their attention to the condemned. Everyone strains to see the infamous criminal, the robber of graves, the blasphemer. Everyone wants to see how he will die. Will he die screaming? Begging for mercy? Strong and stoic? Will he lose control of his bowls, or faint from fear? Ani has seen it all. And only the condemned see him. Sometimes they curse him. Sometimes they forgive him. But always they see him. The prisoner sees Ani now with shining eyes, eyes never more alive than at this moment, and through Ani he sees the next world and his ancestors beckoning him with outstretched hands.

Ani stands on the square in a *lamba* of undyed raffia fabric, coarse and hot. No one cares, but this is his respect for the dead. They have bound the prisoner’s hands behind his back, and he has arrived amidst a crowd of silent, awestruck spectators. Death is not an unusual guest in a typical Merina household, but almost exclusively she is summoned by illness or accident or starvation. The killing of one person by another is a rare thing, even in the military, and the curious citizens of Tana walk with the prisoner to watch. How the condemned suffer on that march, both longing for and dreading their arrival at this place. Now that the prisoner is finally here, the soldiers push him onto his knees in the center of the square, and the crowd fans out around the edges. The condemned man bends over double, blubbering and crying, and the crowd mutters its judgment.

Ratiandrazana leads the troop of soldiers; he will stand for the queen and oversee the execution today. He begins to speak, and the crowd quiets immediately. Ratiandrazana is a hard man, perhaps forty years old, with gray in his hair and scars both faded and new marking his chest, arms and legs. A line of puckered skin, blacker than the rest, runs four inches long just above his left eye—the souvenir given to him by the Sakalava at the well at Mahajunga. Ratiandrazana wears a loincloth, iron bracers on his
forearms, and a necklace of leather, bones and animal teeth. He holds his spear as others would hold a
woman: gently, firmly, with absolute faith that she will do exactly as he commands.

Ratiandrazana speaks of stones. He says, “We do not build the houses of the living from stone—the
houses of the living are built of once-living wood. Stone is eternal, and so we build the houses of the
ancestors from stone. It is through stone that we are connected to our ancestors.” He crouches down and
places his palms flat on the dark granite beneath his feet. He says, “This is the place of execution. These
stones carry the judgment of the ancestors, as revealed to Her Most Blessed Majesty and embodied in
her sacred laws.” Ratiandrazana straightens up and walks to one of the few ficus trees barely alive in
this dead place. Touching the trunk of one of the stunted trees, he says, “We do not build the houses of
the living from the wood of the ficus tree, because the roots of this tree suffocate other trees. The ficus
destroys life. But these trees live here, and they live at the Rova palace, because they are close to the
ancestors. Her Royal Majesty nurtures the ficus trees because she is, on this earth, the person closest to
the ancestors, and it is right that she should make them comfortable in her presence.”

Ratiandrazana walks to where the condemned man crouches, shaking and weeping. The general
stands above the man in such a way that he both acknowledges and ignores his presence. Ratiandrazana
says, “This man has loosed upon us the wrath of the ancestors. He entered their sacred places without
invitation or apology, and he stole cloth and honey and good, strong drink from their homes. This man
broke the taboos of the tanindrazana.” Every person in the crowd looks down at his or her feet,
ashamed and afraid as if each person there had committed the crime. Ratiandrazana, very casually, kicks
the condemned man in the left kidney so forcefully that the man’s eyes roll back and he passes out
momentarily from the pain. Ratiandrazana continues to address the crowd. “We Merina are family. We
are brothers and sisters, mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles, united at this place. At this execution ground
stand our ancestors. At the palace on the hill lives our Queen, our Great Mother. She lives in the
presence of Radama, and Andrianamopinimerina, the most powerful of our *tanidrazana*, and she knows
their will. She must flatter and praise them so they will bless her and her family, so they will give us a
bountiful harvest, and many healthy children, and long years of comfortable life until we ourselves join
their company. And she must mollify them when they have been angered.”

The condemned man has regained consciousness and lies on his side groaning. Ratiandrazana
kicks him again, just as hard, and again he loses consciousness. Ani does not move. He sees that
Ratiandrazana knows the human body—the general creates pain, bright black-speckled pain, but no
injury that would be immediately fatal. But Ani begins to despise Ratiandrazana because the pain is
gratuitous, and Ani suspects that it gives the general pleasure.

Ratiandrazana continues his speech to the crowd, employing now the proverbs with which the
Merina have been raised. He says, “*Anisanisana ny ratsy hihavian’ny soa.* The bad is told so that good
may appear. This man broke the sacred laws of Her Majesty—laws she enacts so the ancestors shower
prosperity on our rice fields. By breaking those laws this man angered the ancestors, and now they must
be appeased. *Ny fandio iray siny tsy mahaleo ny fandoto iray tandroka.* A pitcherful of clean water is no
match for a cupful of mud. This man pollutes us all. *Ratsy izay tsy anenenan’olona.* And none regret the
death of an evil man.”

Ratiandrazana steps away from the prisoner while Ani steps forward and raises the spear. The
prisoner pulls himself into a kneeling position and pleads with Ani with his shining eyes. Ani looks
down to meet his gaze. *Be at peace. Your gods are waiting for you.* The man relaxes an instant before
Ani drives the spear through his loins.

The light in the man’s face dies instantly and he turns inanimate, frozen and empty like a mask.
He topples over onto his side as blood and stinking bile leak past the spear onto rock stained dark with
the memory of other blood. The earth stands paused as Ani waits for Death.
At the place where his heart lives in his chest Ani feels a dilation, the stretching open of a great round gate between this world and the other. He feels the approach of a terrible white bird; he feels the beating of Her mighty wings. A wind stirs in his chest, a wind that smells of Nothing, and the wind grows, becomes a gale, then a tempest, then a cyclone as the bird bursts into this world at the stones of Ambohipotsy. Ani feels white wings unfurl behind him; he feels Her beak open to the sky, call to the heavens, Ani lifts his head to the sky and he hears the heavens answer in the music of the spheres. The wings of Death enfold the bleeding man, they enfold Ratiandrazana and the crowd, all of Imerina, the Island of Madagascar and the entirety of this living earth, and then the body of Death leans over the bleeding man. Ani leans over the bleeding man and that great beak stabs into the heart of the accused and plucks out his life. This is the moment. Paused. And Ani feels. He is rough; the stubble of the beard shadowing the dead man’s chin. He is moldy and fecund; the dirt under the dead man’s fingernails. He is shiny; the sweat on the dead man’s back. He is tender; the skin on the dead man’s wrist.

The body convulses twice, then settles into a twitching that subsides slowly until finally it is still. The dead man’s open eyes may as well be made of glass. Ani feels the stone beneath his feet, feels his heart pumping in his chest, and from very far away, he hears the echo of Her great white wings.

Around him, the square buzzes with people, but Ani waits, immobile, as they trickle away, back to their homes with a story to tell. Ratiandrazana leaves with the soldiers, without speaking to or acknowledging Ani. When only Ani and the body remain on the square, he retrieves a bundle wrapped in a lamba and extracts a pair of crude pliers. He turns the body so that the back of the man and the head of the spear are exposed. Sticky ochre gore paint the spearhead and the shaft. With the pliers, Ani pulls the pin that attaches the spearhead to the shaft, then with a sharp yank separates the two. The spearhead and the pliers he sets on the ground next to him. He turns the body back over, and with a sloppy, ripping
sound tears the shaft back through the body. Immediately the stench of bile and shit and blood assault him.

Ani knows that his obligations do not end with the death of the prisoner. Now, tradition and the queen insist that the body be dumped over the edge of the cliff. He lifts the dead weight in both arms, and cradling it like a baby walks to the edge of the cliff. Three hundred feet below him a pack of dogs are already circling, howling, waiting with ravenous teeth. The dead man’s family also waits—they will fight the dogs for possession of the body. They may or may not win. Ani wishes them strength as he hurls the body into the void.

In a shallow ditch cut into the granite of Ambohipotsy by the patient work of its muddy water, a small stream burbles down from the city’s higher ground. Ani bathes in the stream, washing away the blood and gore that stain his feet and his hands and his chest. Three other men bathe near him, gossiping about the execution. It was well-done, they tell each other, and eavesdropping Ani is pleased. The men joke—it’s an oft-told joke—that Ambohipotsy is a poor place to live, but at least the entertainment is free. The stream water chills Ani’s skin as he pours cupful after cupful over his head and shoulders. He scrubs soap between his toes, making sure that his feet are clean. When he’s done, he switches out the filthy *lamba* he wore with the clean one that wrapped his tools, then heads up the hill into the heart of the city.

Ani is at peace with his own gods, the ancient gods of justice and law, the first gods of civilized man. Summoning Death, standing in Her presence, his heart expands into the white heavens, and his body vibrates with the *musica universalis*. But now he is just a man again, and hungry, and in need of company. He stops at a market and buys a chicken, then walks to the house of the ox cart driver,
Todisoa. When Ani calls at the door, Todisoa’s vadikely, his mistress, or second wife, greets Ani warmly. Ani holds up the chicken, upside down and dangling by its feet, and asks, “I hope you can help me. My cook is visiting family today, and I have this chicken and I don’t know how to cook it.” Of course Ani knows how to cook a chicken, but Todisoa and his vadikely can rarely afford meat. This evening they will feast on chicken, and Ani will wrap himself in humble hospitality.
CHAPTER 9

...In which we learn how Queen Ranavalona came to her throne

Montasoa, 1829

The spiderwebs hang wet with dew, like lace baskets in the trees. A spider as big as Raombana’s palm, with a shiny black body and black and red legs—a spider that could have crawled from the depths of Hell—sucks the juice out of a trapped caterpillar, the worm’s legs still wriggling. Raombana pulls a leech from his ankle, a tiny trickle of blood flows beneath his heel, and he scratches the place where the leech attached. Perched on the purple leaves of an azaina tree is the moth that carries the spirits of the ancestors. Plum-black with a gold stripe across its wings and a swirl of crimson and blue towards its head, it is fady to kill them everywhere in Imerina. Raombana doesn’t believe in the spirits of the ancestors, but the moths are beautiful, and he’s glad for the taboo.

A red-fronted coa swoops from above and dives for a crowd of leaf-bug nymphs clinging to the twisting stem of a climbing vine. But the bird comes away with a beak full of waxy white tentacles. Its long, broad tail splays in annoyance, and the featherless blue skin around its eye flashes in a rare gem of light falling through the thick canopy. The understory through which Raombana, the queen, the captain of the garrison at Montasoa, and their attendants travel is dark and noisy and full of crawling, wriggling, gliding, sliding, hopping and prancing life. A giant millipede flows on its thousand legs through the forest litter, beetles shimmering in jewel colors—amber, garnet, amethyst, and onyx—struggle through the dense vegetation. Raombana reaches down and with a quick flick of his fingers catches a lubber grasshopper, its wings spotted with color like the stained glass windows in Westminister Abbey in London.
The queen and the captain of the garrison at Montasoa discuss trade. The captain belongs to Andriamamba, one of the conservative nobles who helped Ranavalona to her throne. Andriamamba is the captain’s patron at court, to whom he owes this posting thirty miles to the east of Antananarivo on the road to the port city of Tamatave. The captain also owes the nobleman hasina, just as his deka and his soldiers owe hasina to him. To his soldiers, the captain bestows blessings and lucrative assignments. To Andriamamba the captain sends a portion of the fees, taxes, and bribes he collects at his station here. The captain knows his place, what he owes and what is owed him. Now, he owes allegiance to the queen, who has come here to inspect this waystation on the Merina Empire’s most important trade route—the route between Antananarivo and the port city of Tamatave. She inspects the resources available in her forest while her soldiers hunt for wild boar, tenrec, or other game meat. But mostly with the captain she discusses trade.

Raombana pretends not to listen to the queen’s conversation, focusing instead on the forest around him. He listens to the layers of sound that echo off leaves more numerous than the stars in the heavens. Sounds rich and deep like the supersaturated colors in which he swims today. Mechanical clicking, clacking, trilling, a four-note song that rings off the trees like carillon bells. Some calls are dry and thin, others fat and wet. The base: a constant, quiet hum of insects, water splashing in the background, leaves shuffling in the damp, cool breeze. A backdrop to provide drama: the harmonic voices of the birds, warbling to their mates, screeching at intruders, the polyphony of a court in the canopy. Then the melody: a group of small brown lemurs chattering back and forth, hissing musically. Each individual cries a different note, the adolescent male growls low, the female answers with the hint of a squeak in her song. Raombana remembers the fleeting high note of a good wine. Then an interlude: the lemurs are content and the melody changes to the munching of leaves, the scratching of tiny feet and
hands gripping the bark of the trees. The lemurs pelt the humans below with fruit pits from the *tamborisa* trees.

The queen asks the captain about the commodities that flow through the village—how many slaves, how much cotton, how much iron, how much honey. What other goods and in what amounts travel from the interior Merina lands to the port at Tamatave? What and how much travels in the other direction, from the coast to the interior? The captain is a military man—he was trained by Hastie and Brady and fought with Radama. Very politely and with much humility he informs the queen that he does not pay much attention to the trade that passes through his village. He provides protection to the caravans as far as the next way station on the road to Tamatave, but there he feels his duty ends.

The queen hums under her breath. She asks the captain how many *deka* serve him—how many officers were educated in the missionary schools and can therefore read and write. The captain tells her his is only of the ninth rank, and therefore his *deka* are limited to just ten. The queen hums again, her glance traveling through the forest that Raombana studies so intently.

Suddenly, cacophony. Another group of lemurs has approached, a different species, and the jungle fills with sound. The newcomers, larger with silky coats in a combination of orange, gold, white, silver and black and with piercing red eyes, greet the resident family group noisily, and they talk back and forth, exchanging pleasantries, warnings, flirtations. Each group defines itself encountering the other, and Raombana thinks of a tea party, and the English expression, “It’s a jungle out there.”

Suddenly a rock flies through the air and hits one of the newcomers square between the eyes. It teeters and falls to the ground as the rest of the lemurs scream and fly through the branches, skipping across the canopy like a flat stone that skips across the surface of a lake. Raombana has never seen an acrobat as agile as the lemurs, and watching them he feels clumsy, trapped on the forest floor. A dissonance in the symphony, or a bear at the ballet.
One of the captain’s *deka* collects the lemur he killed with his sling. He bows to the queen, and presents the animal to her servant to prepare for her dinner.

Raombana thinks of the fairy tales of the Europeans, of dark woods populated with monsters. He thinks of the neat English landscape and knows that it is *this* forest—this wild dark made of trees as big as a cathedral under which he and the queen and the captain crawl like struggling ants—it is *this* forest that draws forth the fear of the *vahaza*. He remembers an opera singer dressed in a diaphanous gown running from shadows while bass violins, bassoons, and low horns pulsed with the danger of the deep, dark woods. Raombana closes his eyes and smells the forest around him: it smells of yeast and sulfur and milk and manure. This forest is cool and wet, even in the dry season, and Raombana thinks that it is the opposite of the music it inspired. This forest is rich with life: generous and kind. Kinder than the road that runs through it, kinder than the mountain to which it clings. The forest is intelligent. It is tolerant, impulsive, impassioned, unsentimental, immodest, patient, and intuitive. The music it reminds him of most is the music of the Japanese bamboo flute, the *shakuhachi*: breathy and velvet, the wind shivering the leaves, death and life circling each other, nuggets of light in the dark dark green.

Raombana stands by the queen who is still thinking about her captain and the limits of his duty. Raombana thinks that the forest is also merciless. It is pragmatic, unjust, and unremorseful. The queen addresses the captain and his *deka* and Raombana together. She instructs the captain: from now on he is to keep a written record of all trade goods that pass through the village of Montasoa. He is to employ an independent merchant to assess the value of these trade goods. His secretaries will produce a written report every month, the reports will be sent to Raombana, but she, the queen, will attend to them herself. She emphasizes this point to Raombana, but really she is telling the captain, “Obey my command, for I am watching you.”
Like the forest, this queen is a force of nature. She is bigger than the trees which loom over them, more powerful than the forest which surrounds them for uncountable miles. Raombana, the captain, the soldiers, the court—they are all puny, crawling like ants within the great force that is Ranavalomanjaka. Other people will become lost in this queen; Raombana must be careful that he himself does not lose his way. He will write tonight of the intelligence and impulsiveness of this queen. For now, he listens while she re-purposes her military men, turns her soldiers into bureaucrats so that she can control trade. He watches the pragmatism of this queen who will become rich off foreign trade and yet somehow keep Imerina independent of the vahaza. Raombana remembers how she came to her throne, and when he returns to the garrison that night, he continues the writing of his history.

II.

As you can see from what has been said before, the people who conceived and effected the plot to usurp the throne were all people favored and trusted by Radama. Ranavalona was the last person anyone thought might have ambitions to a throne she had no claim to. And the leaders of the conspiracy were so trusted by the king and his family that no one suspected their black designs. This is important to understand in what comes next, for the people surrounding the king had no suspicion that any plot might be conceived to steal the throne from the rightful heir.

The king died on a Monday, and since Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday were fady for Ranavalona, she told Andriamamba that she could not claim the throne on these days or her reign was sure to fail. So Andriamamba caused the king’s death to be kept secret for four days. The king was attended by his tsimandos, or personal guard, who stayed with him at all times. These men were his servants and constant companions, his cooks and his secretaries who performed all offices, menial, martial, and great. When Andriamamba arrived at the Tranovola, the tsimandos were weeping and
lamenting at the death of their sovereign. Andriamamba told them to be silent, and quit their weeping, as the death of the king must be kept secret for the sake of his heir. He forbade the *tsimandos* from going out of the palace, and posted guards at the gates to ensure they did not leave. He told them that if the king’s mother or sisters or wives came to visit him, that they should say that the king gave express orders not to be disturbed. If a visitor insisted, the *tsimandos* should pretend to go talk to the king, and return with the message that the king was getting better, and that he thanked them for their inquiry.

The *tsimandos* agreed to do what Andriamamba asked, because they knew how much the king trusted and relied on him, and they didn’t suspect that Andriamamba might be conspiring to steal the throne from the lawful heir and give it to a usurper with no rightful claim. In this way the death of the king was kept secret for four days.

On Thursday evening, Ranavalona sent her emissaries once again to Andriamamba, but with a different message. She told him that she was now very afraid, and that she repented her ambition to steal the throne. She was sure the plot would fail and she would be killed by the family of Radama, and she was afraid of death. Andriamamba replied scornfully to the two lesser wives that Ranavalona was fickle and unfit to reign, and that if he had not already gone so far into the plot that he would desert her and set up on the throne the lawful heir. But since he had already gone so far in the plot, and since the relations of Radama had no inkling of his death, therefore he would proceed with the plan. He told the two wives that Ranavalona should gather her courage, as everything was in place for the terrible events of the next morning. He sent Ranavalona’s emissaries away with this message, and Ranavalona gathered her courage.
All this time, from Tuesday until Friday, the corpse of the king was lying in his bed at the Tranovola in the most decomposing state. No notice had been taken of it, no garments wrapped around it as is the custom for the dead from the lowest ranks to the highest. The few tsimandos who were there were the only persons who were permitted to enter and moan over his senseless body.

Ranavalona lived in a house on the palace compound called the Besakana. On Friday morning, three hundred soldiers led by Andriamihaja and Ratiandrazana with loaded muskets and fixed bayonets surrounded the Besakana. Andriamamba sat with a loaded musket at a window in his own house overlooking the south side of the palace, ready to kill anyone who tried to force the door of the Besakana. A great crowd of people gathered, attracted by the unusual commotion. The three hundred soldiers had no knowledge of what was about to happen, but they were told to follow the commands of their leaders, and if they did not, they would be killed and their wives and children sold into slavery. A guard was placed at the west gate to the palace, with instructions to prevent Radama’s mother, sisters, and other relations from entering.

Andriamihaja sent an order to the two leaders of the tsimandos—Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay—that they should come to the front of the Besakana. The Tranovola is the only house in the north side of the palace, and it is called the Silver House because silver bells and other ornaments are suspended outside of the house, all around it. A wooden palisade tipped with spears surrounds the Tranovola, and three gates provide access from the north, the east, and the south. The Besakana is in the south side of the palace, on the other side of the spear-tipped wall, and so Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay could not see the three hundred soldiers and the crowd of onlookers that surrounded the Besakana.
Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay did not know for what reason they were summoned, and it was very early in the morning, and they were still drowned in tears over the death of their king. They therefore did not answer immediately the summons, and the conspirators had to call them three times, and hammer at the south gate of the north palace, before Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay came out. These two loyal men had armed themselves with a small fowling piece and a spear each, and when they arrived at the Besakana they were astonished to find the soldiers and the crowd assembled there. They were ordered to sit on the pavement and told to answer a question that would be posed to them.

Andriamihaja then stood up and spoke a great kabary, saying that the tsimandos had been constantly with the king since his illness, and they knew all of his actions and wishes. Andriamihaja lamented the death of the king, and wanted to know from Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay, as they were the commanders of the tsimandos, what person Radama had appointed to succeed him to the throne.

Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay immediately perceived the intention of the conspirators, because it was well known, not just to the tsimandos but to all the court and all the Imerina people, that Radama had appointed his infant daughter Razahakinimanjaka to succeed him to the throne. Radama had often said in the presence of his officers, soldiers, and the civil community, that although she is female, she shall ride horses and dress in military uniform and govern a kingdom that will grow great and illustrious under her scepter. Itsiaribikia answered boldly in the name of them both:

“The king before his illness, and all the time he was ill, always said that his daughter is to succeed him. That although she is a female, she shall ride horses, and put on military uniforms, and govern a kingdom that will grow great. She is to be married to her cousin Rakotobe, who is to possess no sovereign authority. Not only the tsimandos know of the above intention of the king, but every
officer, judge, and almost everybody in Imerina knows of the intention of His Majesty, namely, that he is to be succeeded by his daughter and no other person.”

These bold words produced different emotions in the eyes of the assembled people. Those who were friendly to the family of the king were easily distinguished by their lively expressions, and their animated countenances. Those of the opposite party looked sad and depressed, and rather ashamed.

Andriamihaja then spoke to Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay again, and said that the words of the tsimandos had been heard and understood by the assembled crowd. He told them to return to the Tranovola and consider whether or not the king may have appointed another successor in the place of his daughter.

Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay then left through the south gate of the north palace to return to the Tranovola. After they departed, the conspirators held a short conference on the south side of the Besakana. They decided that the two tsimandos should be summoned again and killed in order to intimidate those who were friendly to the family of the king. The conspirators decided that after Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay were killed, they would proclaim Ranavalona queen.

Itsiaribikia and Imanantsimijay were then sent for a second time, and when they arrived at the Besakana they bore the resolute expression and determined gait of men who would not change the words they had already spoken. They still had the fowling pieces loaded with small shot and the spears they carried, which were the only weapons available in the Tranovola. If these two men had any fear or cowardice in them, they could have escaped through the north gate of the north palace, but they had none and they returned to the Besakana proudly defying the conspirators, the three hundred soldiers, and the whole multitude gathered in front of the house of Ranavalona.
Andriamihaja ordered the two men to sit down on the pavement, which they refused to do, then demanded again that they name the person the king had appointed as his successor. Itsiaribikia answered as before, but as he was speaking Ratiandrazana moved behind him and thrust a spear into his back. Itsiaribikia turned his head to fire his fowling piece, but several men fell on him, disarmed him, and dragged him to the fahitra, or cattle pens, at the front of the Besakana. There they killed him. At the same time, the conspirators seized Imanantsimijay by the throat, hands, and legs, and dragged him to the execution ground at Ambohipotsy where they speared him to death.

The attack was so sudden and instantaneous that the two men had no opportunity to make use of their arms. Had one of the muskets been fired, the rest of the tsimandos, attracted by the report, may have come out to know the cause, and seeing the dead body of one of their commanders, snatched the muskets and spears from the soldiers and attacked the conspirators. If such an uprising of the tsimandos had taken place, the soldiers would probably have followed them and killed the conspirators, for the soldiers loved and respected Radama and would have been for his daughter.

As it was, the death of Itsiaribikia caused dismay and consternation among the soldiers and the people assembled at the Besakana. But each thought that the conspirators had the approbation and sanction of everyone there but himself, and that there was no point making useless opposition. And so after the body of Itsiaribikia was dragged out of the palace, Ratiandrazana spoke to the soldiers in military terms, and spoke to the assembled crowd, saying Ranavalomajaka was now the sovereign.

Those who were not already in on the secret were astonished to hear Ranavalona proclaimed queen. A great many of them thought that one of the sons of Andrianampoinimerina, of whom five were still alive and in Antananarivo, was who the conspirators meant to set on the throne. If this had taken place it would not have altered the dynasty of Andrianampoinimerina and Radama, for these
princes were of the same blood as Andrianampoinimerina, although not of the same mother as
Radama. But when Ratiandrazana finished speaking, the doors and windows of the Besakana were
thrown open, and the conspirators rushed in and kissed the feet of Ranavalona as a token of their joy.

The soldiers and the people saluted and congratulated her on her ascension to the throne, and
no one called her a usurper, for that would have caused their untimely death. Everyone said that she
was the real successor to Radama, being appointed by himself and his father Andrianampoinimerina.
And each strove to gain her good grace and will. All the homage paid to royalty was amply showered
upon her, and she must have felt real pleasure witnessing these ceremonies which she had often seen
acted upon Radama.

The conspiracy was therefore carried through, and the outpouring of blood from the two
tsimandos was but a prelude to the deluge of blood that followed, and which continues to pour
through her sanguinary reign.
CHAPTER 10

... In which the idol’s blessing is interrupted, and Ratiandrazana’s army battles at Ikongo

Antananarivo, 1829

Ani stands at the edge of the cliff at Ambohipotsy, the execution grounds, and looks out over the plain from which Antananarivo rises. The end of the rainy season has left the sky filled with clouds, a gray blanket that muffles the light and murders the shadows. The objects in the scene he oversees are neither near nor far, but merely small or large on a flat surface without depth. He knows if he were to step off the edge of the cliff he would fall, but he feels as if he would merely step into an area of trees and rocks suddenly shrunken, as if ensorcelled. The people below him stand in miniature, toy soldiers lined up by the thousands on the flat plain of Andohalo, with a toy queen and toy generals at their head.

The soldiers are real, however, as is the queen and the generals overseeing them, and the priests walking through their ranks. The queen sits at the front of the parade ground under a canopy of gold-tasseled scarlet silk. She is flanked on her right by her lover Andriamihaja and on her left by Ratiandrazana, the general with the scar over his eye who will lead this military expedition to the south. Nobles and military men cluster around the royal pavilion. The queen’s army of four thousand warriors kneels on the field. Today, they are mustering to march on the hill of Ikongo, where two thousand rebels, or refugees, have settled in defiance of the Merina throne.

For some minutes Ani has been listening to the mutter of leather shoes approaching his perch from the city, and now finally Minister Griffiths stands to Ani’s right. The two men watch in silence the spectacle below, until Ani says, “It looks like an army, but it isn’t, is it?”
Griffiths says, “It is and it isn’t. Most of them are conscripts, taken from my school. Those axes and knives they’re carrying—two weeks ago they were out in the fields harvesting rice.” He points with his knuckle to a line of perhaps five hundred uniformed men kneeling at the front of the crowd. “Those are the soldiers. Do you know about Hastie?” When Ani indicates that he doesn’t, Griffiths continues. “James Hastie was a countryman of mine. He and a Jamaican named Brady trained the army Radama used to conquer the Betsimisaraka, the Betanimena, and half the rest of the tribes on the island. Radama loved him for it. Hastie died about a year before Radama did, and the funeral was something to see. Those soldiers are some of Hastie’s men.”

Ani starts to point with his finger at another group in the crowd, but Griffiths quickly pushes Ani’s arm down. “Don’t point with your finger. If you happen to point at a tomb—and tombs are everywhere so if you point you’re likely to catch one—it will anger the ancestors.”

Ani laughs. “I’m surprised you care about their superstitions.”

Griffiths turns away from the parade ground and gives Ani a measured look. But all he says is, “It’s disrespectful. Point like this,” and he curls his index finger so that he’s pointing with his knuckle at a crested drongo perched in a stunted ficus tree. A bird-shaped blackness cut out of the gray.

Ani follows his example, pointing with his knuckle at another group of men below them. Identified by the splash of scarlet their lambas create on the field, the men are nobles and kneel closest to the queen. “What are they doing here?” Ani asks. “This is a military ritual.”

“They won’t fight, but their station allows them to accompany the army. They will split the spoils with the foot soldiers.” Griffiths sighs at everything this foreigner doesn’t understand about what’s happening below them. He decides to start with the easier part. “Every year at the end of the rainy season the raiding starts. It’s tradition all through the island. These men are a raiding company as much as a conquering force. They will march to subdue Ikongo because this early in her reign the queen
can’t afford any sign of weakness. But they will raid and plunder on their way there and on their way back again.”

The crested drongo, sensing either predator or prey, lifts itself out of the ficus and swoops down toward the plain below. It circles the soldiers and the queen like a shadow, unnoticed by either those above or those below. Griffiths continues his explanation to the foreign executioner. “In some of the villages near Ikongo, they will kill the men, enslave the women and children, and steal the cattle. The soldiers must provide for themselves, so most of them will carry enough rice to get them to Ikongo, but they must steal the food they will need on the way home.”

“And the crown will take a third of their plunder.”

Griffiths laughs. “At least half. But it’s a fair trade.” Griffiths pauses, and looks down at the parade grounds again. A knot of perhaps ten men winds its way through the ranks of the soldiers. At the end of the procession, five men carry bundles of straw in which slither snakes green, red, and black. The men carry the straw bundles in their right hands while handling the snakes in their left, brandishing the serpents at the crowd. In front of the snake charmers march four men with bullock horns strapped across their chests. The horns slosh with honey-water, and with a fascicle of rushes they shake the water at the soldiers, sprinkling naked shoulders and chests.

Griffiths continues. “Do you see the men with the water? It’s not water. Not to them. It’s the blessings of the ancestors. Sacred power. Hasina.” Griffiths deliberately stops talking for a moment. “Do you hear that? The silence?” Griffiths is right—an impossible quiet powders the parade ground like talc. At the head of the procession of priests walks the chief sorcerer, the general Ratiandrazana’s brother, Rainimaharo. He carries a 20-foot-long rosewood pole topped by an indistinct form covered in red velvet. Griffiths says to Ani, “That’s one of their idols—‘Ikelimalaza.’”

“Its name?”
“In a way. Ikelimalaza is the name of all the ancestors associated with the idol. It’s familial, more or less. The general Ratiandrazana’s family has been its keeper since the time the Merina conquered the *vazimba* and settled here in the high plateau. They are the people closest to the idol, saving only the queen. They are the only ones who know the proper rituals and taboos that will ensure the ancestors continue to bestow blessings. They know how to forestall the ancestors’ anger, and there is usually one person in the family to whom the ancestors speak, generally in dreams but sometimes in trances. The cloth hides the idol from unsanctified eyes. The snakes and the horns and the silence—these are all part of the ritual to please the idol. Ikelimalaza requires snakes and horns and silence. And if the idol is pleased, then it will bestow *hasina* on the men. It will give them power in the upcoming campaign.”

“That much is real enough.” Ani says. “Napoleon said that in battle ‘morale is to the physical as three to one.’ If their spears strike true, it will be the idol that creates their victory.”

“Their faith in the idol, at least.” The missionary is unwilling to attribute real power to a graven image. “The Malagasy believe that everything that happens is ultimately caused by the ancestors. If the rice grows, it’s not because of the rain but because the ancestors express their pleasure through the rain. If a child dies of the fever, it’s because the ancestors express their cruelty through the fever. Everything around us is sacred to them in the sense that everything is a potential vessel for the will of the ancestors. But there’s a hierarchy, too—*hasina* flows from top to bottom. The person closest to the ancestors is the queen. The blessings of the idol flow to her then to her priests and finally to the soldiers on the field. In return, the soldiers offer *hasina* to her in the form of cattle and slaves and the spoils of war.”

Ani nods, thoughtful. “And this is why she can pay three *piastries* for a slave that is worth sixty on the coast. The worth of the slave is measured not just in terms of goods for trade.”
“A slave, or a bullock, or a piastre offered as hasina might flatter the ancestors into bestowing a healthy child, or a bountiful harvest, or a long life. That’s why, to the men on the field below us, her half is fair. She gives them victory and they give her half the spoils. It’s half more than they would have had without her blessing.”

The men fall silent, and watch the ritual for a time. Ani knows that Todisoa, the oxcart driver, kneels among the conscripts below. Ani gave him a good spear to take with him on the campaign. Todisoa will carry a month’s worth of rice from the capital, but has no servant to help him guard and cook it.

Ani decides to press Griffiths on the topic he avoided earlier. He says again, “I’m surprised you know so much about their superstitions.” Ani says the last word in a tone that pretends at neutrality.

Griffiths turns his round and ruddy face toward Ani. It’s an open face, a face familiar with laughter and ease. The duly appointed representative of the London Missionary Society says to the queen’s executioner, “I have been living here for almost ten years, sir, and I am a pragmatist. I am not naive about the sources of power in this place.” Ani doesn’t reply, and Griffiths pauses to think a moment. “She may yet survive her power,” he says.

“The queen?” asks Ani, although of course who else would they be talking about.

“These rituals she propagates… Much more than her husband ever did. But then, she cannot stand at the front of an army. So how does she establish her power? By reminding the people, with every ceremony, every celebration, every kabary, every rite, she reminds them that she is the holder of sacred power. It is from her and from her alone that blessings flow. It’s ingenious, really. Andrianampoinimerina started it, and Radama followed it to some degree, but really she’s developing it into an art. She bestows ritual power, and collects material wealth in return.” Griffiths laughs. “So you
see, I am a good Christian after all. I think she is exploiting the native superstitions for her own benefit. To gather wealth and power to her ample bosom.”

Humor twinkles in Griffiths eyes, but Ani cannot decide if the minister is laughing at Ranavalona, at Ani, at himself, or is laughing simply for the joy of it.

On days without *kabary*, Andohalo is a club, lounging space, and newsroom, where public business of all kinds is transacted and people sit in the grass discussing the news of the day. But today is a day of *kabary*, of speeches and blessings for the troops headed to Ikongo. From her shaded platform overlooking the company of soldiers, the queen watches carefully a group of fifty men who have separated themselves from the main body of troops. They kneel respectfully, and maintain their respectful silence, but Ranavalona knows that they are kneeling and praying not to the idol of her ancestors, but to the foreign god the *vahaza* have brought to her country. These Christian converts requested, and were granted, leave to abstain from the idol blessing. They could not, they said, participate in a service that would imply belief or confidence in the idols. Ratiandrazana allowed it, adding simply that Ikelimalaza would be revenged upon them. Now, Ranavalona watches these men, frowning.

The procession of the idol passes through the ranks, sprinkling the men with fortune’s favor. Todisoa accepts the rain of sweet water on his face and bare chest. He averts his eyes from the brandished snakes. And as the idol passes over his head he feels a surge of vigor; he becomes potent with the power of the idol and the strength of his own body. He has never before been this close to an item of such importance, and he is both proud and humbled to be kneeling on the parade grounds this day.
When the procession of the idol has worked its way to the royal platform, the sorcerer and his entourage make their obeisance to the queen, and one of the lesser generals stands to give the kabary. As soon as the silence of the idol is lifted, as soon as the speechmaking begins, Andriamihaja, following the queen’s gaze, addresses Ratiandrazana. “You are bringing the Christians with you on campaign.”

Ratiandrazana remains outwardly stoic, his face toward the speaker and the army. “They will run like cowards, and die screaming on the points of our own spears.”

“The punishment for cowardice is burning.” The conversation, begun privately, starts to attract the attention of the military men and nobles standing near the queen.

Still stoic, Ratiandrazana replies, “I have no need to be schooled in the laws of my own military, Noble Andriamihaja. I was there when they were made.”

“You don’t think the slaughter of the Christians will anger the vahaza?”

“Do you think I care if the vahaza are angry?”

“Your wives might care if they can no longer prance through court in French satin.”

Andriamihaja turns his head to look past the queen at Ratiandrazana. “How will you keep your women happy if you have no earrings, necklaces, or beads?” Andriamihaja looks pointedly at the musket Ratiandrazana holds. “Where will you get your powder and shot if you make the vahaza angry?”

Andriamihaja pauses for effect. “You, sir, are better off without a mirror, but I find that I quite like mine.”

Twitters from the surrounding nobles, and the queen suppresses a smile. Ratiandrazana turns his head to look at Andriamihaja. “You are a brute, who will give away the riches of Imerina in exchange for a few shiny baubles.”

“Those shiny baubles keep the people happy. And when the queen controls the vahaza she controls the distribution of their bounty. She controls the happiness of her people.”
Ratiandrazana’s voice drops low, ready with a point to score. “The queen already controls the happiness of her people.”

Andriamihaja decides not to argue. The actual popularity of the queen is a nagging uncertainty throughout the court. She has the support of the strong conservative faction, but many are waiting to see what she will do, about the treaty with the British, about the missionaries, about the Sakalava. Andriamihaja changes tack. “What riches of Imerina am I giving away? What do we lose by allowing the vahaza to teach us how to make soap and stronger steel?”

“What riches do we lose?” Ratiandrazana turns to fully face the younger man. He draws himself up and begins to speak formally:

“What is the matter, Raivonjaza, That you remain silent? Have you been paid or hired and your mouth tied, That you do not speak with us, who are your parents? I have not been paid or hired, and my mouth has not been tied, but I am going home to my husband and am leaving my parents, my child, and my friends, so I am distressed, speaking little.”

Ratiandrazana respects the fomba of Imerina as he respects his father and mother. To renounce the worship of one’s ancestors, to pray to a foreign god, is to abandon the parents who gave you life. For Ratiandrazana, the taboos and customs of his people are what make a man civilized. Fomba is what separates man from brute beast. To embrace foreign ways is beyond betrayal—it is against the very laws of nature.

But Andriamihaja is not unschooled in the art of kabary, and also knows how to use the hainteny, the poetry of Imerina. While Ratiandrazana was speaking, Andriamihaja also drew himself erect, and turned to fully face the other man. Now Andriamihaja answers the general:
“It is through her subjects that the sovereign reigns.
It is the rocks that cause the stream to sing.
It is its feathers that make the chicken large.
The palm trees are the feet of the water.
The winds are the feet of the fire.
The beloved is the tree of life.”

On this last line, Andriamihaja tilts his head toward the queen. His tone softens, becomes the private speech of two lovers. But he continues immediately, repeating in his formal voice, “It is through her subjects that the sovereign reigns.”

Ratiandrazana’s voice drops to a growl. “Are you so in love with the vahaza that you have forgotten your own language? Hitamaso, Seen By the Eye, she is the living god.” It is Ratiandrazana’s turn to nod his head and acknowledge the queen. Buried in his tone like a badly kept secret is an accusation toward Andriamihaja of blasphemy: Ranavalona rules through divine right, not through the will of her subjects.

Andriamihaja laughs. “Then what is the point of angering the vahaza?”

At Andriamihaja’s laugh Ratiandrazana finally loses control of his temper. Ignoring his surroundings, he roars across the queen at Andriamihaja: “They are blasphemers and their followers are treasonous. They deserve to die.” Ratiandrazana’s voice carries across the plain. In the midst of his kabary, the minor general is forced to stop speaking as all eyes focus on the drama unfolding around the queen. Ratiandrazana leans forward like poised spear, ready to launch himself at Andriamihaja. The queen’s lover stands suave and smiling—the general has made a spectacle. But as Ratiandrazana roars, the queen herself rises and with a voice that fills the plain commands her two subjects to be silent.

She turns to Andriamihaja. Anger stains her words. “Andriamihaja. The vahaza may be useful, but you love them too much. Do not forget who you are.” Andriamihaja bows and steps back, chastened but still smiling faintly. A flash of triumph crosses Ratiandrazana’s face, until the queen turns to him, just as angry. “Ratiandrazana, you are an honorable man of noble blood. Do not dare to speak of
blasphemy and execution. Do not overstep your bounds.” As the divine ruler of the Imerina, it is the
queen alone who determines what constitutes blasphemy. And only the queen has the right to take a
subject’s life. Ratiandrazana’s face contracts in his own anger, and he fires a look like a lead shot at
Andriamihaja.

Nervous mutters build among the soldiers. The conscripts avert their eyes from the quarrel,
exchanging with each other alarmed looks. Among them, Todisoa drops his gaze to the ground. He
wishes himself invisible so the discord spewed by the nobles will not stick to him and bring him bad
luck in the coming battle. Strife during the blessing of the troops—Todisoa knows this campaign is now
jinxed. The queen turns to the general whose speech was interrupted. “My sincerest apologies, sir. My
children have embarrassed their mother. They will be beaten for it, I promise you. Please continue.”
The man does as he’s told, speaking eloquently of the victories they will secure and the plunder they
will win. But the public argument hangs over the assembly like the gray blanket of clouds, and the
mutterings among the soldiers continue, through the ceremony, into the night, and into the campaign
itself.

Todisoa climbs. Hewn from solid granite, the path up the side of the cliff shrinks in some places
so narrow that he must step sideways, his face pressed desperately to the cliff, his back exposed to two
hundred feet of gossamer air that opens below his feet. His palms sweat as he clings to the warm rock,
searching for any weakness that might offer him purchase, offer him some security, some relief from the
relentless, terrifying exposure. In some places the path is so steep he must pull himself up with his
hands. In some places the troops ahead of him crawl on their hands and knees. A boulder on the path
blocks Todisoa’s progress. Holding his breath, he climbs over it and reaches a slightly wider section of
the trail—still steep, but wider at least. He fingers his ody, the satchel of good luck charms hanging around his neck. He adjusts the spear strapped across his back, and continues on.

The detachment climbing the cliff comprises one thousand men. Among this thousand is the entire compliment of Christian soldiers. Before they started their climb this morning, one of the captains ordered the Christians to the front of line. “You are always praying,” he said. “Now I will see if your god succeeds or not in capturing the town.” The Christians replied that their god was certainly capable of ensuring a successful mission, but they did not know if it was his will. They were the loyal subjects of the queen, however, and would obey the command of their captain, and so they were the first to ascend the cliff.

Another two thousand soldiers hack their way through the forest on the back side of the Ikongo mountain. Those men manage the cannons, and must move them through one of the thickest, most tangled jungles on the island of Madagascar. Trees crowded together like an angry mob drip vines that reach down like fingers to trip and tie the troops. Lemurs leap through the canopy, sneezing their warning call, setting the birds aflutter. Fifty men work with machetes to clear a trail for the three cannons: twelve hundred pounds each mounted on modified cart wheels with an improvised carriage. Another five hundred men carry lead shot, eight pounds each, as well as powder, raffia wadding, sponges, worms, wad-screws, rammers, botefieux, priming irons, and quoins of mire. They carry these things through the screeching, clawing jungle along with their rice, their weapons, their charms, and their courage. Chameleons the size of cats rest in the trees, watching.

The Ikongo massif rises fifteen hundred feet above the valley floor; its north, east, and south sides formed by sheer cliffs scaled only by the narrow path Todisoa climbs. The western side of Ikongo slopes more gently to the valley, but is covered by the jungle Ratiandrazana and his men struggle slowly through. The forest ends at the flat top of the mountain where the town of Ikongo stands surrounded by a
strong wall, backed on three sides by sheer cliffs and defended at the front by the jungle. Within the
town reside three thousand five hundred fugitives from Merina rule. The queen’s soldiers assemble
slowly at the top of the mountain in a small clearing in front of the wall with the jungle at their backs
and sheer cliffs on either side. The sun beats on the men, hot and relentless as they assemble the
cannons, burning their hands on the barrels and the lead shot. Todisoa stands with other troops in the
shade of the jungle, waiting, fingering his ody, thinking of his wife and eight sons. He imagines her
eyes, the color of rosewood, the whites stained yellow, her eyelashes long and soft when he brushes
across them with his thumb.

The town could be deserted—nothing moves, nothing speaks. When the sun reaches its apex in
the sky, Todisoa hears a commotion at the gate to the town. The cannon teams have almost finished their
preparations. Two hours ago at efa bana ny andro, when the day was wide open, Ratiandrazana sent a
negotiating team to the town listing terms for surrender. Through the gate three men now walk to deliver
the reply. The Betsileo wear their hair long and their lamba short, but the spears they carry are as sharp
as the Merina’s. They hold no firearms. Ratiandrazana marches with an honor guard to meet the
representatives of the town, and a crowd gathers to watch. Todisoa pushes his way to the front of the
slippery, sweating crowd. The chief Betsileo greets Ratiandrazana formally, and delivers a brief
message:

“We know of the events in Mahasoabe. Whether we capitulate or not, all that awaits us is cruel
death or an oppressive life in captivity. Do your worst, we will not surrender.”

On receiving this retort, Ratiandrazana waits a moment, sizing up the party. Then, faster than
Todisoa thought it was possible for a man to move, Ratiandrazana swings his machete and slices the
throat of the man who spoke. Before the other two Betsileo have time to react, Ratiandrazana’s guard
kill them as well. For one instant the buzzing of cicadas fills the thick air, then Ratiandrazana turns and gives the order for the cannons to fire on the town.

Five days previous, Ratiandrazana's army of four thousand men set up camp on a small hill overlooking the town of Mahasoabe. The afternoon was fine and clear, and Ratiandrazana ordered a feast to be prepared in the queen's name for the inhabitants of the town. Three of Ratiandrazana's own oxen were killed for the feast, and a messenger was sent to the village inviting all the men from the village to dine with Ratiandrazana and his officers. About three hundred Betsileo families lived in the town, farmers who submitted to whatever army controlled the land they lived in. Two hours before sunset, the men from the village arrived at the tents of Ratiandrazana's officers, and together they sat down and ate their rice and beef stew, speaking of the weather and the rice harvest and the price of good iron machetes.

At Ikongo, a five-man crew trained by Brady and Hastie prepares the cannons to fire. With the barrel parallel with the ground and the carriage locked in place, one man slides down the black maw of the gun a metal corkscrew mounted on an eight-foot pole. The worm removes any debris from the bottom of the bore. A second man dips a woolen sponge into a bucket of water and twists it through the length of the barrel. The gun is now clean and ready to load.

At Mahasoabe, Ratiandrazana's officers had secret orders to provide themselves with rope and listen for the beat of the drum. An hour before sunset, the signal was given and Ratiandrazana's men leapt up from their feast and captured the farmers of Mahasoabe, tying their hands together and herding them out into the camp.
At the cannon, a third man holds a pre-packed powder bag and loads it through the front of the barrel. The man who swabbed the gun reverses the sponge, and uses the wooden block on the other end to push the powder charge home. The gunner covers the vent hole to prevent air or debris from entering the barrel of the gun.

When all the men of Mahasoabe were assembled in the camp, Ratiandrazana and his officers marched them down to the village. They assembled in the village square. All the women, children and old men of the village rushed out to see what was happening. Ratiandrazana spoke to the villagers, saying that some of the men from the village had attacked his officers at the feast. He ordered everyone from the village to assemble, give up their weapons, and surrender to the queen. He promised that if they submitted and swore allegiance, all would be forgiven and the queen would accept them as cherished children.

When the powder is seated properly in the chamber, the swabber rams a wad of raffia fabric into the bottom of the gun bore. Two men oil the eight-pound lead shot and then load that too from the muzzle of the gun. The swabber gently presses the shot home, seating it firmly in the wadding.

The villagers of Mahasoabe, terrified for their men bound and captives of the army, collected all the spears and knives in the village, and placed them in a heap in front of the army. When this was done, Ratiandrazana ordered the villagers to separate into two groups by gender. Every man measuring more than three and a half feet was singled out and sent to a separate group, while the young children were
sent back to their mothers. Ratiandrazana ordered the village men to gather in the center of a circle surrounded by two ranks of soldiers. The women and children were guarded separately.

The gunner uses firing tables and the sights on the gun to aim the cannon. This process is delicate, and takes time. When he is satisfied that the gun is aimed just in front of the center of the village of Ikongo, he removes the cover from the vent hole, and pierces the powder bag with a long brass pin. He inserts a two-foot-long fuse through the vent hole into the powder bag. The gunner lights the fuse on the cannon, and all five men duck and cover their ears.

When the Mahasoabe villagers were thus separated, two of Ratiandrazana's officers yelled a warning call, accusing the village men of hiding knives inside their lamba. Someone yelled “They're traitors!” Instantly Ratiandrazana's soldiers fell on the crowd of village men, spearing them all to death.

The ground thunders with the explosion of the powder in the gun. A great cloud of hellfire and smoke flies from the muzzle, and with ringing ears Todisoa chokes on sulfur ash. All three guns fire in rapid succession, and when the smoke has cleared their lungs and the ringing has left their ears, the soldiers outside Ikongo hear the screaming of the villagers trapped inside their wall.

The wailing of Mahasoabe's women and children could be heard through the forest leading to Ikongo. A few men escaped, and warned the inhabitants of Ikongo of what had happened in Mahasoabe. The bodies of the men of Mahasoabe were left on the field to rot, while the women and children were bound together, some to be kept by the army as the spoils of war, the rest to be taken to Antananarivo and sold as slaves.
Ratiandrazana orders the guns to fire on the village until the hour of modiombiterabao, when the newly calved cow returns home. When they first start firing, Todisoa paces nervously around the gunners, watching them worm, swab, load, ram and fire the cannons, pushing and pulling, swinging and swaying, a martial choreography that always ends with an explosion, fire, sulfur smoke, and screaming from inside the village. The pounding of the earth shakes Todisoa through his bones, loosening the skin on his body, vibrating his lips and eyeballs. After an hour he can no longer stand near the guns and retreats to the shade of the forest.

But the forest is thick, and already packed with men. Officers stand in a line on the wide path the army cut for the cannon, watching for deserters. Off the path, movement through the raveled forest is almost impossible. Most of the five hundred nobles have assembled in front of the village walls, waiting for the village to fall so they can be the first to rush in for the spoils. They stand between the pounding guns and the invisible, screaming villagers, waiting for the signal of surrender. They wait an hour. Two hours. Three hours of incessant booming on the outside of the wall, crashing and tearing on the inside, ten rounds an hour for each gun, almost a hundred leaden missiles raining on the town like the fury of the white man's devil, punishing them for the sin of being poor and weak and far away from the favor of the queen.

After three hours, most of the army is temporarily deaf, bored but still nervous about the possible fighting to come. Todisoa stands sweating in the sun with a group of other conscripts, shifting his spear from hand to hand, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Todisoa has never killed anyone before, and the massacre at Mahasoabe, which he watched but did not join, was the most violent episode in his life thus far. He doesn't doubt he will kill if he has to, but otherwise he is neutral on the subject, unencumbered by moral misgivings or complex ethical dilemmas. Mostly, he wants to survive this day, this raiding
season, and get back to his wife and his rice fields. He captured one of the women of Mahasoabe along with her two daughters—they are tied up now with the other slaves at the base of the cliff, and if he can get them back alive and healthy to his home outside the capital, the wealth of his household will triple. His wife has never owned slaves, and will be grateful for the help with the household work.

The jungle is too crowded. Todisoa mills with two thousand other men in the clearing around the walled village. The men stay as far away from the cliff edges as they can, but the clearing is barely large enough for the army, and the men are pressed close together in crowds. Elbows jab ribs, feet stomp feet, and Todisoa cannot see beyond the press of men. Army officers repeatedly threaten to shoot with their muskets anyone they find in the forest. So for three hours the guns pound the village, the army sweats and waits, tense and jittery, the Christians pray to their god, and the nobles bounce on the balls of their feet imagining the wealth they will steal from the town.

Finally, when the sun is two hours from the horizon, Ratiandrazana decides the village will not surrender that day and signals the drummers to beat the retreat. The army's position on the hilltop is precarious, and most of the army must descend, to climb again in the morning and start the battle over again. Todisoa does not hear the details of the orders, he only hears that he must climb down the cliff tonight, then climb back up again tomorrow. Terror fires his belly when he remembers the narrow rock path, the hundreds of feet of open air, the emptiness that dares him to leap, perhaps to fly. The cliff works to bewitch him, and he fears it as he fears the work of a powerful sorcerer. He maneuvers his way over to the forest, thinking he might retreat on the forest path, down the spine of the hill, rather than face the sheer cliff wall and the witchy air around it. But the line of officers still stands strong, still threatens anyone who would disappear into the jungle. So he turns to head back and confront the tilted vertical world.
But something has gone wrong. As Todisoa works his way back to the head of the path, allowing himself to be carried along with the crowd, he hears screaming, and suddenly he is being pushed backwards and forwards by the men around him. The screaming now comes from outside the wall, screams that start loud then fall away and finally dissolve into nothing. The mass of men yell incoherently, howl at each other ineffectually, Todisoa cannot see what's happening, and he is being slowly pushed by those around him toward the edge of the cliff. He fights with all his strength, he digs in his heels and leans into the men around him, but the men are packed too tightly together, there's no room to escape, and the army turns into a seething mob of blind, terrified men. One man pulls out his knife and stabs the man behind him, desperate to escape the edge of the cliff that is creeping closer and closer, but who knows how close because no one can see anything, and the world is only slippery bodies, the now-gentle sun shining off the black skin of the terrified army conscripts.

Todisoa knows that if he does not escape, he will die. Now the soldiers are fighting amongst themselves, knives flashing, and Todisoa's skin is slippery with blood as well as sweat. He feels a sudden release behind him, the man at his back has fallen, instantly trampled, and Todisoa twists and gains five feet between him and the invisible, looming cliff face. He spies another opening, half-squats through a low leap, and he is another three feet toward the forest. Dodging the flash of a knife, he dances around a man in mid-fall, he is very nearly knocked off his feet, and then he is shoved into something hot and round and metal. The barrel of the cannon presses into his shoulder blades. The barrel of the cannon, twelve hundred pounds of immovable mass, as well rooted to the ground as any tree, and Todisoa crouches underneath the carriage, taking refuge between the wheels.

Swirling around him knees and feet tangle themselves like the vines in the jungle behind him. Three feet to his right a man falls and within seconds one leathery foot crushes his hand, one snaps his elbow, a pair of feet on his chest, Todisoa hears ribs snapping like tree branches and the man's
screaming turns to gurgling as he turns his head and sees Todisoa hiding under the gun. Pleading in the man's eyes, but Todisoa knows if he reaches out, if he leaves the sanctuary of the gun, he will lose his fingers, his hand, his arm, his life. So Todisoa watches the man beg with his eyes, blood drooling from his mouth, and does nothing. The man takes a long time to die.

Gradually, eventually, the chaos subsides. The feet no longer tangle themselves. The terrified roaring dwindles, and the screams that recede into the void cease. Space opens up around the cannon, and Todisoa ventures out. Dying light. Dying men, dead men lying by the hundreds in front of the walled town. The gray rock turn to red earth dark and slick with blood. Bodies wet and broken, crushed like rice threshed under the hooves of cattle. The survivors running to the forest path, abandoning the guns in their fear, and Todisoa joins them, slipping into the crowd like a catpurse. He will not, after all, have to face the cliff and the sweet song of the void.

His band of two hundred men reach the bottom of the hill, and in the gloaming are greeted by a scene of destruction that will wake Todisoa in the middle of the night for years to come. Thousands of bodies lay piled at the base of the cliff—officers and noblemen and common soldiers in heaps, their spears and knives and muskets scattered around them. Todisoa stands and stares, his companions also, oblivious to each other and everything else that is not the mountain of broken bodies, already buzzing with flies. Todisoa wonders if the sorcerous air is satisfied.

Todisoa feels another man take his arm and turn him away from the scene. He partially recovers himself, and moves to check on his slaves. A hundred yards from the scene of destruction they stare glassy-eyed into the setting sun. He rouses them, unties them, and leads them with the remnants of the army, its numbers halved, away from the Ikongo massif.

They camp on a river a mile away, the survivors huddling together while the slaves cook the evening’s rice. No one talks much, each man struggling with the burn left by the acid wings of Death.
The men at the river were only brushed by those wings, but still they are incapacitated, imprisoned, cut off from the murmur of the water and the caress of the cool evening breeze. Todisoa cannot eat his rice—he is trapped in a mob at the top of the mountain pushing him further and further into the black vortex of terror. He lays down—not to sleep, but because the sky has turned dark and it is time to lay his body down—and his skin is slippery with the hot sweat of other men who press against him so tightly he cannot breathe. The light of the full moon reflects mercilessly off the menacing, voracious cliffs.

Ratiandrazana takes his time leading the remnants of his army home. He is silent on the long march, and no one knows his thoughts. Gradually, his men piece together what happened on the flat top of the Ikongo massif: the Merina nobles gathered in front of the city wall panicked when they heard the drum sound the retreat, thinking the army would descend and leave them exposed in the rear. So they pushed their way to the front trying to gain the path first and threw the entire body of men into irretrievable confusion. Nobles, officers and common soldiers pushed each other over the precipice to be dashed on the rocks below. The army officers learn that not a single Christian soldier lost his life, and there are whisperings among the Christians that the massacre at Ikongo was their god's retribution against Ratiandrazana for his cruelty to the people of Mahasoabe. The officers remember Ratiandrazana's quarrel with Andriamihaja at Andohalo, and his warning that the idol Ikelimalaza would be revenged upon the Christians. Some begin to wonder whose god is the stronger.

There is no talk of burnings for miamboho lehilahy—Ratiandrazana is silent, and no one else dare speak of it. As the army makes its slow way home the surviving conscripts melt away, returning by local paths to the villages where their women and children wait. Todisoa surrenders to an army officer the mother of the two slave girls he captured in Mahasoabe. The mother is his hasina to the queen,
worth at least as much as the other two put together, and anyway he is not so wealthy that he can support three slaves. The two girls will already be a stretch, but he can sell one later if needs be. One of the girls wails like an *indri* when she is separated from her mother, but Todisoa beats her until she is sobbing but quiet. The other girl watches with empty eyes as the officer leads her mother away, and Todisoa does not think to wonder what is in her mind.
Antananarivo, 1829

Andriamihaja lies on his belly on his soft European mattress and inhales the medicinal odor of aromatic herbs. For two days he has been face-down on his bed, the raw flesh on his back at first too tender, and now the scabs cracking and bleeding, oozing blood and pus that drips down his back where he can’t reach it. A slave stands constantly next to his bed—a slave Andriamihaja knows is one of Ani’s spies, reporting on Andriamihaja’s circumstances in exchange for small doses of opium. Andriamihaja doesn’t mind Ani’s spies, or Ranavalona’s, or Ratiandrazana’s for that matter. The ones he knows about he doesn’t mind—it’s the ones he doesn’t know about that worry him. Now the slave assists the queen’s doctor as the doctor applies a poultice of willow, cloves and thyme across Andriamihaja’s flayed back, shoulders, arms and buttocks.

Andriamihaja thinks he might be able to get out of bed today, get away from the smell of poultices that overlays the tang of sweat, pain, and chamber pot. Andriamihaja’s house holds a mosaic of European, Arabic and Malagasy objects: tsihy mats and a Persian carpet on the floor, a small alter to his ancestors in the far northeast corner, bunches of herbs hanging from the rafters to ward off witches, ghosts, illness, and bad humor. A Turkish coffee set sits on a low table surrounded by purple and green satin pillows and two ornately carved rosewood stools. Lace curtains in bordello red, lemon yellow and baby blue hang from the walls, covering nothing but the wood planks and producing a cacophony of uncoordinated color and texture. A dusty picture of Napoleon Bonaparte hangs crooked above Andriamihaja’s collection of spears, next to which a blue vase painted with Greek-style javelineers
holds fresh bougainvillea blooms. Near his bed, a well-silvered mirror in a frame carved with sea
monsters stands leaning against the wall.

When he is well, Andriamihaja sometimes wanders slowly through his house, fingering his
miscellaneous and mismatched treasures. They make him happy. He often lingers at the picture of the
French emperor, imagining himself standing proud with one hand in his jacket, the other resting lightly
on a table that holds the French crown, seemingly oblivious to it as he looks off to the side. He feels the
weight of the imperial sashes and chains draped across his neck, the gray silk stockings wrapping his
legs, pointed shoes with bows on top cocooning his feet, a linen cravat tucked under his chin, propping
up his head and its mop of unruly hair. Andriamihaja twirls sometimes as he stands in front of the
picture, imagining the heavy cloak swirling around him. He secretly wishes he could be as dapper as
Napoleon Bonaparte.

He has been lying in bed for two days, since he was carried from the courtyard where the queen
had him beaten. He feels anything but dapper now, and needs to stand before Napoleon’s picture,
imAGining himself beautiful and suave once again. The queen’s doctor whistles tunelessly but cheerfully
as he paints brown-green paste onto the great rents in Andriamihaja’s skin. The beaten man winces,
cursing, then breathes again and resumes his banter.

“Slather me up, doctor,” he says. “You’re preparing a meal fit for a queen.”

“You’ve already been roasted,” the doctor returns. “Now I’m just adding the sauce.” He nods to
the slave holding the bowl with the poultice, and draws out another strip of dripping muslin. “Has she
been by to see you yet?”

Andriamihaja laughs, which makes him wince again. “Oh, do not play the fool with me, dear
doctor. You know she has not.”
“I know no such thing,” the doctor retorts. “I am not so much in the privy council of our elevated Majesty.”

“And yet she sends you to butter me up.”

“Make of that what you will. I will not presume to guess at her intentions.”

“What, no secret message hidden in your bowl?”

“Only the poison she ordered me to apply,” is the doctor’s droll response.

“Hah! But I know you’re lying. When she kills me, it will be with a spear.”

“Will she be the one wielding it?” The image of a woman with a spear makes both men laugh.

Andriamihaja muses, “With her, anything is possible.”

“Speared to death by the very hand of the monarch. Now that would be love.”

“Are we talking about love? I’d rather be the one doing the spearing.”

“Down boy. Stay in bed. Let this heal.”

“Not a chance. I’m cooked and sauced. Ready to be presented on a silver platter.”

“What do the vahaza say? ‘Bon appétit’?” The doctor’s accent is execrable.

“Oo. Be careful. They don’t like it when you murder their language.”

“Sacred eggs, why not? They butcher ours regularly.”

“Yes, but don’t tell them that. Except for this new executioner. He’s very fluent.”

“And how did he become so?” The doctor’s tone suggests he may already know the answer to his own question. “People talk, you know.”

“And what do people say?”

“It’s not so much saying as whispering. People fear him. They say he’s a sorcerer.”

“Mmmm, maybe he is.” The doctor paints more paste onto Andriamihaja’s back, and once again the nobleman curses, this time in English, “Jesus Christ!”
The doctor laughs again. “Yes, good, use the name of their god as a curse word.”

“Why not? They do.” Andriamihaja clenches the bed clothes with both hands, working to not cry out in pain. “Have you met the executioner Ramanany?”

“Again, I am not so much in her Majesty’s privy council.”

“Neither is he, thank the gods.”

“You don’t like him?”

“I don’t trust him. He’s silent and brooding and absolutely no fun at all. He has plans. I don’t know what they are, but he has them. He’s far too tall to be trusted.” Andriamihaja points his chin at the slave holding the bowl. “This one belongs to him.”

The doctor looks over at the slave, whose eyes do not leave the ground. The doctor raises his eyebrows and goes back to his work. “The queen is throwing a feast—”

He is interrupted by the noisy appearance of another of Andriamihaja’s slaves. “My lord, Her Royal Majesty approaches.”

The doctor chuckles to himself and starts to pack away his instruments. Andriamihaja curses again in English, “God’s teeth,” but he is smiling brightly as he says it. He starts to move slowly in the bed, trying to sit up. The doctor gives him a stern look: “No spearing!”

Andriamihaja shrugs and says, “I am her Majesty’s servant.” He reaches for a lamba the recently arrived slave brought for him, and manages to kneel up in bed and drape himself with it just before Ranavalona enters. As the rustling of her satin and the clipping of her shoes settles, everyone bows, even Andriamihaja, however stiffly. He apologizes to her, “I’m sorry, Your Majesty, that I cannot greet you properly. A monstrous cat took me while I was sleeping the other night, and I am since wedded to my voluptuous bed, in agony for her return.” Andriamihaja can hear the queen’s guard
standing outside his house—she has entered alone with one of her women. To Andriamihaja, this is a good sign.

The queen stands regal just inside the threshold. “Monstrous? Indeed. You are lucky you survived,” she says. She nods to the doctor, he bows and takes his leave, and they are alone except for their slaves. Ranavalona walks slowly through Andriamihaja’s room, fingering the red lace curtains, pushing her nose into the bougainvillea blossoms. Andriamihaja knows that from the veranda of the Tranovola she witnessed his beating. She straightens the crooked picture of Napoleon, and with her back to Andriamihaja, staring at the photo, she says, “You have a picture of the beaten French emperor, but not your own monarch.”

Ranavalona has been to Andriamihaja’s house many times, and has never before commented on its contents. Andriamihaja answers her, “A picture could never do you justice. I much prefer the real thing.” Still without turning, she hums noncommittally in her throat. She traces Napoleon’s silhouette with her finger, brushing his unruly hair upward and out. She says, “You look like him, a little.”

“You flatter me.”

“I flatter him, actually. But so many clothes, so many jewels. It’s a wonder he can stand up.”

Andriamihaja remains silent, and Ranavalona resumes her circumambulation of the room. She pauses at a window to look out over the view: the whole city of Tana stretches beneath them, and beyond that the fallow rice fields in the valley below. Andriamihaja watches her back as she stares out the window, her long hair in elaborate coils that fall like black smoke down her neck and across her shoulders. His fingers know the texture of her hair, smooth like lizard skin stroked along the scales. She turns from the window and faces him still kneeling on the bed, the lamba draped awkwardly across his lap. The mask she shows him has been carefully constructed to hide, while advertising the hiding, whatever emotions battle behind it. Andriamihaja sees the slight, unconscious furrow of her brow. He
likes to press his thumb gently between her eyebrows, smoothing the skin there. It makes her look more human, less burdened by the divine, but her smoothed brow never lasts more than a second or two.

The slaves have placed a chair next to the bed, and the queen settles herself into it. She pulls on the fingers of her linen gloves, removes them carefully and sets them beside her on the bed. She smooths her blue satin skirt, draping it artfully across her legs, then turns her head and looks at her lover with desert eyes.

Facing her on the bed, Andriamihaja still kneels stiffly, his mangled back straight, his face neutral. An uneasy quiet settles between them, and in that silence Andriamihaja hears the demands of the conservative factions, the drums of the Sakalava, and the cannons of the vahaza. He hears the groaning of her sacrificial bulls and the sighing wind through the rice fields when the grain is fat and heavy, the stalks bent to the ground. He hears the bells tinkling on the Tranovola. He hears the whispers of her ancestors. He hears the crack of the whip against his back. Into this heavy silence Andriamihaja asks, “Did you enjoy watching?”

She hesitates for a moment, then says firmly, “No.” He suspects she’s lying, and knows that is all the apology he will ever get from her. Which is fair, he thinks, because taking the beating is all the apology she will ever get from him.

He reaches out carefully, moving only his arms, and takes her gloves in his hands. He brings them to his lips and kisses the rough linen, inhaling her perfume: French with a musk base that is all and only hers. She watches him, then looks down at her skirt, her face softer but still unsmiling. She looks up again and stares out the open window at the view across Tana and the sepia fields below.

“I’ve just received a message,” she says. “No one else in the city knows yet, but I’m sure the news will be out in an hour.” She stops, still staring out the window.
Andriamihaja can guess what the message is—news is due from Ikongo, and he can see that it’s bad. But he waits for her, he doesn’t ask, because that’s his place and how she tells him will help him gauge what to do next. She waits a long time, looking out into the distance, and again the silence falls between them. When she finally speaks, she is frank, direct: “The report is that Ratiandrazana lost half the army and all the guns.”

Andriamihaja doesn’t answer immediately as the implications settle in his head. “A disaster,” he says, matching her tone. The two of them are working now, he near naked and beaten on his bed, she perched in her vanga-blue satin trimmed in red.

“A military disaster. And a political one, too.”

“Not necessarily. Ratiandrazana can take the blame for this one.”

This is the wrong thing to say, and he knows it before the words are out of his mouth. Her anger explodes, pushing her to her feet, “You are a fool!” The red buttons and red piping on her sleeves flash as she snaps her arms, pointing at him with deadly accuracy. “This rivalry between the two of you...” her tone turns nasty, “…have you not learned your lesson? Make your peace with him.”

Andriamihaja bows low and feels the scabs on his back break open. She strides to the vase holding the bougainvillea blossoms and picks it up, turning it in her hands. It’s a delicate thing, translucent china that was brought to Antananarivo from Greece by an Arab trader. The javelinier’s body turns like a spring ready to unleash the spear. The queen examines the vase while she brings her anger under control. “There’s more. Every one of the Christians survived. Ratiandrazana tried to kill them off, and instead he lost half the army, all of the guns, and every single one of the blasphemers survived.”

The queen has turned toward Andriamihaja once again, and now he pours every once of energy into controlling his face. He knows that she expects him to be pleased, that she is scrutinizing him for
any sign that he is pleased. He is in fact pleased, about the Christians’ survival and Ratiandrazana’s humiliation. But she is right that it’s a military disaster. Her enemies will now see her as weak, at a time when she cannot, under any circumstances, afford to be seen as weak. She’s also right that it’s a political disaster for the conservatives. For him, however, it’s an opportunity. He will have to think about how to best capitalize on the opportunity. He will have to be patient—now is not the time.

He waits. She still holds the vase, pink star-shaped blossoms spilling over the side. She says in a low growl, “I hate them. These Christians. I hate what they are doing to my land, to my culture. Dividing us. Weakening us.” She looks at the vase in her hands, her shoulders move and Andriamihaja closes his eyes, knowing what’s coming and not wanting to see. She hurls the words at him: “I will not be a vassal state!” and then lets fly, and the vase shatters against the plank walls of the house. Shrapnel in a three-foot arc, a pool of water and bright pink blooms now doomed to wither and die.

The slaves look to Andriamihaja, but he motions them to remain where they are. The wreckage will stay for now. Andriamihaja remains silent, refusing to get into an argument about the vahaza. She wants him to agree with her, but the best he can do is withhold his disagreement. She continues to seethe at him, breathing hard, her breast heaving above the stays of her corset. He directs the conversation toward common ground. “The Sakalava will see this as an opportunity.”

“Yes. The Sakalava will. The Betsimisaraka will. The Betsileo will. Certain members of my own court will!” He doesn’t know if she is referring to him specifically—certainly she is referring to the liberal faction at court, which he supports. “Such a great opportunity. Reclaim the lands my father and my husband fought so hard to unite. And it’s as good as an invitation to the vahaza. We will be fighting border wars for years.”

He looks at her standing across the room, and the pain in his back brings a clarity that is new to him. He has been with her from the beginning—without him, she would not now be sitting on the
thron. He doesn’t know who he is without her. But for the first time he sees that she is an insecure ruler. Strong, determined, proud, and entitled, but mercurial in her fear. Juxtaposed on this new picture of her is his dear Ramavo: a woman, sinuous and unknowable. And now she needs to forget. She needs to be forgiven for her fear. This is his work today.

Quietly, in the private voice he reserves for her, he says, “There is nothing to be done about it now. This problem will keep.” He says,

That ascent in the south
Is the ascent of birds’ flight, the ascent of winds.
Bright partridge with the crow and his mate.
If desire tempts my eyes,
When I look closely, I am free of it;
But if desire tempts my heart,
Though I use a hook, I am not free of it.

As she listens the rage drains slowly from her face. She smooths the skirts of her gown, where droplets of water have stained the expensive satin. She walks with measured steps toward the bed, but turns her back to him and faces the mirror. She examines herself in the looking-glass, pulling at the red lace at her décolletage and down the length of her arms. She begins to unbutton the tiny red buttons on her sleeves. Andriamihaja feels blood slowly dripping down his back. Ranavalona reaches up and unties her sleeves from her bodice, pulling them off and revealing fine muslin undersleeves. She turns in the mirror, examining the amputated dress, then nods to her slave. Andriamihaja tries to compartmentalize the pain in his back, but fails.

The queen stands before the mirror while her slave unlaces the blue satin bodice. Andriamihaja watches Ranavalona’s expression in the mirror—her eyes closed, her mouth soft as the sursurus of silk ties. He doesn’t know if he can do this, but he knows he must find a way. He focuses his attention on the bare skin of her neck, where it meets her collarbone, and imagines sinking his teeth in the hollow of her skin. The lamba in his lap stirs then quiets. The girl removes the queen’s bodice, then her skirts,
Ranavalona stands with her back to Andriamihaja in petticoats and a corset. She opens the metal busk and her breasts fall free inside her muslin shift. The girl takes the clothes and disappears into the corner of the room.

He has never seen her fully undressed, not even when they lie sleeping next to each other. He has imagined grabbing her naked hips and taking her as the animals do, unimpeded by affects of civilization such as clothes. Light from the window shines through the thin muslin of her shift, and he sees clearly her curved silhouette. He imagines squeezing her bare breasts like persimmons in his palms. She stands tall as if she were wearing her heavy crown, and looks at herself in the mirror. He wants to leap out of bed with his knife and rip the muslin from neckline to hem, and his loins stir again, more substantially. He waits for her to meet his eyes in the glass. When they do, he tells her to take off her shift.

The queen orders Andriamihaja’s slave out of the room, then turns to Andriamihaja and tells him to close his eyes. When he doesn’t, she reaches her right hand to his face and with her thumb gently pulls his eyelid down over first his left then his right eye. In the black, Andriamihaja smells again her French perfume, the coconut oil in her hair, a sharpness from her clean shift that reminds him of gunpowder. He reaches his hand up to take hers, but she grabs it sideways, shifts her weight, and twists his arm around behind him. She says, “Lay down,” practically forcing him onto his belly with his twisted arm, and he’s lying down again as he was for the doctor, his head turned toward the mirror and his eyes still closed.

He hears her pull the muslin shift up over her hips, hears the rustle of the fabric sliding along her ribs, bunching above her shoulders, turning inside-out as she pulls it over her head. Again the sharp smell of clean as she drops the shift next to him on the pillow, and then he feels her fingertips on his buttocks. She starts low, where his flesh is still intact, but slowly draws her hands higher to the small of his back, the bottom edge of his hurt, and with the lightest touch she traces the first great rent with her
fingers. He winces, mostly from anticipation, but she is careful, nudging the fiery flesh into the wound as if she could push the edges together, fixing what she had broken. She reaches up to the pillow for her shift, shakes it out, and he feels the edge of the cloth along his lower back, soaking up the blood and the poultice and his leaking life.

She spreads her shift across a patch of his back, then folds herself so she is kneeling next to his thighs, her face resting lightly on the fabric. Her hand continues its feather-light strokes of the ruptures on his back, brushing lightly along the ridges of torn red flesh, carefully avoiding the fissures—exposed, raw, excruciating. She says, “How fragile you are,” and he opens his eyes to see her face in the mirror, her own eyes closed as she inhales his pain, her face soft and possessive, her nipples hard in the small of his back. Her hand follows a path that takes it around his ribs, then down, and he lifts his hips so that she can take his penis in her hand. Her eyes are still closed but in the mirror he watches her naked body begin to undulate as she moves her hand, the broad arc of her buttocks rising and falling in time with her slow strokes.

Still her breasts press into his back, her nipples like stones on a soft pillow, and he drinks with his eyes her body in the mirror, the curve of her hips, the meat in her thighs, the great crevasse that stretches from the tops of her two legs to come together at her tailbone. Her legs are parted and the idea of seeing with his own eyes what lies between them completes the task at hand, she holds stone in her palm, and he rolls to the side so their bodies come apart. She keeps her eyes closed as he maneuvers her onto her hands and knees, she moans a little, a small protest, he’s heard it before, but she is a woman and this is the way of things. His is the organ of power. Of dominion. Hers, of acceptance only.

Kneeling behind her he pushes her knees apart and takes her hips in his hands. He is oblivious to everything except the sight she presents him, almost formally, showing off her wares. He is fascinated by the brown folds of flesh, the dark, curled hair glistening in the lamplight. He reaches in with his hand
and strokes her from front to back, his palm comes away wet and he closes his eyes to smell her, swampy, his tongue on his palm salty and sour, and now he has a smell and a taste and an image, most importantly an image, and he watches himself as he parts her flesh with his hand and then thrusts hard into the place where he cannot see.

He digs into her hips with his hands, sorting through the softness until he has a good grip on her hipbones. He pulls hard, slamming his hips into hers, she has plenty of padding and so he is fast and rough, and very quickly he is very close so he focuses on the pain in his back to keep him from going over the edge because he wants this to last. He wants to hold on to this domain that is his. Somewhere in the room someone is whimpering, it may be him, it may be her, but he doesn’t know and he doesn’t care because here is the truth of power, not in the rends in his back ordered by a woman grasping vainly at power, but in the taking of a body by another body. When there is nothing between them—no crown or scepter or army or even clothes—when they are naked and only who they are, it is he who gives and she who must take, and this is a truth so fundamental, so incontrovertible, that even she must be subject to it. And so now he will dally in this truth, stay for a while before he finishes and puts on his clothes and she puts on her crown and once again they play out their farce and pretend that she is the ruler rather than the ruled.

Andriamihaja forgets that he doesn’t know who he is without Ramovo, without Ranavalona. He forgets that she is an insecure ruler, strong, determined, proud, and entitled. He forgets that she is mercurial, and that his work today was to forgive her for her fear. Andriamihaja fucks the queen as if he were the king, and the sound of it leaks through the plank walls of his house: slapping, thumping, grunts of pleasure and of pain. Outside the house wait Andriamihaja’s slaves—they wait until Andriamihaja is satisfied, until he calls them back in to clean up the mess.
The children move in frightened stutters across the serrated stone. The boy pulls his sister behind him; she struggles to keep up with the irregular rhythm of his gait. The leather-like skin on the bottoms of their feet have protected them thus far across the knife-edged tsingy, but the boy knows that soon the stone will begin to cut through. He can wrap their feet in the rags they wear and that will buy them a little more time, but eventually the tsingy will shred their skin. They will leave a trail of blood, and at that point it won’t matter if they can still walk.

Suddenly the boy freezes, covering himself in the stillness of creature that knows it is being hunted. The sun blasts the silver tsingy and the glare partially blinds the boy. To either side jagged canyons drop away into darkness and cold, and stout branches covered in four-inch spikes jut from the cliffs below. A lizard skitters across the scalloped stone then dives head-first over the edge, disappearing into the shadows. The boy leans out past the limit of the fin on which he stands and sees no bottom. He swallows hard. He squeezes his sister’s hand, soft in his; even if he could stomach the climb down, even if he could coax his sister to follow, the stone would strip the skin from their palms. The boy’s shadow flushes a parrot from a thorny bush below—the squawk echoes across the tsingy and the boy flinches back from a sudden assault of blue and black feathers. His sister screams. He pulls her face into his chest, shushing her as he looks around, but it’s too late. His sister’s small body convulses with sobs, and the boy spies a dark figure on the far horizon.

The boy watches, and the tiny figure grows.

The boy crosses the narrow fin carefully and looks down the other side. Fifteen feet below him on the opposite wall of the canyon is a small ledge, two feet long and not even a foot wide. Now the ledge is in sun, but in half an hour it will be hidden in the shade. They can cross on a boulder wedged precariously between the canyon walls, but they will have to climb—down to the boulder, across, then from the boulder to the ledge, twenty feet along the vertical cliff face. The pockmarked stone provides
handholds enough, but this does not comfort the boy. Nonetheless, he picks up his sister and shifts her onto his back before he lowers himself over the edge.

Ratiandrazana loves the tsingy. When he and his men tracked the runaway slaves from their camp to the edge of the forest, his heart lifted as his men’s sank. He mocked them half-heartedly, then sent them back to prepare for the next day’s march—the army and its spoils are still a long way from Tana, a long way from his reckoning with the queen—and now he hunts the children alone.

Ratiandrazana loves the tsingy because the tsingy tells the truth. Its suffering and its pain and its death are out in the open, clear for all to see. Its dangers are obvious ones—dehydration, starvation, losing yourself forever in the rasping stone maze. Flesh flayed from your body with pitiless efficiency. Ratiandrazana loves the tsingy because it is honest about its intentions. It will draw you in, terrify you, hurt you, and then kill you slowly. The tsingy wears its stone like a warning sign: Abandon hope all ye who enter here.

The tsingy is in many ways the opposite of the forest, which shows itself as fecund, crowded, and infinitely alive. The forest hides its darkness in soft, silky shadows—shadows that invite you in with their cool damp. But beyond these trees—the ones in front of you—reach beyond these trees and all you grasp is the black unknown. In the black the monsters hide. Monsters like pride. And gluttony. And lust for power.

Ranavalona is like the forest. She shows as fecund—a mother creating life and providing a home. But beyond the great ebony trees of her fomba Ratiandrazana senses in Ranavalona a hidden darkness, a danger like the danger of the tsingy only cloaked in the leaves and mosses of life.

Ratiandrazana loves the tsingy because it is straightforwardly dangerous. The horrors of the
The boy tells his sister to close her eyes and hold on tight. He tells her not to move, not to shift her arms tangled around his neck. He tells her to press hard into him with her legs. He tries to make it sound like a game, but fails. He asks her if her eyes are closed, and when she says yes he reaches out with his toe and gingerly presses on the boulder wedged between the canyon walls. The boulder shifts and the boy recoils his leg, too suddenly, and almost loses his grip with his other foot. Cool, damp air swirls up from the bottomless black below. He hangs sideways off the cliff face, his right hand and right foot gripping the rock while his left foot tests the boulder again. Again it shifts, but not as much. He seesaws the boulder until it moves only inches, then turns his belly back to the cliff face.

He wants to lie chest down on the rock and wriggle across the void, but he would need to turn around and his sister on his back makes that impossible. He cannot manage the geometry of the move, how he must let go then grab the rock and somehow not fall. Trying to figure it he looks down and then he is paralyzed, utterly unable to move. He squeezes his eyes tight for many minutes. His hands are starting to cramp, his sister grows heavy on his back, and he knows he must move or fall.

So once again he leans sideways off the cliff face. He looks across the gap, only three feet away but from here to back home again—Mahasoabe—for all that he can reach out and touch it now. He leans sideways off the cliff face, reaches his left foot out and places it tentatively, them more firmly, on the boulder. He shifts his weight and the rock wiggles a little under his foot, but then settles. He lets loose with his left hand, and he is half-standing—one foot on the rock, one foot tucked into a pocket on the cliff face. He wills his right hand to let go, and when it finally does he is balancing on his two feet above the void. He crouches down slowly, the boulder rocking beneath him, then with infinite care moves his
right leg from the cliff wall onto the boulder, turning slightly as he steps, and then he is crouched on the boulder facing the opposite cliff. He stands up slowly, and when he has his balance practically launches himself at the handholds he saw, and suddenly, suddenly, he is across, his face and belly pressed against the opposite cliff, his breath ragged in his chest, and his sister asks, *Can I open my eyes now please?*

He hangs now on the other side of the chasm, his hands and feet gripping the sharp rock, a slippery line of blood trickling down his arm from where the rock cut his palm. Another lizard—or maybe its the same one—hangs upside down right next to his face, the round pads of its feet glued as if by sorcery to the vertical surface. He watches its neck pulse with breath, its tongue dart in and out of its mouth, its black eyes stare at him stupidly past the red stripes that come to a point at its nose. Right now, more than anything in the world, the boy wishes he was a lizard. But he is not, and his sister is getting restless, and he must work his way sideways to the small ledge.

Ratiandrazana knows where the children dropped into a canyon—he knows the exact spot. He did not hear the screams of a fall, but he can’t believe they climbed their way down, so he has a good guess what he will find when he arrives. And he is correct. He sees the two children cowering on a tiny ledge fifteen feet below the knife-edge of the *tsingy* flake, the boy trembling, the girl with empty eyes. Ratiandrazana has handled trapped animals before, and so he just sits down on the edge of the opposite wall, in full view of the children, and opens up his water skein. He takes a long, thirsty drink, caps the bulging sack and sets it on the rock next to him. Then he pulls out a strip of dried beef and some rice bundled in a banana leaf and eats both noisily, ignoring the children, watching a family of *sifaka* leap across the stone as if mocking the clumsy, terrified humans. Pure white, they are creatures of the air as much as any bird, and if they touch the earth it is because they enjoy the tickle of the rock on their hard round paws.
Ratiandrazana turns to the children and finds them both watching him. The girl stares at the water bag shamelessly, but when she reaches her hand out her brother slaps it down. He says to her, *He will kill us.*

Ratiandrazana says, “I won’t kill you. You are worth money in Tana. But if you stay where you are, you will die. If you move, you will die.”

The boy looks down into the black chasm for a long time. The girl wets herself and starts to cry. The boy still cannot see the canyon floor—it must be several hundred feet below them. All around him the sharp rock and the sharp branches and the precarious boulders of the tsingy grow longer and longer shadows. Soon it will be night, and at night in the tsingy, it is cold. Soon it will be cold, and they are hungry, and thirsty, and Ratiandrazana can spend the night sitting at the edge of a cliff, but the children cannot spend the night clinging to a ledge. At some point they will weaken, and sleep, and then fall to their deaths.

Ratiandrazana looks the boy in the eye. “I will not kill you. If you come back with me I will give you food and water and take you to be sold in Tana. If you don’t come back with me you and your sister will be dead by morning.”

The boy hesitates, but the girl looks up at him pleading, *I don’t want to die,* and so finally the boy turns to Ratiandrazana and nods. The general will have the boy castrated when they get back to camp—too much spirit in a slave is a bad thing—but he thinks the girl has learned her lesson and will be no more trouble. So Ratiandrazana moves off his perch and sets about rescuing the children from the trap in which they caught themselves. The general is satisfied—at least one thing on this cursed campaign has gone well.
CHAPTER 12

...In which we learn of the coup's bloody aftermath, and the cleverness of Prince Ramanetaka

Antananarivo, 1829

From the Zoma market Raombana’s vadibe—his chief wife—brings back two chickens and news of the disaster at Ikongo. She boils water in a cauldron while Raombana slits the chickens’ throats and holds them by their feet, their bodies still convulsing, so the blood will drain. His wife tells him that two thousand people died, many of them nobles, perhaps some of them their friends, but no one knows yet for sure who lived and who died. Except—everyone knows that all the Christians survived. Raombana is startled and pleased with this news, but he worries about his friends. He will go to the palace tomorrow and ask a military officer who is a friend of his if they have yet an accurate report of casualties.

His wife dunks the two chickens briefly in the boiling water, then pulls them out and starts plucking the fowl. Sodden feathers gather in a pile on the swept dirt to the side of the wooden board on which she works. Raombana sits on his heels and listens to the gossip from the market while he watches her prepare their evening meal. Ratiandrazana and the remnants of his army are still a week away from the capital, she says, and he is releasing the conscripts back to their homes. The queen is furious, she says. People in the market wonder if she will let Andriamihaja burn Ratiandrazana for his failure, for turning his back on the enemy and losing three of the queen’s limited supply of cannons.

Raombana says nothing to his wife, but privately he thinks that the queen cannot afford to burn Ratiandrazana. Andriamihaja will want to, but Andriamamba won’t allow it. Ratiandrazana is the conservative noble closest to the queen, and if she kills him it will be an unequivocal humiliation for the conservative faction. The queen’s hold on her throne is still tenuous. She still needs the support of the
conservative nobles who helped her take power. Raombana thinks there may come a time when she
wields authority independently of Ratiandrazana and Andriamamba and their ilk, but for now the
conservative nobles control most of her high-ranking military officers as well as many of the captains at
her outlying garrisons. And as landowners, they and their *fokonolona* provide a significant percentage of
her tax revenue. Until she has the army more firmly under her thumb and has created for herself more
diversified sources of income, she cannot afford to burn Ratiandrazana.

Raombana’s wife looks at him expectantly, and he hands her the cleaver lying next to him on the
wooden board. She expertly slices the first chicken from anus to gullet, reaches her hand inside and in
one practiced motion pulls out the slippery, shining vitals, organs still attached to each other by their
translucent membranes. Chattering with market gossip she dumps the innards onto the pile of feathers
then repeats with the other chicken. Raombana thinks about Ranavalona. He thinks that she cannot
afford to burn Ratiandrazana in the aftermath of this Ikongo disaster, but remembers another aftermath
and the blood that flowed so freely after she took the throne. Raombana’s wife spreads the wings and
feet of the chicken, and with a loud *crack* of her cleaver she begins to dismember the fowl. Raombana
hopes that Ranavalona will not burn Ratiandrazana. Raombana is a Christian and Ratiandrazana is his
enemy, but Raombana is a Christian and does not wish to see more blood spilled. Raombana wants more
than anything for there to be peace in Imerina.

III.

I have told how Ranavalona stole the throne of Imerina from the rightful heir,
Razahakinimanjaka, the daughter of Radama and stepdaughter of Ranavalona herself. But the blood
shed on the steps of the Besakana that Friday morning was not the only blood that flowed to secure
her throne.
Ranavalona felt that she could not sit safely on the throne until the mother of Radama, Rambolamosandoandro, and Radama’s nephew, Rakotobe, were also murdered. As soon as Ranavalona was declared queen, she ordered that the mother of Radama be seized and taken to a secret place. Because Rambolamosandoandro had sucked Radama at her breast, Her Majesty did not order her to be speared or strangled, but rather that she be forced to eat a lump of sirahazo (potash). The sirahazo ate up her entrails, and after hours of excruciating pain the mother of Radama died in the most horrible state.

The fate of the young prince, Rakotobe, was even more terrible than that of his grandmother. Radama had intended Rakotobe succeed him on the throne before Radama’s daughter was born. But after she was born he changed his mind, and declared that Rakotobe would marry his daughter, and that they would reign together, but that absolute sovereignty would be with the princess only. For this purpose Radama placed Rakotobe under the tutelage of the missionaries, and Rakotobe became proficient under their instruction. He advanced rapidly in his learning, and had a mild disposition which endeared him to those who knew him.

Ranavalona knew that she could not sit safely on her throne until Rakotobe was dead. So she ordered that he be strangled, and sent Andriamihaja with some ruffians to capture him and strangle him with a rope. Accordingly, Andriamihaja with three other men took the young prince, and as they were making preparations for his murder, Rakotobe demanded in a firm tone for what reason they were going to strangle him. Andriamihaja,” he said to them, “is it by the order of my uncle Radama that you are going to kill me? Certainly not, for I cannot conceive it to be so!” Andriamihaja said that Radama was dead, and Ranavalona was now the sovereign, and that she had ordered them to kill him so that there may be no disturbances in the kingdom. At the report of the death of his uncle, and out
of fear of his own impending death, the young prince wept bitterly, and said that if the queen would spare his life, he would make no rebellion or disturbance, and that he would be her slave and wash her feet and perform any menial task she required of him.

But these words availed him nothing, for his fate had been sealed by a bloodthirsty queen who thought she could not sit firmly on her throne while he was alive. So the assassins took the rope and seized the prince and wrapped the rope around his neck, and two men pulled on the ends of the rope in each direction. But in pulling the rope it broke, for it was half rotten. By this time the prince was half dead, and his squeakings were horrible to hear, so that at least one of the executioners was afraid and would have run away if Andriamihaja hadn't said to him, “Stay and finish your work, or Rakotobe's fate will be your own as well, and your wife and children will be sold into slavery for your cowardice.”

Another man was sent to buy a new rope, and it was almost half an hour before he returned, during which time the young prince renewed again his wailings and entreaties. But when the man came back with a new rope Rakotobe found his courage and told his executioners to finish quick their orders that he might be free from pain. Thus died the young prince, and he is buried in a secret grave known only to his assassins and perhaps to the queen herself.

As for Radama's daughter, and his two sisters Ratsiadala and Ramarivelo who were in Antananarivo at the time of the king's death, Ranavalona did not kill them or do them any harm, for after the death of Rambolamasoandro and Rakotobe she thought them to too insignificant and not worth killing.

But one more murder was committed in Ranavalona's name in order to secure her throne, and though it was not directly ordered by her, as you will see she approved and sanctioned it after the fact. Ralala, a noble and the First Judge or Minister of the late king happened not to be in Antananarivo at
the time of Radama's death, but was at some distance off inspecting his cattle at the northern border of Imerina. On the Sunday following the Friday Ranavalona took the throne, Andriamamba, without asking permission from the queen, sent three people to go and kill Ralala. They met him by Ambohimanga on his way home, and as he was being carried in a palanquin, they ordered his carriers to stop as they had some news to tell him.

Ralala eagerly demanded their news, and one of the assassins amused himself with some falsehoods that Radama's daughter now reigned, and other foolish things. As he was talking, one of the other assassins moved behind Ralala and stabbed him with his spear. Ralala first thought that it was one of his slaves that was murdering him, and cried out, “If you are weary of carrying me, why did you not say so, and you would have been relieved, rather than murdering me thus!” But in answer the assassins said, “It is not your slaves who are murdering you, but we who were sent by Queen Ranavalona who now reigns in the room of Radama.” At these words the old man wrapped a part of his lamba around his head and died almost without a groan by the repeated stabs of the murderers.

The report of Ralala's death spread instantly and reached the ears of Her Majesty that Ralala was attacked by assassins on his way home to Antananarivo and killed. At this Queen Ranavalona expressed some grief and gave orders for the apprehension of Ralala's murderers, and to bury in an honorable fashion his dead body. But as she was speaking, Andriamamba entered into the Tranovola, and told her that it was he who ordered Ralala to be killed, because he was a good friend of the family of the king, and that if he was in Antananarivo at the death of the king, she would not be a sovereign now, but would probably be in her grave.

These words had their effect, and Her Majesty immediately countermanded her former words, and proclaimed that, “Ralala has been guilty of a great crime, and was killed by her order, and that in
consequence of his guilt his numerous slaves, property and rice fields were to be confiscated.” This was carried out: his fine rice fields at the front of Antananarivo were given by Ranavalona to Andriamamba, Andriamihaja, and Ratiandrazana. By these confiscations, as well as the confiscation of the lands and slaves of the mother and nephew of Radama, the supporters and family of Ranavalona, who were miserably poor, became in one fell swoop enriched and in a great flourishing state.

It is justly supposed that if Ralala had been in Antananarivo at the death of the king, that the coup would not have succeeded, for Ralala was firmly attached to the family of the king, who promoted him to First Minister or Grand Judge. Ralala was very shrewd and cunning, and would have known the serious illness of the king sooner than his wives, and would have taken prompt measures for the succession of his daughter. For Ralala was much loved and feared by the tsimandos, as well as the soldiers and civilian people.

More than twenty-five people were executed on the order of Ranavalona so that she might secure her throne. The king’s father was publicly executed, his mother was starved to death, his grandmother was suffocated, and six of his uncles were secretly speared to death in their own homes. Many of the more celebrated of Radama’s officials were also poisoned, speared, suffocated, or otherwise murdered.

Ramanetaka alone escaped the clutches of the bloodthirsty queen. He was governor of the Sakalava in Iboina and an army was dispatched by Ranavalona to Mahajunga where Ramanetaka lived. When the army contingent halted in Marovoay, about sixty miles from Mahajunga, its commander sent four of his soldiers with a letter for Ramanetaka. In it, the queen requested that he return to Antananarivo to assist her, through his counsel, in the advancement of her realm. In reality, however,
the soldiers had received orders to kill him covertly if they found the opportunity. Ramanetaka surmised their true intentions and told them:

“\[quote\]
I shall come forthwith, but I do not wish to do so empty-handed—I wish to lay all my treasures at her feet. However, my valuables are so numerous that they cannot be easily be transported overland. I shall therefore take a ship to carry them as far upriver as it is possible to travel. My wife is already in the ship in preparation for the voyage to visit the queen.”

“Very well,” replied the soldiers. “We shall accompany you aboard the vessel as far as Marovoay where the army is stationed.”

“You do that,” responded the prince. Ramanetaka and over one hundred soldiers subsequently toiled until the late evening loading his treasures. When they were finished, they boarded the ship, together with the four messengers and Ramanetaka’s wives. The following morning, when everything had been loaded and they set sail, the prince turned to the four messengers and said to them, “I fear that, as you are unaccustomed to being at sea in such a large vessel, you may become ill, so it would be better if you were to travel in the small boat that is alongside this one.”

The messengers, not thinking that they were being tricked, boarded the smaller boat, and at the first breeze the prince commanded his men to sever the rope attaching the two craft. The ship turned downstream and headed to the open ocean, leaving the four messengers in the boat to the mercy of the elements. As the vessels were pulling away from each other, Ramanetaka shouted at them: “Farewell! Inform the queen that life is sweet and that, if I were to obey her, I would be killed like a chicken. Goodbye! I am away in search of a land where I may consume more rice.”

Accompanied by his wives, his friends, and one hundred soldiers, he set out for Bombay to seek protection from the British government. But contrary winds drove him to the Island of Johanna in the
Comoros. The King of Johanna wished Ramanetaka to stay, and presented him with a part of the island where his people might live. Ramanetaka is the only one of Radama’s great officers to survive the deluge of blood Ranavalona let loose in order to secure her throne.

Radama had acted rather unwisely, for had he retained with him two or even one of his great military officers, such a conspiracy would never have been thought of, and his throne would have passed to his lawful heir. But he had separated them from him: his cousin, Ramanetaka, who was distinguished by two great qualities seldom seen in a single individual—he was brave and skillful in war, and sound and skillful in politics—Radama had placed in Mahajanga, to be commander there. Radama hoped that Ramanetaka, through his great talents and skill, might subjugate the Sakalava of lboina and Ambongo, either through force of arms or by more gentle means.

Ramananolona, the brother or Ramanetaka and cousin to Radama also, he placed at Fort Dauphin, to conquer the Tanosy people. Ratefy, Radama's brother-in-law by his marriage to Radama's sister Rabodosahondra, he had placed at Tamatave where the Europeans are more numerous, because Ratefy had been to England, and knew more of the manners and customs of the Europeans than any of his other relations. At Tamatave, Ratefy pleased and treated well the Europeans, particularly the English, who had allied themselves with Radama. Ratefy was of a very mild disposition, and therefore well suited to ruling the Bestimisaraka people of Tamatave. Rafaralahindriantiana, a noble and great officer of Radama, he placed at Foulepointe.

The above four great officers, and several other great noble officers, he placed at the heads of military stations that by their great talents in war and sound policy, all of Madagascar might be brought under his subjugation. He was right in doing this, but he was also wrong, for had he retained with him
even one of these great men, especially Ramanetaka, in all probability his daughter would have reigned after him. But he separated them from him, and his lawful heir lost the throne by want of the aid of only one or two powerful relations.

And thus it was through Radama's own bad judgment, as well as a combination of surprise, cunning, and luck on the part of Ranavalona and her conspirators, that Ranavalona usurped the throne of Imerina, and plunged all of Imerina into a bath of blood.
CHAPTER 13

...In which the consequences of the battle of Ikongo are measured

Antananarivo, 1829

In the house of the Christian missionary David Griffiths, one of the Christian survivors of the assault on Ikongo relates his tale of the battle. “Ratiandrazana said that the idol Ikelimalaza would be revenged upon us.” Seven men including Ani sit on tsihy mats in the Malagasy-style room while the girl Rasalama serves them hot rice-water and tea. The atmosphere among the men is both triumphant and fearful, victorious and protective. Griffiths listens with a face that refuses to pass judgment until he has heard the whole story.

Ani arrived at David Griffiths’ house that afternoon not long after the group of Christian survivors. One of Ani's informants watches the house of the missionary, and Ani knew almost immediately of Griffiths’ visitors. For a week Antananarivo has been buzzing with the news of the failed assault, but this is Ani’s first chance to hear of the battle first-hand. Ani excuses his visit with concern over the missionary’s wife. She is two months recovered from her malaria, but Ani has continued his occasional visits and a climate of polite acquaintanceship has developed between him and the missionary’s household. Once or twice on his visits Griffiths elbowed Ani with the suggestion that the executioner is having his house watched, but the minister made the comments in good humor and Ani feels like he and the missionary have arrived at the kind of understanding two pragmatic men can be comfortable with.

Sitting next to Ani is David Jones, Griffiths’ fellow missionary, dressed in the same drab gray as Griffiths himself. They are both native Welshmen, trained together at Neuaddlwyd Academy, but there
the similarities between the two men end. Where Griffiths is sturdy, Jones is tall and slightly built and has never fully recovered from a bout of malaria he suffered in 1818. The fever killed his wife and infant son. Illness has carved permanent hollows in his cheeks and stained purple the skin under his eyes. But despite their superficial differences, the strong professional and personal bond between Jones and Griffiths has borne the weight of over ten years in Madagascar. Together they mastered the native tongue, opened missionary schools, devised a system of transcribing the languages of Madagascar, and are working to complete a first translation of the Bible into Malagasy. Now, in Antananarivo, they preach and teach entirely in the language of Imerina, and have laid the foundation of a native Christian community that may have to weather the censure of the new monarch.

But Jones’ health, never strong, continues to decline, and recently he has left an increasing share of the work of the mission in Griffiths’ hands. Jones spends much of his time in his garden, and today Ani meets him for the first time. Where Griffiths’ speech is plain, down to earth, Ani hears in Jones’ words the refinement of an orator. Ani thinks he must be an inspired preacher, and wonders if Jones has studied the Malagasy art of speech-making, *kabaray*.

Neither Jones nor Griffiths speaks now. Four Malagasy sit with Ani and the two missionaries: an elder, whom everyone calls by the honorific *dadá*, and three younger men, all students at the missionary school and members of Griffiths’ mission. The younger men adopted Christian names when they were baptized: Paul, Peter, and David. Peter and David are finely made, of noble blood with thin noses and straight black hair, but Paul is of rough peasant stock. His wide nose squats above an overbite half-emptied of crooked teeth. Out of respect, the young men leave the story-telling to the elder, who repeats himself, bemused. “Ratiandrazana promised the Ikelimalaza would take vengeance upon us for refusing his blessing. In the end, I was grateful for the blessing of our Lord God.”
David Griffiths smiles at the old man. “Certainly the Lord was watching over you, to deliver you and all our brothers in faith.” With a metal ladle Rasalama pours hot rice-water into Griffiths’ wooden cup. She lingers over the pouring, and both Ani and Griffiths notice that she is listening intently to the conversation. Griffiths touches her wrist lightly, father to adopted daughter, and thanks her for the tea. “Pour a cup for yourself and join us, Rasalama. These men have a story that will strengthen our wavering faith.” He speaks light-heartedly, reminding Rasalama of her lapse when Mrs. Griffiths was sick with malaria, when she begged the minister to call on the local witchdoctor. Of course it is a reminder to the minister himself as well, and once again Ani’s respect for this humble man grows.

Rasalama smiles shyly, but sits on the floor on the northwest corner of the room, her knees drawn up to her chest. The elder continues his retelling of the battle: how the general Ratiandrazana placed the Christians at the front of the line, thinking they would all be killed in the fighting. In a long, eloquent speech he describes the harrowing cliff face, the four-hundred-foot precipice over which two thousand of Ratiandrazana’s men were pushed by their own people. He describes the dreadful booming of the cannons, as if the mountain itself had risen up in anger and was spitting deadly iron at their enemies. Ani remembers a cavalry charge he once faced outside the walls of Damascus, how the earth shuddered beneath his feet. Ani, planted before an advancing wall of thunder and smoke as five thousand horses and armored men hurtled themselves toward vengeance and glory. The pounding of horses’ hooves, the booming of cannon fire, the drums of war.

Ani coughs once to clear his lungs of the memory, and brings his attention back to the story of Ikongo. When the old man finishes the tale, the peasant Paul quotes from the Bible, Luke 4:29, describing how the people of the synagogue in Nazareth rejected Christ’s teaching: “They got up, drove Him out of the town, and took Him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw Him off the cliff. But He walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”
Paul regards the ministers Griffiths and Jones, the young man’s course features luminous and serene. “I swear to you, Father, I walked right through the crowd. It was chaos. Men shoving each other and screaming and falling and never getting up again. But I was calm. I felt God’s hand on my shoulder, guiding me. In all that chaos, I passed through the midst of them and went on my way.” Paul looks down shyly, and Ani knows his look. Paul is afraid that if he believes to strongly in his deliverance, it will be taken away from him. The simple peasant is basking in the happiness of being alive.

From the corner, Rasalama whispers, “It was a miracle.” Seven heads turn to look at her and Ani sees her awestruck. She gazes at Paul, already half in love either with him or with his god, perhaps both wrapped up in the same thick body. Rasalama’s eyes meet Paul's for an instant before they both look down, embarrassed. Identical smiles appear on Jones’ and Griffiths’ faces: small smiles, knowing smiles of fathers who are happy for their children.

But responding to Rasalama, Griffiths downplays the idea of divine involvement. He points out that two thousand men survived the debacle, most of whom weren’t Christians. He gently reminds his guests that God works in mysterious ways, and that we cannot know His intentions. Ani is gratified to see that while both Griffiths and Jones celebrate the Christians’ success, they also understand the danger. Jones especially is bothered by Rasalama’s suggestion of a miracle. Ani knows, and he sees that Griffiths and Jones know, too, that the sword of Damocles hangs over the Christian mission in Imerina. Now is not the time for the Christians to show their strength. Ranavalona’s claim to the throne rests on the support of certain key nobles—very conservative nobles—who preach that she was chosen by the ancestors to rule. The Christians, by rejecting Imerina’s ancestral beliefs, already pose a threat to Ranavalona’s still-nascent throne. Now is the time for the Christians to lie low, to disappear into the woodwork, as any ostentatious show of strength could be met with swift and heavy sanctions.

One hundred percent of the Christian soldiers survived the Ikongo battle, compared with only
fifty percent of the rest of the army. Add to this Ratiandrazana’s very public denouncement of the Christians at the blessing by the idol, plus his placing them at the front of the battle line, and the Christians’ success at Ikongo suddenly looks like an ostentatious show of strength. The city whispers of the power of the Christian god who protected his followers so ably. Ani expects Griffiths’ sermon to be well-attended on Sunday, a circumstance that normally would warm the minister’s heart but now will stain it with dread.

The men talk for a while more about the battle, recounting scenes of terror and deliverance, and when the Merina stand up to leave Ani moves with them. But Jones touches his arm. He says, “I understand the queen has decided to throw you a banquet.”

Ani looks at the ceiling and closes his eye momentarily, asking his own gods for patience. Indeed, the queen informed him two weeks ago by messenger that, as promised, this Tuesday a grand fête would be held at the palace in the executioner’s honor. Ani is intensely conflicted about the affair: he is gratified that his political standing will be raised, but he is... not uncomfortable, exactly, but certainly unused to sitting at the head table. He is looking forward to watching the political maneuverings of the court, however. And he wonders how much verbal and political dancing will be required of him.

To Jones he turns a well-crafted but obviously artificial expression of gratitude. “The queen does me a great honor,” he says.

Jones smiles knowingly at Ani’s expression. “I’m looking forward to seeing you there,” he says.

“And I you.” Ani bids a formal goodbye to Griffiths and Jones, leaving them to what he imagines will be an intense discussion of political strategy.

From the minister’s house Ani descends the hill which Antananarivo decorates and walks into the valley below. The way is easier now in the middle of the dry season, and he follows the main road
for two miles to Todisoa’s village. Along the roadside native *goaka* crows peck in the tawny, stubbled rice fields. The crows looks like priests with their all-black bodies and a collar and breast of pure white, but selfish of their meal they scream at Ani harshly as he passes by. When Ani arrives at the village he crosses the defensive trench—twenty feet wide and twenty feet deep, planted along the damp bottom with banana and guava trees, manioc and arum. Beyond the fosse a wall made of stones stacked five feet high circles the village. Two vertical stone slabs stand in the wall as a gateway, open now during the day, but closed at night by rolling a huge round stone across the opening.

Ani finds the earthen house where Todisoa lives with his wife and eight sons. Ani carries six eggs in a small basket filled with straw—eggs his chickens laid last night and were collected this morning by one of his Merina servants. He pays his servants well, but it is fear as much as loyalty that keeps them honest—fear of his vocation, of his practiced ease with death. Ani is also able to protect them from some of the crown’s more burdensome requirements, such as military conscription and the *fanampoaana* labor tax. His servants work well, lest they be dismissed. The woman who packed the eggs was careful about it.

He finds Todisoa outside his house, sitting in the courtyard under a fig tree with his wife, watching his two new slave girls pound rice in a huge mortar, hulling the grains. They use wooden pestles that are almost as tall as they are. The two girls alternate their up and down strokes like pistons in a steam engine, their lower backs arching as they lift the heavy pestle then straightening as they drive the wood into the mortar and rub the hulls off the rice grains. *Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump.*

Ani presents the eggs to Todisoa’s wife, who stands to receive them and thank him. While she’s up, she reaches for a *sahafa*, a round woven pan about a foot and a half in diameter. She stops the two slave girls and gathers rice from the mortar, then steps back under the fig tree while the girls refill the
mortar with unhulled rice and continue their work. Todisoa’s wife expertly tosses the rice up and in, and while it’s airborne the breeze puffs away the rice hulls. Her tosses are rhythmic and practiced, and the shusshing rain of rice falling into place measures the slow time of village life. When the hulls are blown away, she tosses the sahafa with a different flick of her wrist, and the small rocks mixed in with the rice collect at the bottom of the pan while the rice piles up on the sides. With nimble fingers she plucks the rocks from the rice and flicks them to the ground.

Ani and Todisoa sit together under the fig tree and watch as the women work for tomorrow’s food. Todisoa extracts from his girdle his snuff-box—a length of hollow reed six inches long and half an inch in diameter. The outside is polished like satin and decorated with an angular, repetitive design burned into it with a hot needle. Todisoa withdraws the small, tasseled cork, and pours a bit of snuff into his palm. With a dexterous jerk his deposits the tabacco mixture between his lower lip and gum, then offers the box to Ani, who declines. Ani smells salt and the burnt ash of sage and cinnamon mixed in with the dried tobacco.

Ani asks Todisoa, referring to the slave girls, “Spoils from the raids?”

Todisoa grunts in acknowledgment, looking over at his wife. “They’re good girls, mostly, although sometimes Mama ny’Raveny must beat them for being lazy. Still, she says, managing slaves is easier work than cooking and cleaning.”

“Mmmm,” says Ani, noncommittal. Ani has owned slaves in the past, although he doesn’t now and privately supports the abolitionist movements sweeping through Europe. He’s surprised at how successful the movement has been—slavery abolished throughout the British Empire in 1807, and in France and all its possessions in 1794. Napoleon reintroduced it on sugar plantations, including the Island of Bourbon, in 1802, but it’s still officially illegal in the home country.
There is still much legal, semi-legal, and illegal trading that occurs in Africa, both on the east coast for the Indian Ocean markets and Arabia, and on the west coast for the American market. Slavery has been with humanity since the beginning of history, and Ani is skeptical that it will ever be fully abolished. On the Island of Madagascar, slavery is an integral part of the economy and well-established in all of the tribal cultures. But Britain seems serious about enforcing her laws, committing naval resources to patrolling the well-established trade routes. The 1817 treaty that Radama signed with the British government prohibited slave exports from Imerina. Ranavalona seems likely to set aside that treaty, but history has surprised Ani before.

But Ani wants to know about the battle at Ikongo. He watches Todisoa’s wife toss the sahafa and asks the farmer, “How did you survive?”

Todisoa rounds his shoulders and with his elbows pressing into his knees drops his head almost to his chest. He sits like that for a long time sucking on the wad of tobacco in his lower lip. Finally he spits, a dark brown glob that lands wet and heavy and makes a small crater in the dust at his feet. He says flatly, “I hid under a cannon.” He watches without seeing as the wet glob dissolves into the red earth, and Ani is sorry he asked. He has seen men like this before—men returned from battle alive and healthy but still somehow broken. Men who come home with snakes in their bellies. Some days the snakes lie quiet, some days they are constantly writhing, devouring the man’s flesh from the inside. Some days they reach up into his neck and close his throat with their fangs so he can neither speak nor breathe.

Todisoa will never again voluntarily shake a spear at another man. He thrusts his chin roughly at the two slave girls and says, “They’re enough. I’m not a greedy man.” He looks pointedly at his wife when he says this.
His wife answers him, quoting in formal language from a source Ani doesn’t recognize: “‘Your slaves are both a legacy and possession. They are like six hundred measure of rice stored in a granary. They are like jewels passed down to us by the ancestors, like a thick lamba that protects us against the cold and frost. In hot weather, they are like a velvet bed upon which one enjoys tranquility. They are an adornment and a source of pride.’” She looks at Ani. “This is what the great Andrianampoinimerina said about slaves.”

Todisoa speaks to her harshly: “Enough!” Todisoa’s wife narrows her eyes at him, her anger matching his, but she drops it and Ani is glad not to be involved in their quarrel.

Two hens and their peeping chicks come pecking at the rice hulls piling up on the ground. Above Ani in the fig tree a family of lemurs naps and feeds on leaves and flowers. They call to each other in melodic gurgles, the matriarch chatting with her infant and the three males that travel with her. Two lizards, as green as emeralds and shimmering in the sun, cling to the wall of Todisoa’s hut, dancing a mating ritual. Village children play with improvised toys in the swept dirt around the huts: rocks and sticks tied with raffia string, desiccated fruit, animal bones. They chase and kick at a mangy, skeletal dog. One child shoots his sling with expert accuracy and hits the dog in the rump. He laughs as the dog runs away, whining. And then, as if some signal had been given, the children gather into a large group near the fig tree, laughing and jostling each other with their miniature rivalries.

One of the boys searches and finds a small stone in the red dirt. The boy turns his back on the rest of the children so that he faces the fig tree, and Ani sees him hide the pebble in his palm under the ring finger of his left hand. He then turns back to the children and, holding out his two closed fists, tells each of them to choose. The fourth girl chooses the finger with the pebble, it drops to the ground and in an instant all the children are screaming and running away to one of the many large stones scattered
through the village. The girl chases after one of the boys and catches him before he reaches the safety of
the stone, and the boy lies down as if he were dead.

Todisoa chuckles, watching the children play. “That one has leprosy now,” he says, referring to
the boy lying on the ground. The rest of the children gather together again, laughing and in high spirits,
and now it’s the girl’s turn to hide the stone. Screaming and chasing, and another child on the ground.
Todisoa tells Ani the game is called *kibokaboka*, because *boka* is the word for leper. When all the
children have been caught and are pretending to leprosy, they spit and yell, “Poà! I am not a leper!”
And with a great cacophony of cheering and laughing and screaming, the game begins again.

Ani notices that the thumping of the mortar and pestle has stopped, and he turns to look at the
two slave girls. They are about the same age as the older village children, and the two of them watch the
game silently, holding their pestles unnoticed. In their eyes Ani sees a past in Mahasoabe—their own
running, their own laughing, their own friends. Todisoa turns his head to see what Ani is looking at, and
he yells at the girls harshly: “Oy! Get back to work! We don’t feed you for just standing there!” He
makes as if to get up and hit the girls, and they hastily drop their eyes, pick up their pestles and the
thumping begins again. Ani sees droplets fall from the younger one’s face, and though Ani has a strong
stomach, he thinks there will be too much salt in tomorrow’s rice.

Todisoa sits back down and asks Ani about the court gossip, about what he’s missed while he
was away. Todisoa doesn’t really care about what goes on at court, but he likes to seem important to his
fellow villagers, all of whom are secretly watching and listening through the thin walls of the village
huts. Ani tells him that Ranavalona was as good as her word, and ordered both Andriamihaja and
Ratiandrazana beaten for their impudence at the idol blessing. Ratiandrazana sent a slave to take the
beating in his stead, then left on campaign. He returned just last night with the main body of troops.
Andriamihaja bragged publicly and often about how he could take a beating and Ratiandrazana couldn’t,
and that he would stand for his own. Ani tells Todisoa that secretly Andriamihaja thought the queen was bluffing. She wasn’t, and now relations between the two of them are strained.

One of Todisoa’s sons approaches the fig tree as the shadows grow fat. He carries a bird dangling from one hand, his sling in the other. He tells his father that he shot this XXXX in the rice fields pecking at last season’s stubble. Todisoa is pleased and proud—they will eat meat tonight, however stringy, greasy, and mostly bones, and one more nuisance bird has been killed. Todisoa’s wife takes the bird from her son and disappears into the cooking hut to pluck, clean and cook it. Todisoa’s son sits down under the fig tree with Ani and his father, and Todisoa again withdraws his snuff box and this time offers it to his son.

The Merina are not in the habit of expressing fondness for their children lest the ancestors become jealous and take the children away. So Ani is surprised at this gesture of Todisoa’s. Todisoa reads Ani’s face and says, “Do you know what I want? I want several wives, numerous offspring, a mountain of wealth, and a large and handsome tomb. These are the things that I want out of this life.”

Ani says, “You already have some of these things, and many years to gather the rest.”

Todisoa muses. “You are like the queen, you know. Neither of you have children of your own.” Todisoa says this as if it were the saddest thing in the world, and Ani sees that the farmer Todisoa genuinely pities the queen. “Who will remember you when you turn your back on the world? Who will honor you after you are gone?”

Ani says, “Ranavalona’s heir is her nephew, the Prince Ramboasalama.”

Todisoa answers, “A nephew is not as good as a son.”

Ani laughs. “And one son is not as good as eight.” The son sitting next to Ani offers him the snuff box before he takes a pinch for himself. He is not as dexterous with the snuff as his father but he
manages, and for a while the three men sit sucking on tobacco and watching the children play, saying nothing into the rhythmic \textit{thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump} from behind them.

Thirty-five miles to the south of Saint-Denis, the capital of the Island of Bourbon, the volcano Piton de la Fournaise slumbers uneasily. It has erupted forty-eight times since the French claimed the island in 1642, when Jacques Pronis of France deported a dozen French mutineers to the island from Madagascar. In 1793, when Louis XVI of the House of Bourbon lost his head to La Guillotine, the Island of Bourbon was renamed “Réunion,” then in 1801 renamed again “Île Bonaparte.” In 1810 the British took the island from France in their war against the very same Emperor, and out of spite or ignorance the island under British rule reverted to its old dynastic name. In 1815 the Congress of Vienna restored the island to French suzerainty, but the original name, despite calling forth images of hand-holding twins—wisdom and foolishness, belief and incredulity, light and dark, hope and despair—the original name remains. The Island of Bourbon was born from violence—geologic violence and political violence—and the rumblings of both the earth and its kings still shake the island to this day.

In Saint-Denis, thirty-five miles to the north of the Piton de la Fournaise, this day is much like every other day on the Island of Bourbon. The sun smiles on the feathered leaves of palm trees while their shadows wave across white sand beaches. Water the color of the sky teems with sea urchins, conger eels, parrot fish, sea turtles and dolphins, while a sky the color of the limpid, placid sea sighs sweet nothings into the sails of the ships in the harbor. Out past the coral reefs, a pod of humpback whales exhale arcs of white meringue that dance in the sunlight—fountains whose grace and power no architect could ever hope to match. Achille Guy Marie de Penfentenio, Comte de Cheffontaines, Governor of the Island of Bourbon thinks sometimes that it’s all too much. A ridiculous paradise that also hosts slave revolts, malaria, and a cyclone season that regularly flattens fat swaths of the jungle. He
imagines sometimes Heaven and Hell holding hands and frolicking across the belly of this Island of Bourbon.

Bobbing among the other ships in the harbor is the dispatch *Colibri*, arrived this morning with her captain Jean Baptiste Marie Augustin Gourbeyre. Now Penfentenio and Gourbeyre sit in Penfentenio’s open-air office and enjoy bread that is fresh and wine and cheese that are not. Gourbeyre brings news to Penfentenio about the political situation in Paris. It’s not good, he says. In March, the Chamber of Deputies passed a no-confidence vote against the king and Polignac’s ministry. In response, King Charles X of the restored House of Bourbon dissolved parliament and delayed elections for two months while he tried to shore up support in the provinces. He failed. The election held two months ago returned an overwhelming defeat for the government. Now, Gourbeyre says, there is talk of a censorship law, and the king is threatening to dissolve again the newly-elected Chamber of Deputies. Gourbeyre’s news is almost a month old, and as far as he knows the hereditary monarchy may already have been dispatched. Again. Both men are old enough to remember La Guillotine, the rivers of blood like wine on the cobbled streets of Paris, and the spectre of political upheaval brings with it a special terror, a black choking in the bowls that is the inheritance of all Frenchmen of their generation.

Penfentenio, for his part, talks of the recent news from Madagascar. He tells Gourbeyre of the action at Ikongo. Penfentenio and Gourbeyre have been watching the situation in Madagascar for several years, and they agree that a permanent French settlement on the island is crucial to French interests. Commerce with the Merina has become increasingly difficult since Radama died almost two years ago. Some argue that Ranavalona’s inclination to autarky merely follows the direction Radama set before he died, but the sugar plantations on the Island of Bourbon are dependent on supplies from Madagascar, and the uncertainty the new queen brings to French trade is dangerous. And it’s not just the French—the queen’s attitude toward all Europeans vacillates between xenophobia, indifference, and pragmatic
acceptance. Letters from her secretaries contradict each other, and she’ll reverse her own instructions two or three or four times in a matter of days or weeks. No one knows what she’s going to do about Radama’s 1820 treaty with the British, not even Penefentenio’s British counterpart on the Island of Mauritius, Governor Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Colville.

Gourbeyre asks Penfenentio, “You’re in contact with Colville?”

Penfenentio answers, “Informally. The usual channels.” By which he means spies and informants and neutral third-parties, usually merchants, who act as unofficial go-betweens and message carriers. Both Penfenentio and Colville fought in the Napoleonic wars, and even though there’s been a nominal peace between Britain and France for fifteen years, still, proprieties must be observed.

“Colville’s orders from London are to wait and see what she does. In the meantime, he makes preparations—I’m not sure of all the details—but he won’t jeopardize the chance that she might honor the treaty.”

Gourbeyre slices another hunk of cheese, sour and soft. He says, “She’s weak.”

Penfenentio nods. “Yes. They’re a barbarous people ruled by the king with the strongest army. She won’t hold on to her power for much longer.”

“And what will happen when she is deposed?” Gourbeyre chews in silence for a moment, then says, “Charles wants to build an empire and rule it in truth and not just in name. He wants the old ways back—aristocracy, divine right of kings, everything.”

Penfenentio whistles. “He’s a fool. God save him.”

Gourbeyre crosses himself and says, “God save us all. But…” He pauses, letting their talk settle a moment. “I’m to wait here for orders from Paris. They should arrive within the week.” He looks to the harbor and inventories the ships that bob in the smiling sun. Four merchantmen that don’t interest him and two French warships—the Chevrette and the Infatigable—in addition to his dispatch the Calibre.
Gourbeyre knows of at least two other frigates within two day’s sail, one of which, the *Terpischore*, mounts sixty guns and will transport a landing party of five hundred men. Gourbeyre’s little dispatch the *Calibre* could gather those ships and have them in the harbor at Sant-Denis in less than a week. The garrison at Tintingue is four hundred strong, and if Gourbeyre is very lucky, Paris might send soldiers with his orders. Gourbeyre looks at Penfentenio. “If those orders say what I think they will say, this is our chance.”

Penfentenio never met Radama, nor the previous governor of Mauritius Robert Townsend Farquhar, nor his errand boy James Hastie. But Penfentenio believes in learning the language of one’s enemy, and he has used his time on the constantly rumbling Island of Bourbon to study the history of the treaty that Radama and Farquhar and Hastie fashioned. The situation on Bourbon is not very different from the situation on Mauritius, and Penfentenio also believes in learning from the past. He has copies of letters, copies of reports, copies of the treaty itself, both in its original 1817 form and its renewed 1820 version. He remembers part of a report Farquhar commissioned when he first became governor of Mauritius, and he quotes it now to Gourbeyre, translating to French on the fly: “Can it be hoped that the chiefs and the inhabitants will submit of their own free will to the English? This cannot be hoped for. If a single monarch were in authority over the whole extent of the island, he might possibly be won over to yield his crown to the king and people of Great Britain.” Penfentenio pauses to make sure Gourbeyre follows his point. “The British chose the wrong monarch, but their idea was sound.”

Gourbeyre understands. He is a chess player, and he understands about endgames. He repeats what he said earlier: “And what will happen when she is deposed?”

Penfentenio nods. “Exactly.” He stands and retrieves another bottle of wine from a straw-filled case in the corner of his office. He uncorks it with a *pop*, careful not to agitate the sediment, and refills
both his and Gourbeyre’s crystal stemware. As he’s pouring, Gourbeyre says, “You have someone in mind.”

Penfentenio sits back down at the table and picks up his glass by its thin, fragile stem. He drinks deeply then sets his glass back down on the table. He leans on his elbows toward Gourbeyre, interlaces his fingers and says, “There’s a prince. A cousin of Radama’s. Ranavalona tried to have him killed when she took the throne, but he outsmarted her and escaped to the Comoros. He managed to take his three wives and most of his wealth with him, and now they call him the King of Mwali.”

Gourbeyre chuckles. “How did he manage that?”

Penfentenio says, “He’s clever. And he’s likable. The Merina respect him.”

Gourbeyre says, “And he has a legitimate claim to the throne.”

“More so than she does.”

“Would he be amenable?”

“Our agent Robin approached him about a year ago. Amenable? He’s positively enthusiastic. We’re keeping communication channels open.” Penfentenio leans back and smiles at Gourbeyre. “But we don’t yet have orders.”

Gourbeyre returns Penfentenio’s smile. He leans forward and pats Penfentenio fraternally on the cheek. “They’re coming, my friend.” The two men’s mouths curl identically upward—two old dogs ready for one last hunt. “Our orders are coming. And when they arrive, we will need to be ready.”
Antananarivo, 1829

Dressed in his best izaar and sandals, Alidy lifts his arms and his servant slips the thawb over his hands and head. The ankle-length tunic is newly made of the finest Egyptian cotton Alidy could find, and the neck and arms have been stiffened with potato starch in accordance with the formality of the occasion. Alidy called in his favor with the not-quite-Arab executioner, the one for whom he acquired chinchona bark for the minister’s wife’s malaria. Alidy has an invitation to the queen’s banquet tonight. The pure white of the thawb shines in the light slanting through the windows of his house in Tana. Around his waist he belts a long dagger in a silver sheath with an elaborately curved point.

His servant holds out for him his new bisht, the flowing cloak made of good raw silk from weavers in the Betsileo country, dyed midnight blue with expensive indigo imported from China. His trading partner’s concubine spent the last two weeks embroidering the bisht with traditional Islamic patterns, and now the dark cloak twinkles with silver thread. Alidy slips his hands through the arm holes, and shrugs the heavy cloak onto his shoulders. He reaches for his keffiyeh, also pure white and of the same exquisite cotton, and settles the rectangle of cloth on his head with his new agal, the black bands doubled-over and embellished with the same silver thread of his bisht. Dressed, he twirls in front of his servant to feel the drape of his clothes, and his servant nods his approval. Alidy will not embarrass himself this evening when he makes his presentation to the queen.

Alidy’s palanquin is waiting outside with four native bearers, all washed and wearing clean lambda. Next to his palanquin is another, fully curtained in layers of cheerfully-colored muslin that waft
in the breeze and hint at but do not reveal the prize hidden inside. Scrubbed and oiled, Alidy’s noble slave sits in the palanquin wearing only golden manacles around his wrists and a golden collar around his throat. Alidy has left him unnamed, another privilege for the queen. In the months since he arrived from Mahajunga, the slave has been cleaned, healed, fed, and taught the rudiments of the Imerina language. He learned obedience from Alidy himself, who knows punishments involving water that leave wounds on the psyche but not the body. The slave-prince is now disciplined, if not fully docile.

Alidy steps onto the flagstones of his inner courtyard and mounts his palanquin. He seals the curtains against the dust, and for the next twenty minutes rocks in his chair as his slaves bear him and his gift to the royal palace.

David Griffiths kneels in the small prayer room of his house. While he waits for David Jones to arrive, he prays to his god that the banquet goes smoothly. He, too, has washed and dressed in his finest starched shirt, double-breasted waistcoat, a sheer white cravat and gray trousers with a black stripe down the side. Rasalama shined his calf-skin shoes so his face reflects back at him in black. Griffiths doesn’t know quite what to make of this banquet. He doesn’t know quite what to make of Ani. Their interactions have always been polite, not exactly formal but conducted at a certain personal distance. Griffiths has a professional interest in the man—Ani seems to be moving inward through the queen’s circle of advisers, and Griffiths hopes that if he can turn Ani into an ally, he might have some sway with the queen over her decisions about the mission.

But Griffiths doesn’t know if Ani is an ally. He senses that Ani’s interest in the mission is also professional, although he doesn’t understand the goal of Ani’s attention. Griffiths hopes at the banquet tonight to elicit some minor, but public, show of favor from Ani. The idea of a banquet for the court executioner seems strange to Griffiths, and he wonders if there’s something more to the fête. Jones
thinks there isn’t—the eccentricities of this queen are becoming more pronounced by the day, and she may just be amusing herself. Nonetheless, Griffiths will be watching carefully, and will be on his guard. He kneels in front of the small cross hanging on his wall, his knees pressed into the woven tsihy mat, and prays that the banquet will go smoothly.

From the next room he hears Rasalama and Paul earnestly stumbling through their lessons, reading the Bible together. Griffiths and Jones have been working on a translation for four years, and they think it might finally be close to finished. He relies on his students to help with the translation work, smoothing the language, marrying the airy poetry of the New Testament with the earthbound verse of the Merina. Griffiths thinks, *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.* He speaks to the cross, “Na dia miteny amin'ny fitenin'ny olona sy ny anjely aza aho, kanefa tsy manana fitiavana, dia tonga varahina maneno sy kipantsona mikarantsana aho.” He smiles to himself. It has a good sound to it.

In the other room Rasalama speaks with the voice of an angel, her tongue sweet with love. Rasalama and Paul have been spending every afternoon together at the translation work. Griffiths chaperons so he can keep a watchful eye, and he thinks that Paul will ask Rasalama to marry him soon. If so, it will be the first Christian wedding in all of Madagascar. But Rasalama seems more in love with Christ than with Paul these days. Her faith fixed with the survival of the Christians at Ikongo, she has become one of Griffiths’ most ardent students. Soon she will be reading more skillfully than Paul. Griffiths listens to her voice through the thin wall, then focuses back on his cross to combat the violet pride spreading through his chest.

Griffiths quotes from Isaiah. “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.” Looking up at the bamboo cross hanging from a precious steel nail, he hears Jones call at the front door. Rasalama pads across the
tsihy mat to greet him, and Griffiths says his “amen”s. He stands on strong legs, the skin of his knees and shins indented with the criss-cross pattern of the tsihy weave, and prepares for the trip to the Rova.

Andriamihaja doesn’t know what to wear. He loves his coat with its gold-braided epaulets and gold chevrons sewn up the sleeves, his bicorn hat with its ruff of white lace and feathers spilling like wealth out of the top. Despite his still-healing back, he wants to wear a starched white shirt and trousers—European dress is what the court expects of him, except on the most solemn of state ceremonies. This banquet is not a solemn state ceremony, and another time he would have worn his fancy coat without giving it much thought. But now he stands in front of his mirror, remembering Ranavalona as she pulled off her chemise and stood naked before him, the bones of her spine sinuous as a snake. He remembers watching her back as he kneeled behind her on the bed, she undulating in time with his thrusts. Rhythm. He and she, the pulsing of their passions has always been in synch, even before she was queen.

It would be a kindness to her if he wore the scarlet lamba of the Merina nobility this evening. His slave stands behind him, holding the long rectangle of silk striped with the deep green of banana leaves, the silk edged with silver trim. But if he wears it, the court will read it as weakness. They will think he has accepted his chastisement by the queen, or worse, that he has been defeated by Ratiandrazana and the rest of the conservative faction. He refuses to acknowledge the public humiliation of his beating, couching it instead as a triumph of strength and honor. If he backs down now, his humiliation will be real.

But Andriamihaja is sensitive to the queen’s opinion of the vahaza. The queen watched for eleven years as the British agent James Hastie seduced and manipulated her husband, King Radama. She watched as the king cut his hair, polluted his culture, burned his soldiers, and bent to Hastie’s
wishes until sometimes it wasn’t clear who was the king and who the adviser. Radama forgot the lessons of his father—to be strong, and to respect the traditions of his people. Ranavalona will not not make the same mistakes: she will not abandon her ancestors and she will not be controlled. Andriamihaja knows her this well. Still, he has been slowly and gently wearing away at her xenophobia, and he thinks he may have won a small victory. It seems he has convinced her of the usefulness of reading and writing. She now supports the appointment of literati to serve as bureaucrats who will help manage the territories of Imerina. To this degree, the vahaza schools are useful. It’s not much, but it’s a start, and Andriamihaja can be patient.

And so standing in front of his mirror, Andriamihaja is inclined to wear his European-cut clothes and his bicorn hat. But his slave still waits behind him, holding the scarlet silk lamba edged with silver trim. The lamba was a gift from the queen, and wearing it will please her. He closes his eyes and remembers again the feel of her naked breast in his palm. He dons his trousers, his shirt, his waistcoat, his cravat, and the military jacket with the gold epaulets. He tilts his hat at a rakish angle. Then he takes the lamba from his servant and drapes it over his shoulders, adjusting it so that the folds hang loosely on his left side and reach almost to the ground. Thus attired, he calls for his palanquin.

Ratiandrazana washes his feet then steps with his right foot first into the small house at the crest of the hill in his hometown of Ambohimanambola. To the north and the south the hill falls away and the village houses are built on these gentle slopes. But the crest of the hill is bare except for this tiny house, barely tall enough for a man to stand up in, barely six feet square. The house is immaculately clean and perfectly maintained—no rotten spots stain the wooden walls and the rushes that thatch the roof are new and densely laid. Inside the little house even Ratiandrazana’s superb eyesight cannot penetrate the unnatural, mid-day dark, so he strikes flint against steel and lights a candle by feel alone. From the first
he lights four more in holders along the walls, and the little house brightens with the steady yellow flames.

The candles are made of beeswax, very expensive, and as they burn they release a thin trail of gray smoke. The ceiling beams are blackened from centuries of this candle smoke, and old cobwebs hang like curtains of soot from the rafters. When Ratiandrazana and his brother replace the roof every year, they are careful not to disturb these ancient, honorable layers of mainty molàly. The little house smells sweet and musty, of crumbling silk and tarnishing metal and moth cocoons. To Ratiandrazana, who has come to this place since he first became a man, the house smells of power and desire—power that is not his and desires that are. Only two other people can safely enter this house—his brother and his cousin, to whom the idol speaks in dreams—and it is here and only here that Ratiandrazana feels completely himself.

The house is empty except for the candles in their holders and the table that occupies the northeastern quarter. The table is covered in a scarlet silk lambda, and scattered across the table are trinkets and talismans—bones, sticks, stones, strings, feathers, fur, and scales. Ratiandrazana remembers the meanings of most of these things, but the significance of many have been lost over time. A silver cup holds a measure of rice from this year’s harvest. Tarnishing coins of copper, silver, and even a few of gold sparkle in the candlelight. And at the center of the table, layers of scarlet silk drape the idol itself, one lambda for every year until the most ancient crumble to dust.

Ratiandrazana places the small pouch he carries on the table, then very gently begins to remove the layers of silk that shelter the idol from blasphemous eyes. Ikelimalaza has guarded and blessed the royal family since the time of Andriamasinavalona, who reigned in Imerina before Andrianampoinimerina united the highland tribes. The idol commands the elements of the air—thunder, rain, and hail—and will protect a man from crocodiles if the proper offering is made. Ikelimalaza has
many powers, but Ratiandrazana is not here to ask for gifts or blessings. He is here to ask for forgiveness. With reverent hands he unwinds the silk that swaddles the idol’s corporal form, the innermost layers diaphanous as the cobwebs that hang from the rafters. He sets the silk gently aside, until the thing itself is finally revealed.

Ikelimalaza is not impressive to look upon. Three sticks of wood about eight inches long and an inch or two wide. Each stick irregularly carved, rounded and scalloped so it looks like a string of small stones. The sticks tied together by a cord through the center, then a loop in the cord from which the idol hangs. The wood shiny and mottled from centuries of smeared offerings: wax, charcoal, honey, sap, and toaka. Thus, only, is the form of Ratiandrazana’s god. But standing before it he stands in the presence of his father, and his father’s father, and his father’s father’s father before him—a line stretching back unbroken to the beginning of civilization. This house at this moment holds all of history; the past as present as the present moment; real, tangible, and compelling.

Ratiandrazana stands before his ancestors and knows that he has much to answer for. He opens the small pouch he brought with him and withdraws a heavy silver coin. Hasina first. He lays it with the other coins on the table. From the pouch he also takes a small ceramic jar, and when he pulls the wide cork the small space fills with the sweet smell of honey gathered from the flowers of virgin forest. He smears the honey on the wooden body of the idol and addresses his ancestors.

Ratiandrazana apologizes. He says he is sorry that he allowed the barbarian vahaza to be present on the plain of Adohalo. He says he regrets his stupidity, and promises that he will work hard to remove their pollution from the land. Ratiandrazana tells his ancestors how grateful he is for the land—for the rice fields that they cleared and cultivated and cared for so that he and his progeny could live like civilized men. He is grateful for the house in which he was born and in which he now raises his children. And he is grateful for the tomb where he will finally rest his bones when it comes his time to join them.
All these things his ancestors have given him, and he begs them to understand that it was out of
ignorance, not disrespect, that he angered them.

Ratiandrazana smears the last of the honey onto the idol, then bows his head in humility and
touches his forehead to the wood. He begs the ancestors’ forgiveness, and says to his parents that he will
make them proud. Ratiandrazana does not fear death. He does not fear the queen, and he does not fear
the vahaza or their treaties or their guns. What Ratiandrazana fears is a fading—he is afraid that
someday no one will come here to speak to the ancestors. That no one will dream to give them voice.
That the people of Imerina will lose their humility, will lose their gratitude, will lose their culture and
their civilization and then lose themselves in an unmoored present with no past and no future.
Ratiandrazana fears that the ancestors will fade to transparency then be gone, and everything will be
lost.

Ratiandrazana stands before his idol and swears that he will rid Imerina of the foreign corruption
and uphold the taboos of his ancestors. It is an oath he has made before, and now he renews his vow. It
may be his last chance, for the queen may send him to his ancestors soon. Ratiandrazana hopes that this
is not the case, because even though he does not fear death, still he loves his life, and he has much work
to do.

When he had done what he came to do, and said what he came to say, Ratiandrazana carefully
replaces the silken shrouds. He gathers his things into his pouch, then blows out the candles in the wall.
He opens the door and steps blinking into the sun. He wraps his scarlet lamba around him and descends
the hill on the road to Antananarivo, the banquet, and the waiting queen.
CHAPTER 15

...In which a banquet is held to honor the court executioner, and news is received about the French

Antananarivo, 1829

Ani stands to the left of the throne in the large main hall of the Tranovola. He stands alone, towering above the chair like a taloned bird perched in a tree, watching. The dark scarlet velvet of the empty throne absorbs the light from the oil lamps, so it governs from a shadow of its own creation. Attached to the shadow, Ani watches banquet guests arrive in groups of two or three or six or eight. Thirty people now congregate in small flocks around the room, and a valiha player fills the space with the twangy, lilting music of strings stretched across a bamboo frame. Ratiandrazana, his brother Rainiharo, and their good friend Andriamamba stand with two other conservative nobles and three army generals in the south side of the room—as far away from the throne as they can be.

This banquet will be Ratiandrazana’s first audience with the queen since his army was defeated at Ikongo. A large empty space surrounds his small group like a moat as the rest of the banquet guests avoid the disgraced general. Nonetheless, heads turn their way as people speculate about what the queen will do to Ratiandrazana. More than one general has suffocated in smoke as flames sizzled the skin of his feet and legs. Ani wonders if he will have to kill Ratiandrazana: take his story then chain him above oil-soaked faggots and dip the torch into the pile of wood. Consensus in the court, the lobbying of the liberal faction notwithstanding, is that the queen cannot afford to have him killed. She needs the support of the conservative faction of which Ratiandrazana and Andriamamaba are the leaders. If they withdraw their support she could lose her throne and possibly her life. Still, the liberal faction lobbies.
At this moment, an absurdly overdressed Andriamihaja stands with a group of the young liberal faction as they talk in animated voices with the court’s highest judge. Andriamihaja still holds himself stiffly, and he does not himself speak though the judge often glances at him while the younger men argue their point. Andriamihaja and the judge maintain similar masks of neutrality through the conversation; Ani can guess what they’re talking about even though he cannot hear them clearly. Andriamihaja’s young men want Ratiandrazana to burn.

The walls of the great hall, covered in metallic paper swirling with baroque flocking, reflect the light from the oil lamps. The room smells of salt and beef fat and nutty cooked rice, the glossy skin of well-fed people. The throne sits in its shadow in the back of the hall. Five long tables form a U at the front of the hall creating a small open forum before them. The tables are set with French linen, English china, and Hungarian crystal. Servants flow unobstructed through the space, and everyone waits for the queen to arrive.

Ani sees the Arab trader, Alidy, arrive at the hall. He is accompanied by two servants who follow slightly behind him. Many of the nobles register his entrance, their faces moving identically from surprise to puzzlement, followed by a slight turning of the body away from the Arab trader. Alidy is not a fool; he knows he is out of his element, and wanders slowly through the hall admiring the silver ornaments, the elaborate Louis XV furniture, the paintings of naval battles and Chinese landscapes and old European cities. Alidy feels Ani watching him, and turns toward the throne. The two men’s eyes meet, Alidy bows slightly, Ani returns the bow, and the Arab turns back to the Rembrandt Peale portrait he was admiring, of George Washington mounted on a white horse. The horse is stepping fiercely sideways, away from the fire and smoke darkening the background. Washington himself looks tired after forging a sort of resigned peace.
Ani hears clapping and singing outside the Tranovola announcing the approach of the monarch, and he notices that the missionaries have not yet arrived. He moves away from the throne, follows the east wall from the back of the room to the front, and places himself within easy distance of the west door and the head table. He will sit to the queen’s right this evening. The hub-bub in the hall gradually dies as the queen’s entourage approaches from the west, and the hall is quiet when the doors are thrown open, the queen’s guard enters, then her ladies, and finally the queen herself. She wears a satin gown of mustard yellow slashed with green velvet trim, and she enters alone as the entire hall bows to her. With light-hearted ceremony she calls, “Where is my executioner!” Her secretary indicates with a small wave of his hand in Ani’s direction, and the queen flounces over to Ani. He bows, and the queen says, “You’re a good killer of criminals!” The entire hall laughs; Ani smiles indulgently. She takes Ani’s proffered arm and he leads her to the central seat of the head table.

The food is surprisingly modest. Servants lay banana leaves on the fine translucent china, then ladle mountains of rice on the leaves. Huge tureens of beef stew stand on curved feet, ladles hooked to the edge like tongues. Bottles of French wine, *betsibetsy*, *toaka*, whiskey, and Arabian beer slosh around the tables. People drink more than they eat. Ani serves the queen, spooning beef and carrots and onions over her rice, which she scoops up with a gold-plated spoon and a gusto that would make the British court cringe. She has seated Andriamihaja to her left and spends the first part of the meal flirting with him. When she leans in to speak to her lover, Ani pretends not to see that underneath the table her hand moves up his thigh to his crotch. He smiles in satisfaction and the queen smiles teasing in response.

Not long into the meal, a servant appears behind the queen, leans over and whispers that the missionaries have arrived and are begging entrance to the hall. The queen tells him that they are late, and therefore cannot be admitted. She tells the servant to send her regrets. When the servant leaves, she leans over and giggles at Ani, “I told my guard to practice in their neighborhood this afternoon, to delay them.
It was Andriamihaja’s idea. Who wants somber gray doves at a party?” Ani laughs at the trick—a neat way to avoid the problem of the *vahaza*. Invite them, but then make sure they don’t attend.

Banquet guests stand to make *kabary* in praise of the queen and her new executioner. Ani and the queen both receive the praise with practiced grace. Ani has been preparing his own speech all week, thinking about the best way to praise the queen in this culture of speechmakers and storytellers. Then, at the time when it is appropriate for the guest of honor to speak, he stands and begins his own *kabary*.

“Where I come from, a great river floods every year and leaves the land fertile. Long ago my people believed that the river created an underworld, and when a man died he traveled through the underworld during the twelve hours of the night to be reborn at dawn. But he would only be reborn if he was a good man. A monster lived in the underworld, the god of chaos called Apophis, whose mortal enemy was the goddess Ma’at. Ma’at gives us order and justice and law, and in her eternal battle with Apophis keeps the world from spiraling into chaos.

“My people believed that Ma’at had servants who walk this earth, working for justice in the world. I met a man once who claimed to be a servant of Ma’at. He said he fought his way through the underworld, battling Apophis through a desert, across an ocean, and underneath a lake of fire. He could not kill Apophis—who can kill chaos?—but he subdued the great beast, and finally arrived at the place where his heart would be judged. This is the story he told me:

“‘I limped into the Hall of Judgment. My linen skirt was shredded and stained with blood both mine and the enemy’s. The skin on my forearm bubbled red and black, acid burns and lacerations covered my torso, my back, and my legs. My right wrist was broken, and a blue glass scarab beetle pulsed, embedded in the center of my chest. I stank of adrenaline, endorphins, and roasted monster snake. Thus did I approach my gods.”
“The Hall was crowded, but I saw only three figures: Anubis, the jackal-headed god standing in front of a set of scales. The jackal held a single white ibis feather—the feather of Ma’at, of justice and truth. Baboon Thoth stood behind the scales, stylus and papyrus in his hands, ready to record the outcome of my trial. Between them crouched the monster Amenti with the jaws of a crocodile, the torso of a leopard, and the hindquarters of a hippo. Amenti’s fangs dripped saliva into a pool on the stone floor, hoping I would fail the test so he could devour my soul.

“Amenti growled as I approached the scales, chanting:

O my heart of my mother, o my heart of my mother,
O my heart of my coming into being,
May you not gainsay me in my righteousness,
Turn not against me before the Guardian of the Scales,
Let me rise as one in triumph.

“I stood before the scales. Anubis watched me with jackal eyes. With my good left arm, I tore the scarab from my chest and let it shatter against the floor. Still chanting, I reached into my ribcage and pulled out my own beating heart. Anubis placed the feather on one pan of the scale. I placed my heart on the other.

“Around the Hall of Judgment, the gods stood with Ma’at as witness: the sun-gods Amun-Ra, Mut and Khonshu, the gods of the underworld Osirus, Isis, Horus, and Seth, his wife Nephthys, Atum the creator, Geb of the earth, fertile Hathor and Min, the warriors Montu and Neith, crocodile Sobeck, learned Sokar, and the goddess of the night, Nut, who swallows the sun every evening and births it again every morning. With them Ma’at watched as the scales holding her feather and my own heart dipped and rose, dipped and rose. Amenti growled, and strained at his chains.

“Anubis stood back so none would say he influenced the trial. When the scales come to rest, the two pans were perfectly balanced. Thoth scratched with his stylus, and Amenti howled in disappointment.”
Ani’s eyes are closed. He has forgotten the banquet, forgotten the queen, forgotten the Madagascar of 1829 as he loses himself in memory. The hall around him is silent, and it is the smell of beef fat and rice that brings him back to the present moment. He opens his eyes and looks around the room at the assembled guests. “The man told me that he collapsed onto the stone floor, and when he woke up, he was once again in the land of the living. Understanding only the what, but not the how, he swore himself to the service of Ma’at and her virtues of justice, order, and law.”

Ani pauses, to let the story settle on his audience and soak in, like a fine mist of rain. He looks down at the queen seated in front of her goblet full of wine, and smiles as if to acknowledge the weirdness of his words. He says, “Of course, this is just a story. The Merina are an enlightened people, and don’t believe in a great river of the dead. But the man did dedicate his life to the pursuit of justice, and so the story is true in at least that way.

“The great Queen Ranavalona is like the man in the story. She has fought her way through a kind of underworld, battling chaos until she finally arrived at the place where her heart would be judged, where the ancestors decide if she is worthy to rule. And you can see for yourselves what they decided, for she sits here before you, Queen of the Merina. For her people, Queen Ranavalona ripped her own beating heart out of her chest and placed it on the scales of justice, and the ancestors saw that she was pure. And now she rules as an avatar of order and justice in Imerina. How lucky are we, the subjects of Queen Ranavalona!”

The hall erupts into cheers. Andriamihaja recognizes a show moment when he’s in one, and as Ani seats himself the nobleman stands and yells, “All hail Queen Ranavalona!” The guests stand and yell “All hail Queen Ranavalona!” And for fifteen minutes there’s yelling and stamping of feet and clapping of hands and drinking of cups.
Underneath the tumult, Ranavalona leans over and speaks to Ani so only he can hear. She says, “I liked your story.”

Ani answers, “It is my pleasure to please Your Majesty.”

She says, “Your ancestors’ customs are strange to me. And you have strange gods, like animals. That part about tearing out my own beating heart…” She shudders. “But,” she says, “all people have their own laws and customs.”

“No,” says Ani. He is thinking about what to say, next—something about the universal nature of justice, about the rights every member of a civilized society possesses intrinsically. About the ideas of John Locke and John Stewart Mill and the fathers of America, who built a new kind of government based on the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The ideas with which the French are currently struggling, with which the English struggled until the matter was finally settled, more or less, by the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The ideas that Ani himself struggled with, until finally he didn’t—until finally he saw that death is the great equalizer. That no matter one’s station in life, at the moment of death every person is naked and alone and a king is the same as a peasant when he goes to meet his gods. And from this equality in death Ani has deduced an equality in life. Ani knows that every person—every man, every woman, every Frenchman, Englishman, Merina, and Sakalava, every king, peasant, worker, preacher, trader, sailor, soldier and slave—in fact every member of this great race of human beings, all of us are equally endowed with an inalienable right to justice. This is what separates us from the base animals. This is what makes us civilized.

Ani is thinking what to say to the queen about the universal nature of justice, but she speaks under the tumult and into Ani’s silence and says, “My father Andrianampoinimerina always respected the ancestral customs of the people he conquered. He said to them, ‘Tsy ova’ko amy ni izay ipetraha’nao.’ ‘I change nothing in the land in which you reside.’
Ani holds his tongue and waits for her to continue, and what she says to him surprises him, although perhaps it shouldn’t. She says, “God is not the God of one nation only but of all, for all nations have different words for God and follow the customs of their ancestors. The Europeans follow the customs of their ancestors. You follow the customs of your ancestors. All sovereigns posses the land that God has given them, and your people follow the law you make, and we follow the law our sovereign makes. For all people have their own laws and customs. Don’t you agree, Ramanany?”

Ani thinks for a moment how to answer her, and remembers a conversation he had a long time ago. He says, “A Chinese man once asked me, ‘If you saw a baby crawling at the edge of a well, would you not run to go save it?’ I said, ‘Of course I would.’ And he said, ‘So would any person.’ Queen Ranavalona, when I see a baby left on an ant hill to be devoured, even though it is the custom of your people that this be so still I want to run to go save it.”

The queen smiles at Ani and says, “I understand. But we know that the child was born under an evil destiny, and will grow up to bring calamity to its family and its village. Would you save the life of the child only to see the rice crop fail and the entire village starve? Of course you would not. So the parents weep, but they place the child on the ant hill so that a greater calamity is forestalled. We are a civilized people, and we know that sometimes we must endure personal tragedy so that we do not call forth a greater misfortune.”

Ranavalona looks out at her guests still cheering and toasting to her health and long reign. “As you said, Ramanany, I am the avatar of order and justice in Imerina. Everyone here has a place, and is that not order? My laws ensure that everyone receives what is due to him—that the ancestors receive what is owed to the ancestors, the queen to the queen, the nobles to the nobles, the fokonolo to the fokonolo, and the slaves to the slaves.” Looking out at her court, she is barely talking to Ani any more. “Is that not justice?”
Ani also has been watching the guests. As the cheering continued, he saw the Arab trader Alidy speak to one of the slaves, who spoke to one of the servants, who spoke to one of the queen’s ladies, who now steps been Ani and the queen and speaks into her ear. The queen nods and dismisses her. Ranavalona is finished with her conversation with Ani, so she stands and lifts her goblet of wine. The room quiets quickly and she says, “Your Queen thanks you for your good wishes, for you are indeed my beloved children!” The guests cheer once again and drink, but quiet again quickly for the queen still stands. “I have been told that an entertainment has been prepared. Where is the Arab trader?”

Alidy leaves his seat at the lowest table and walks to stand before the queen, bowing low. “With your permission, great Queen Ranavalona.” The queen waves her hand in acknowledgment. Alidy motions minutely to his two servants standing behind him, and they turn sharply and give a signal to a servant at the door. Alidy continues speaking to the queen. “I am Alidy ibn Saleh ibn Tariq ibn Khalid al-Fulan. Although I am not worthy, it has been my great honor to support our peculiar institution, and provide services to many here at this august gathering.” He sweeps his hand through the assembled guests, many of whom nod in acknowledgment. Behind Alidy, four slaves carry the palanquin curtained in layers of cheerfully-colored muslin. “Although it is a base thing, undeserving of your attention, still in my humility I hope it might provide you with some pleasure.”

The servants set the palanquin down on the ground, and with a flourish Alidy strips the muslin curtains to reveal the slave boy inside. He reaches in and attaches a delicate chain to the boy’s collar, then pulls the boy up so that he’s standing. With a slight flick of the chain, the boy steps gracefully out of the palanquin to stand naked before the queen, his wrists bound, his head bowed, his magnificent male member flaccid and long before the entire company. The oil lamps flicker on the boy’s polished mahogany skin, and when he moves the scent of exotic spices drifts from his body. The queen’s eyes go wide, and she smiles the smile of a thief in a treasure house.
Ranavalona walks around the table until she is standing before the slave. Ani watches Andriamihaja out of the corner of his eye, and sees the the man’s face darken. With a bow, Alidy hands the queen the golden chain. Her eyes only on the slave, she says merely, “He’s magnificent.” Alidy smiles, and steps backward to give the queen room.

The queen runs her hand down the boy’s arms, shadows and highlights clearly defining the muscles in his shoulders and arms. She reaches around and squeezes his buttocks, hard as the rock upon which Tana is built. And then she reaches through the trimmed pubic hair and holds the boy’s penis in her right hand. She strokes it lightly with her left, then lets it fall, and reaches up to trace her hand across his high cheekbones. Andriamihaja’s nostrils flare and the muscles in his jaw clench; Ani can practically smell the man’s jealousy. Finally the queen steps back and looks at the slave boy again, examining him from head to toe. She smiles, hungry.

Finally tearing her eyes from the boy, she looks at Alidy with new appreciation. “I am most pleased. Speak with my secretary, and we will make arrangements to purchase from you in the future. I assume he has been trained?”

Alidy is beaming under his dark eyebrows. “I assure you, Your Majesty, he is well trained. Your Majesty is too kind.” He motions to his servants, who in a matter of seconds remove the palanquin and clear the area. Alidy bows low, takes three steps backwards, and resumes his seat just as a loud argument breaks out at the far end of the head table.

At this point in the evening, Ani thinks he and Alidy may very well be the only sober men in the room. Certainly the one who is yelling is drunk. “You are a coward, Ratiandrazana! A coward and incompetent! Ikongo! You deserve to burn!” Ratiandrazana is on his feet, lunging across three place settings at the man. English china and Hungarian crystal shatter, men fly backwards to get out of the general’s way. Ani recognizes the provocateur as one of the liberal crowd who was arguing with the
court judge earlier in the evening. And then the two men are on the floor. Ratiandrazana smashes the young man’s eye socket with the meat of his palm, the man goes limp but Ratiandrazana keep beating on him, kicking him, and the sound of breaking ribs cracks through the hall. Again Ani steals a glance at Andriamihaja, who is covering his satisfaction with a mask of concern. This was planned. Three men pull Ratiandrazana off the young liberal, and all heads turn toward the queen.

Without taking her eyes off the two fighting men, the queen hands the delicate chain to a servant. With a face turned dark and dangerous, she watches the two men disentangle themselves, then turns on her heel and strides through the low murmurs to her throne at the back of the room. The court follows her, abandoning their place settings but bringing their bottles of wine, toka, and whiskey. The queen settles herself in her seat, Andriamihaja standing to her right. A huge scarlet canopy shelters the throne, the vermilion velvet draped down the wall like a tapestry embroidered in gold thread, “R.M.,” “Ranavalona Manjaka.” Queen Ranavalona. Ratiandrazana has shaken off the men who held him, but walks with an escort and stands tall before the throne. The liberals have revived their unconscious friend by throwing water on his face, his eye is already swollen shut, and he must be helped across the room.

Ranavalona sits silent for a long time after Ratiandrazana and the young liberal are brought before her. The court shifts nervously around the throne. Ani stands to the queen’s left, at the exact distance an executioner should stand from the monarch when she pronounces judgment. Desert surrounds him, deserted space, despite that he was tonight’s guest of honor. The eloquence of his speech has been forgotten, and now he is just his office once again. The queen lets the court stew for a long time; she drinks deep from a crystal goblet; she is already halfway drunk. The court stands broken into factions, men huddling together with allies and friends. Alidy’s noble slave is held close to the throne by a servant who doesn’t know quite what to do with him. The doors and windows of the Tranovola are
open to the cool night air, squares and rectangles of sparkling black, silver-studded velvet draped over the Silver House.

Ani spies a messenger in military uniform standing half-concealed behind the southern door. The messenger watches one of Ratiandrazana’s friends, Andriamamba, carefully. Andriamamba meets the messenger’s eye once, moves his hand infinitesimally, wait, then ignores him. The messenger waits, his eyes never leaving Andriamamba. Andriamihaja sees the exchange as well and his brow furrows. Ani wonders what message the man carries, and when he will deliver it.

Finally Ranavalona speaks. Curt, scowling. “Noble Ratiandrazana. Twice now you have interrupted us with your fights.”

Ratiandrazana bows low, but he is very angry. “My deepest apologies, Your Majesty. This child, this son of a slave, thought to question my bravery on the battlefield.

I am the war shroud of Raboina:
For a hundred years I was tied on the loom,
For a thousand years I was spread on the loom.
I am accustomed to drinking from a cup,
and cannot live drinking from the spout.
I would rather be pierced by a spear and die,
than carry this burden of suffering.”

Ranavalona rises from her chair. “He is not the only one who questions your bravery on the battlefield, Ratiandrazana. Defend yourself, or you will not be pierced by a spear. You will be chained to a stake and burned, by your own law.”

“Your Majesty received my full written report. Ikongo will fall next year.”

“Yes, I received your report. Three guns lost! Shall I go the British and beg them for more guns? What part of my kingdom shall I sell to them, to replace what you have lost?”

“Your Majesty knows that she and I are in agreement when it comes to the British. If I could make guns of my limbs to replace the ones lost, I would. If I could buy more guns with my life, I would.
But then who will man them? Who will carry them through the forest? Who will set them in front of the walled city of Ikongo and make the traitors pay? Burn me if you like. It will only add to the losses of Ikongo. It will not bring back what has been lost."

Ani thinks Ratiandrazana could be accused of many things, but cowardice is not one of them. The nobleman is playing chicken for his life with an insecure and angry monarch. Ranavalona sits down heavily in her throne, and Ani hears whispers around him: “The tangena trial.” “Ratiandrazana must submit to the tangena.” Andriamamba hears the whispers too, and before they can reach the queen he signals with his hand. The tableau between Ranavalona and her general shatters to the sound of military boots stomping across the hall. The messenger approaches the throne, bows, and holds out an unsealed letter. “With Your Majesty’s permission. A message, urgent from Tamatave.”

Exasperated, the queen snatches the letter from the messenger’s hand. She looks over at Ani with an expression he cannot read, gestures for him to approach, then holds out the letter. “Read it,” she says, her voice deep as a night in the forest. The message is brief, describing a naval attack on the port at Tamatave by French ships. The message says the town is lost, thousands dead, the town now occupied by the French who claim it in the name of King Charles X. The letter is dated three days ago, and promises more details to follow.

As Ani reads, the court begins to whisper once more. The whispers become murmurs and the murmurs build into a nervous chatter and the court, full of fear, looks to the queen for guidance. The queen sits on her throne staring straight ahead while she hears the news that her kingdom has been invaded by the vahaza. When Ani finishes the letter he says, “That is all it says, Madam,” and steps back to his place behind the throne. Ranavalona nods, her vision turned inward and away from the frightened court. She reaches her hand absently in the direction of the table next to her and Andriamihaja behind it,
but Andriamihaja doesn’t know what she’s asking for so he steps forward and says, “Your Majesty?”

He is tentative, careful, as if handling a powder bag near an open flame.

The queen turns her head sharply and looks at him, focusing outside herself finally. She nods at her staff of office leaning against the small table that holds her goblet of wine. Her staff is a simple thing, three feet long, plated in gold, tapering at the foot and with a round ball at the top that fits comfortably in her palm. Andriamihaja hands it to her with a bow and steps back. The court quiets as she sets the staff on the ground, cradling the ball in her palm, and seated thus she takes the measure of the men in the room. She looks at each of them individually and what she thinks is impossible to know from her inscrutable face. Finally she looks at the general Ratiandrazana, dressed in bones and scars and a *lamba* edged in scarlet.

The queen finds her voice, and it is a voice of authority that stalks through the frightened silence of the room. “Ratiandrazana. You are a brave warrior and skillful. You won many battles for my husband the king who has turned his back on the world. You failed us at Ikongo, and for that I should have you burned. But shall I cut off my arm when my elbow knocks over the pot of rice? I listen to this news from Tamatave and I think: The ancestors have provided you with an opportunity to redeem yourself.”

Ranavalona lifts her staff of office then drops it sharply, and the report fills the throne room of the Tranovola, reaches out into the city of Antananrivo and strikes the French force at Tamatave like thunder. She says, “Ratiandrazana will gather his force of four thousand trained soldiers.” She looks around at the nobles in the room, and when next she speaks there is acid in her voice. “Trained soldiers only.” She turns back to Ratiandrazana, who has not moved. “You will gather them tonight, and tomorrow morning you will march to Tamatave, recapture the city and restore to your queen her lands. And Ratiandrazana…” She uses her staff to support herself as she stands. “If you fail, pray to your
ancestors for a clean death on the battlefield.” Ratiandrazana’s face does not move. “Go now. Take your
ten with you.”

Ratiandrazana says nothing. He bows, then turns his back on the throne and strides out of the
hall.

The general’s officers follow him when he leaves, but the queen has already forgotten them.
Ratiandrazana disappears from her mind, the rest of the court disappears, and when she turns to her
lover the only two people in the world are Ranavalona and Andriamihaja. Ranavalona slaps
Andriamihaja across the face. “You did this. You and your love of all things vahaza.”

Andriamihaja stands very still. He speaks to her as if they were alone in her bedroom. “Ramavo,
you know that’s not true.”

Her voice is deadly. “You only want to conquer. Conquer my land. Conquer me. There is no love
in you. Only greed.” She reaches out and rips the scarlet lamba from his shoulders so he stands in his
western clothes. She tosses the lamba on the floor. “You cannot have it both ways. You must chose, and
chose now. Chose them. Or chose me.”

Andriamihaja slowly unbuttons the jacket with the gold-braided epaulets and gold chevrons sewn
up the sleeves. He tears it off his shoulders and turns half-way so she and everyone else in the hall can
see the blood soaking through his shirt. “You say I have no love in me. LOOK!” he roars at her. “I have
already chosen you! Years ago, I chose you!” He turns toward the servant who holds the chain of
Alidy’s slave, and snatches the chain from his hand. “You, who do not need to chose anything! Who
will take her pleasure as she will, and the rest be damned. You say I have no love in me?” He steps
forward so he is close enough to feel the queen’s breath on his face. In a low growl he asks, “What more
would you have me do?”

He reaches to his side and draws the ornamental dagger from its sheath. He glides sideways and
plunges the dagger into the shining, oiled belly of the slave who was once a prince of his tribe. Andriamihaja jerks the knife up, the muscles in his arms as hard as the expression on his face, and he holds the slave over his forearm for a moment before he lets him sink noiselessly to the floor. The court watches as a red stain grows like roots into the patterned wood, silence crushing the hall. Then he turns back to the queen. He reaches up with his bloody hand and strokes her scowling face, leaving a filthy streak on her cheek. For once, Andriamihaja says nothing. He drops his hand, steps past the queen and walks from the hall.

The queen watches him go. She stands until he has made his stormy exit, then lowers herself into her chair. She suddenly looks very tired, and she waves at what’s left of her court and tells them all to leave. Ani bows with the rest, unseen as she fills her wine goblet to the brim and drinks. She is still drinking when he emerges into the silver-studded night.
CHAPTER 16

...In which a battle ensues between the French navy and the Merina forces on the east coast of Madagascar

Off the coast of the Island of Bourbon, 1829

Achille Guy Marie de Penfentenio, Comte de Cheffontaines, Governor of the Island of Bourbon lies in bed listening to the creak of the ship's timbers. The gentle rocking of the *Infatigable* normally would lull him to sleep, but tonight he lies awake, anticipating the morning's action. Now the watch chimes four bells, now five, now six, and it's three o'clock in the morning and still Penfentenio does not sleep. He listens to the slap of the rigging above, the hew of the bow through the sea, the splash of the wake astern, the gentle shiver of a sail followed immediately by a call on deck to *trim the sheeting there man*! A single lantern sways from a hook and shadows move through the cabin like thieves, but he keeps his hopes close to his chest and they will not be stolen from him by the pirates of the night.

Tomorrow they land at Tamatave. Capitaine de Vaisseau Gourbeyre arrived yesterday in the dispatch *Colibri* and hoisted his broad pennant on the 60-gun frigate *Terpischore*. The 30-gun frigate *Nièvre*, the *Chevrette*, like the *Infatigable* a corvette mounting fourteen guns, and the *Madagascar*, a transport carrying land artillery and troops, round out the Commodore’s little fleet. More than enough to bring the small fort at Tamatave to bay. But Tamatave is not the only prize Penfentenio hopes to win.

His instructions from Paris are to press the French claims on Malagasy land, and with these ships, these men, these guns, Penfentenio must take and hold Tamatave, then Foulepointe, then Tintingue.

Among his papers, Penfentenio carries orders from M. Hyde de Neuville, Minister of Marine, to eject the Merina from the littoral between Antongil Bay and Tamatave, and occupy such points on the
coast as can be safely held with the troops available. The troops available number 250 (with an additional 300 at the Tintingue garrison), commanded by one Captain Fénix. Penfentenio knows Commodore Gourbeyre—they have been planning this assault together for almost a year. Gourbeyre is a steady man, thick and ponderous, reliable, unimaginative. Penfentenio does not know Captain Fénix, but Fénix is who Paris sent. Penfentenio will not complain. After months and years of letters from Penfentenio, Paris finally decided that London has held sway in Madagascar for too long, and now the government of Charles X intends to secure at least one permanent naval base on Madagascar. France must establish a foothold on the Indian Ocean trade routes, and must also ensure trade remains open between Madagascar and the lucrative slave plantations on Bourbon.

Penfentenio understands the importance of maintaining trade with Madagascar. The plantations are indeed lucrative—lucrative to the owners, lucrative to the French government, lucrative to Penfentenio himself. He lies in the captain’s cabin of the *Infatigable* in silk underwear, a gold watch and gold jewelry stowed with his fine silk garments. His wife, back in France, recently procured for them two thousand acres in Provence. He dreams of retiring, of spending his dotage growing lavender. As he finally nods off into a half-sleep, *Eight bells and all’s well*, he smells the dry Mediterranean sun warming his purple fields, the wet tropical heat banished like the false shadows of thieves in the night.

Tamatave stood for seventeen minutes under the fire of the frigate *Terpischore*. On approach to the bay, Penfentenio watched from the fo’c’sle as the ship, formerly a peaceful hamlet borne by the wind, transformed herself into a floating fortress, a flying dragon belching fire and iron from its sixty guns. Gourbeyre placed the *Nièvre* and the *Chevrette* at the south end of the harbor, just out of reach of the southern battery, while the flag ship *Terpischore* with its sixty cannons navigated the narrow straight between the northern point of the bay and the reef that protected the harbor.
The citizens of Tamatave panicked as the ship managed the approach, tacking south-south-west into a southeastern wind, the twenty-five guns of her starboard broadside menacing the town like sharp green teeth. The Nièvre and the Chevrette stood to the south, gunports open, support for the Commodor’s ship. Gourbeyre knew his business, and his slow progress was both purposeful and effective. By the time he was in range of the northern battery, the town was empty, the citizens fled to the interior, and the northern battery manned by barely a skeleton crew.

That skeleton crew didn’t manage a single shot. The third round from Terpischore’s bow-chaser hit the powder magazine dead-on and the northern battery exploded in a cloud of black thunder and red lightening, then settled into a lumpy gray heap. At the same time, under fire from the Nièvre and the Chevrette, the southern battery struck its colors. In the ensuing silence, Gourbeyre ran the Terpischore into the bay and fired a single broadside into the deserted town. Momentarily blinded by the smoke, momentarily deafened by the roar of twenty-five guns off the starboard side, sulfur like salt on his tongue, Penfentenio nonetheless smiled at Gourbeyre’s terror tactics. Fear is a crude but effective tool for conquering. When his senses returned Penfentenio saw that half the town lay in ruins, mud and stick huts shattered and scattered across the beach, the single stone government building somehow surviving the onslaught.

Captain Fénix landed his two hundred soldiers on the beach unopposed and took possession of the town. The Merina from the southern battery had long since fled, and Fénix set his men to plundering or destroying anything of value they might find. They found 23 carronades, 200 muskets, and the bodies of 50 Merina soldiers slain by the French fire and the explosion. They took twenty-eight thousand piastres out of private homes and the government office, three hundred bolts of silk, five hundred bolts of cotton, two barrels of black pepper, and fifty barrels of tea, as well as all the rice and fowl the town had to offer, which was little enough for its unfortunate inhabitants.
Two weeks ago in Paris, in the face of growing anti-government sentiment, the ultra-conservative, ultra-royalist government of King Charles X of the House of Bourbon passed tight new censorship laws and banned the middle-class from government positions. Many citizens believed the Bourbon monarchy intended to drag France back to the time of feudalism and the divine right of kings. Ten days ago the national police raided the office of the newspaper *Le National*, where fifty journalists from a dozen city newspapers met and vowed to keep running in defiance of the new censorship laws.

After the police raid the people of Paris armed themselves, and the next day twenty-one citizens were dead in the streets. On the second day, the revolt turned into a revolution, and on the third day, the revolutionaries took the Louvre, the Tuileries, the Palais de Justice, the Archbishop's Palace, and the the Hôtel de Ville. A man wearing a ballgown belonging to the Duchesse de Berry, with feathers and flowers in his hair, screamed from a palace window, “*Je reçois! Je reçois!*” Indeed, he had it. A few hours later, politicians entered the battered complex and set about establishing a provisional government. And thus ended the reign of Charles X, King of France and Navarre.

News of the change in government has not yet reached Achille Guy Marie de Penfentenio, Comte de Cheffontaines, Governor of the Island of Bourbon, and so he continues to act on his orders to secure for France at least one permanent naval base on the island of Madagascar.

Ratiandrazana leads a force of four thousand men with muskets and spears but no artillery. When he arrives in Hivondrona, a short day’s march inland from Tamatave, he finds the ruins of the armed position to which the citizens of Tamatave fled. The serene Ivondro River encircles Hivondrona on three sides, but the surrounding forest still smokes, unnaturally silent, trees splintered and flattened from cannon fire. Villagers inform him that not two days previous the French overran Hivondrona, destroying
the three guns and killing fifty Merina troops. To Ratiandrazana’s face the villagers curse the Yolofs, troops from Senegal the French use to reinforce their own infantry.

The Yolofs’ bravery is equal to the vahaza’s, and their cruelty is greater. Many women in the village move stiffly and silently through their daily work, their eyes not leaving the ground. Their men watch with pity, unsure of what to do—there is nothing to be done, it is a thing to be born—and everyone dreads the coming pregnancies. Two women are bedridden with bleeding and high fevers—one of them is still a girl, perhaps ten years old, and the villagers think it will not be long before she turns her back on the world. Hivondrona is a place soaked in sorrow, and the villagers move as if through mud.

Ratiandrazana slaughters one of his bullocks and feasts the elders of Hivondrona. As he listens to their story, he secretly thanks the French and their cruelty. This village is now firmly in the hands of the Merina—its citizens would die for Ranavalona, to keep the vahaza out of Madagascar. From the elders he learns that the remnants of the Merina garrison, approximately three hundred men, are now marching through the forest on their way to Foulepointe. They are led by Prince Corroller, the half-breed lord of Tamatave who rules as a Malagasy king and owes allegiance to no one save Ranavalona. They have no artillery and no ammunition, but will reinforce the Foulepointe garrison. They should arrive tomorrow.

As the men sit around the tsihy mat, eating with their fingers rice and beef kabaka off of long banana leaves, one of the village elders introduces Ratiandrazana to his grandson. The grandson, a short, ugly youth of perhaps thirteen with too-long hair and skin livid with parasites, speaks good French and knows the country well. He has been spying on the French since they sacked Hivondrona and retreated to their ships at Tamatave. Half of the French ships (three, according to the boy, the big ones, he says) are holding Tamatave, while the other half are now busy evacuating vahaza traders from the coast to the
Island of Sainte-Marie. The boy is certain that the French will leave Tamatave in three days and sail up the coast to Foulepointe.

“Tell me how you know,” Ratiandrazana asks, politely, so as not to offend the grandfather.

“There are four men. Their clothes have more gold than the rest. One is the Governor of Bourbon—he’s an old man—and one is the Governor of the Island of Sainte-Marie. He’s young. He arrived on a ship last night. The other two... I think one is in charge of the ships, and one is in charge of the soldiers. The four sit in the stone building and drink and talk. When they drink a lot they talk loudly. And the stupid vahaza soldiers who guard them cannot tell the difference between the sounds of the forest and the sounds of a very quiet boy. They cannot see that the shadow high in the mango tree is not the shadow of the fosa or the ankomba, but me, pressed against a branch, listening.

“Three times now I have heard them say this. They will take their boats away from Tamatave in three days. The big boat will sail to Foulepointe and attack the town there. They think that Foulepointe will fall as easily as Tamatave. They think we are stupid like the lemurs, that they will always be able to surprise us. So they will only send the one big boat to Foulepointe. The four men argued for a long time about this, but the fat man, he is in charge of the boats I think, he said that this is how they will do it. The other two boats will meet up with the smaller three at Tintingue, on the mainland across from the Island of Sainte-Marie. At Tintingue they will strengthen the existing French garrison and turn it into a French port. A city full of vahaza protected by two thousand French soldiers and all six French ships.”

The boy shakes his head slowly. “They expect to meet Queen Ranavalona’s army at Tintingue. Is that where you will meet them, uncle?”

Ratiandrazana stares at the boy for a long time without blinking, assessing him, judging his character. Ratiandrazana decides that the boy’s information is probably accurate. He looks up at the elders gathered on the tsihy mat and says, “I fought with the great Andrianampoinimerina during the
Merina civil wars. I remember a day when a young boy, about your age, came from Avandrano to speak with the king. This is what the boy said to the great king:

Behold us, Andrianampoinimerina,  
we of Avandrano, the spade of plenty, the iron of discovery;  
it is we who have spent the roots and stumps of our crops,  
it is we who bear our existence with honor,  
and for this war in which we all advance,  
we will not be sparing with our lives,  
but we will make our heads into shields,  
we will leap over the trenches,  
for it is to increase the prosperity of your kingdom.  
This is the pledge we make to you, Andrianampoinimerina.

You, the people of Hivondrona, have spent the roots and stumps of your crops. But it is to increase the prosperity of the kingdom. You bear your existence with honor. Now my soldiers and I will make our heads into shields. We will leap over the trenches and we will not be sparing with our lives. These vahaza are like frogs—slippery when they are on water, but incompetent on land. When they are in their ships they are invincible, but once they step ashore, we will defeat them.”

The elders are pleased with Ratiandrazana’s speech, and the general says very little more. After a short time, he thanks them and takes his leave. Ratiandrazana sends messengers among his troops: rest now, prepare, for we leave before dawn.

The governor of the Island of Bourbon is once again listening to the creak of the ship, but this time he is dining on the flagship Terpischore, rather than sleeping in the borrowed captain’s cabin of the Infatigable. And in addition to the creak of the rigging, the calls of the sailors on deck, and the slap of the water against the hull, Penfentenio also listens to the tinkling of silver on china and the bawdy laughter of the high-placed men seated around the table. At the head sits Commodore Gourbeyre—it is his ship, and his fleet—and to his right Captain Fénix. Also at table are Bertrand Hercule Blévec, Governor of the Island of Sainte-Marie, and the captains of the frigate Nièvre and the corvette Chevrette.
The *Infatigable*, the *Madagascar*, and the little *Colibri* sailed north the same night the fleet took Tamatave, to evacuate the French traders still living on the east coast. With good reason the citizens of France fear reprisals from the native Merina in response to the attacks on the port and on Hivondrona.

Penfentenio is a little drunk, and has stopped listening to the table conversation. He is thinking about the British, specifically his English counterpart on Mauritius. Both he and Governor Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Colville served in the Napoleonic wars, albeit on opposite sides. Colville led a brigade at Waterloo, while Penfentenio captained the flûte *Elephant*, trawling the Indian Ocean for British East Indiamen. He knows a little of Colville—by reputation an honorable and brave man. Penfentenio wonders how badly Colville was marked by those years, if he harbors hatred still, like Lamarque, a straightforward hatred of the enemy, protected and nursed, scarcely touched by intermediate events. Or if those intermediate events have softened the man so that, like Penfentenio, he worries now about slave rebellions and cyclones on his own little island off Madagascar. Waiting out his years until he can retire to his wet, gloomy England.

Penfentenio thinks he and Colville, separated by six hundred miles of ocean and a thousand years of history, must have more in common than Penfentenio does with some of the younger men with whom he now dines. He and Colville are both old soldiers now exiled to administration, fighting their battles with wax seals instead of cannons. Penfentenio is grateful to Gourbeyre for allowing him to accompany this expedition. He misses the gentle rocking of a ship at sea, the smell of sulfur in his nose after the roar of an expert broadside. From the fo'c'sle of the *Terpischore* is a poor way to share in a battle, but Penfentenio does not kid himself—his days of leaping from the gunwale to the enemy’s deck brandishing his flintlock and boarding ax... Those days are well over. Still, it was a pretty piece of action at Tamatave, and Penfentenio is glad to have seen it.
At table, the captain of the Nièvre—Penfentenio has forgotten his name—is raising a toast to Charles, by grace of God King of France and the Navarre. “To Charles,” he says, “and the Great Glory of the Monarchy!” “To Charles,” they all respond, and drink deep from their very good bordeaux. But Blévec does not drink as deeply as the others, and does not salute as enthusiastically. The captain of the Nièvre takes note, and in spite of the dictates of etiquette which demand no talk of politics at table, and because he is drunk on very good wine, and, Penfentenio thinks, because he has all his life been swaddled in silken privilege—the man fairly stinks of aristocracy—the captain of the Nièvre presses the issue. He looks directly at Blévec, raises his glass and says, “To the monarchy.”

Blévec picks up his own glass and pours the contents onto the floor. Penfentenio begins to like this Blévec very much. Not for his politics—Penfentenio is now immune to politics—but for his audacity. For what his diamond buyer in Antwerp might call his “chutzpah.” A pity about the bordeaux, though. Blévec says, “I had just enough wine to drink to the health of our noble king, but now that you speak of hereditary right, I’m afraid my glass is empty.”

“Hereditary right is the will of God, and the tradition of France.” The captain’s tone is of a schoolmaster to particularly slow pupil, and Penfentenio looks to Gourbeyre to manage his own table. The Commodore smiles gleefully at Penfentenio, and the governor remembers that the Commodore is a man of simple tastes who will enjoy a spectacle over dinner. Blévec is not a seaman, and bad blood between Sainte-Marie on the one hand and Gourbeyre’s captains on the other will probably not matter much in Gourbeyre’s world. And so Gourbeyre anticipates entertainment. Penfentenio sighs and reaches for the bottle of wine.

Blévec keeps his voice even. “Hereditary right is an anachronism, sir, that should have died with Louis and Marie. Would you have us burn our constitution while it is still only an infant?” The captain of the Nièvre looks like he would be very happy to see La Charte go up in flames, and the ministers of
the Chamber along with it. Blévec hardens his tone. “Government by the will of the people is simple justice. The Athenians knew this two thousand years ago, and the Americans know it now.”

“The Americans!” The captain laughs. “Yes, the Americans. Let’s all become Americans now.” The captain stands, wobbly, and starts to sing in badly accented English, “Oh say does that star-spangled banner yet wave, o’er the laaaaaand of the freeeeeeeeneeex,” his voice cracks badly, intentionally, and then he continues off-key, “and the home of the brave!”

The table laughs and claps, even Blévec, who has the grace to withdraw from battle. Gourbeyre looks slightly disappointed that the entertainment fizzled, but Captain Fénix looks as relieved as Penfentenio feels. Penfentenio likes Fénix. The Captain used the Senegalese troops to great effect in Hivondrona—the man knows how to wield the weapons at hand. And now Penfentenio thinks that Captain Fénix, though young like the rest, does not comfortably meddle in the affairs of Admirals, Generals, Ministers, and Kings. Captain Fénix is a competent soldier, and content to remain just so. Penfentenio appreciates a man with narrow ambitions.

Penfentenio decides to turn the conversation onto safer territory. “Captain Fénix,” he says, “Perhaps you will be so kind as to review for our able seamen the plan of attack at Foulepoint...”

Ratiandrazana’s four thousand men catch up with Corroller’s three hundred men late the following day. Corroller’s force is cooking their rice about five kilometers outside of Foulepointe—they’ve been alerted to Ratiandrazana’s arrival by a runner, and weary, beaten men stand as Ratiandrazana strides into the camp with a guard of twenty veteran warriors. Behind him the army clamors through the forest and surrounds the remains of Tamatave’s garrison. Corroller sits sideways on a tsihy with two advisers, waiting for a woman to serve them rice. Without pausing, Ratiandrazana marches up to Corroller just as the prince is starting a formal greeting. Ratiandrazana crosses the tsihy,
grabs Coroller by the hair and drags him to a nearby tree. He lifts the man up and turns him to face the
tree, then slams him bodily into the trunk. Blood drips down Corroller’s cheek from a cut on his
forehead.

Ratiandrazana hears behind him the sound of three hundred men shouting and reaching for their
weapons, and the simultaneous sound of four thousand spears and muskets moving through the heavy air
to take aim. The garrison men shrink. Ratiandrazana holds Coroller against the tree, leans in and says to
him so only he can hear, “I don’t care who you are, I would kill you right now if I didn’t have a better
enemy than you to fight.”

Ratiandrazana pulls back on Coroller’s hair and slams his head against the tree so hard the man
falls to the ground, stunned. Ratiandrazana nods to his guard, and two of them pick up the fallen prince
and manacle his hands together above him over a low branch. Hanging thus, Coroller fights to regain
consciousness as two more members of Ratiandrazana’s guard gather wood, some of it still burning,
from the garrison soldiers’ fires and stack it around Coroller’s feet. Some of the garrison soldiers,
realizing what Ratiandrazana is doing, move to protest. One reaches slyly to gather his spear, but three
of Ratiandrazana’s troops have him at spear-point in a matter of seconds. The troops, all 4300 of them,
fall silent as Ratiandrazana stands to address them. The fire around Coroller’s feet begins to catch.

“According to our military law, the punishment for cowardice is burning. The punishment for
negligence is burning. The punishment for desertion is burning.” Ratiandrazana pauses, and Coroller,
slapped back to consciousness by the flames licking his feet, starts dancing and cursing Ratiandrazana
and his ancestors.

Ratiandrazana ignores him and speaks so that all the men can hear. “At noon the day after
tomorrow, the French will arrive with one of their big ships. They will attack Foulepointe from the sea.
If you will defend it, instead of running like the dogs you are, you may redeem yourselves.”
Ratiandrazana turns to Corroller. “Will you face the vahaza and their infernal ships, or will you run
again like a dog? Shall I burn you now, and save you another disgrace?”

The curse that Corroller lays on Ratiandrazana burns the prince’s tongue like acid, invades the
ears of the gathered host hot as the fire at Corroller’s feet. But when he is done, he has also sworn to
protect the town. Ratiandrazana turns to the Tamatave garrison. “Will you defend this town?”

Some of the garrison men mutter amongst themselves, and some of them answer with a half-
hearted “Yes.” Ratiandrazana steps toward Corroller and kicks a piece of burning wood closer to the
prince’s feet. He turns again to the troops. “I will burn him unless you swear to help me. And then I will
burn every single one of you.” Ratiandrazana means it. He imagines a field of men burning like a forest.
He imagines the smell of roasted meat. He asks them again, “Will you defend this town?”

This time the answer is louder, but dark with anger and fear. When the calls of the men have
reached their peak, Ratiandrazana nods to his guard, who kick away the fire at Corroller’s feet and take
him down from the tree. Corroller shrugs them off and wheels on them, enraged. Ratiandrazana hopes
he fights. Ratiandrazana despises a coward, and so must battle his hunger to kill the prince now. If
Corroller gives him an excuse... Prince Corroller sees this on Rainjohary’s face, and decides against a
fight. He stalks to his tsihy mat and reinstalls himself with as much dignity as he can muster. Now
Ratiandrazana joins him on the tsihy mat. The general speaks to one of his guard, telling him to run to
Foulepointe and bring back the commander of Foulepointe’s garrison. Then Ratiandrazana turns to the
three men on the mat and says to them, “Tell me about the defenses at Foulepointe, and we will figure
out how to beat the French and their mighty ship...”

In France, Paris is in chaos. Louis-Philippe d'Orléans has ascended the throne as “King of the
French,” rather than “King of France.” He is a constitutional monarch who derives his authority from
national charter rather than from an appointment from God. Who is this new king? Louis-Philippe’s father, Philippe Égalité, helped send his cousin, King Louis XVI, to the guillotine in 1793, and so Louis-Philippe (for now) is loved by the people and despised by the nobility. Now, after the Three Glorious Days, the aristocracy and the Catholic Church are once again in hiding as the middle class invades government to sack the French ministries for spoils. Strikes and demonstrations galvanized by the liberal press will be a regular feature of Parisian streets for the next six months, as Republican groups agitate for political and social reforms and the execution of Charles X’s ministers.

And where does this leave the Island of Bourbon, and French territorial claims to Madagascar? The Island of Bourbon is an important source of revenue for the French government, and so the sugar plantations must be protected. But the British Royal Navy badly embarrassed the French in the Mauritius Campaign of 1811, and since then the French presence in the Indian Ocean has been minimal, its claims on Madagascar nominal at best. The source of those claims begin with a French colony established on the Island of Sainte-Marie in 1745, a colony built on the ruins of the fabled pirate utopia Libertalia—but that is a story for another time. The colony at Sainte-Marie failed in the face of native opposition and the ravages of the fever, but France still claims the island as her own.

Since 1745, France has off-and-on occupied various ports on the east coast, including Tamtave, Foulepointe, Tintingue, and the Island of Sainte-Marie. French merchants have been working these ports for over one hundred years, trading cattle, rice, slaves and guns to and from Madagascar, the Mascarene Islands, and the world at large. We know that this trade is vital to the survival of the slave plantations on Mauritius and Bourbon. Now we know also that taking and occupying these ports is an urgent assertion of Empire, and a demonstration of French strength in the face of British dominance of the Indian Ocean theater. French occupation of Madagascar ports had practical, political, and ideological importance to the Bourbon monarchy.
But with the ascension of Louis-Philippe d'Orléans, the Bourbon monarchy is dead, and the new government in Paris has enough trouble at home without waging war five thousand miles away against a Merina monarch in her native land who employs generals with no understanding of civilized conduct in battle. Simply put, says the new Minister of Marine, the French government needs its military close to home. He writes new orders, seals them with wax and a tri-colored ribbon, and sends the orders by the dispatch *Hector*, ultimately to rendezvous in two week’s time with Penfentenio at Tintingue.

Foulepointe marks the end of a graceful north-east sweep of the east coast before the shore turns westward. The town of Foulepointe (its local name, Antisnanana, has already been supplanted by the French moniker) occupies the point where the land reaches humbly out into the sea. A long breakwater protects the shoreline, starting not quite two miles to the south of the town and extending past it for another mile. A ship such as the heavy frigate *Terpischore* must therefore approach from the north, and either sail into the prevailing southeast winds, or wait for the sea breeze to rise as the land warms in the late morning. Commodore Gourbeyre waits until the late morning, until the wind vane points in the direction of his prize, then drives his moveable fortress directly toward the town.

But Foulepointe has been warned. She mounts four batteries pointing toward the sea and guarding every inch of coast; two of the batteries will catch a careless ship in crossfire if she attacks at the town’s most vulnerable place. Gourbeyre is not a careless captain, and the *Terpischore* is not a careless ship this day. Gourbeyre avoids the southeastern batteries by sailing to the north of the town. At the extreme edge of her range, the northwest battery fires a targeting shot that splashes twenty yards short of a direct hit on the mizzen mast. The Merina have been practicing, Gourbeyre thinks, and wonders about their ammunition stores and powder.

*Terpischore* sails directly into the battery fire. With his glass Penfentenio sees the redoubt
mounts three guns only, and he smiles to himself. They were told the northern fort carried a compliment of five, but it’s like the Merina to exaggerate their strength. Penfentenio counts thirty-two men at the fort before a cloud of smoke envelops the guns and two 16-pounders soar toward the *Terpischore*. One slams into the quarterdeck and crashes below—wood splinters fly and Penfentenio hears cries from the lower decks. The other shot tears through the main topgallant sail before splashing into the water on the starboard side. Penfentenio minds the sweep of the second hand on his pocket watch, measuring the Merina rate of fire. The *Terpischore’s* larboard gunports are open but Gourbeyre holds his fire, bearing in with the land during the calm between shots. The calm lasts six minutes thirty-two seconds, and Penfentenio smiles to himself again. The Merina have been practicing, but with that rate of fire, *Terpischore* will get in three rounds for every two of theirs.

The next three shots from the battery hurt. One crashes through the hull into the gun deck, taking out one of her larbord guns while miraculously missing the powder charges stored below. The second shot hits the mainmast, shredding the rigging and biting hard into the solid white pine. The mainmast creaks and the ship holds her breath, but the spar remains standing. Gourbeyre’s lieutenant orders the men to shore the mainsails and reduce the load on the mast. The third shot shatters a longboat and the soldiers on board curse as one of their landing vessels breaks apart and tumbles into the sea. Still Gourbeyre holds his fire as he drives the ship within easy striking distance of the battery.

Five minutes precisely after the last round from shore, *Terpischore* opens fire with her larboard guns. With a call of “Heave heartily, lads!” and “Bring her to!” the ship glides to a stop in perfect firing position against the northern battery, and she lets loose her hellfire and brimstone. One after another twenty-four guns explode in an acrid cloud with a fire at its heart, twenty-four times 12-pound shot flies on wings of death at the northern battery, crashing into the fort, crashing into the guns, crashing into the Merina soldiers, and metal and sand and bone and blood spray up onto the walls of the battery.
Penfentenio listens to the cries of his own men; he imagines the screams of the poor bastards manning the shoreside guns. The French on the gun deck will take four minutes to reload, and then it will start again.

Penfentenio raises his glass to inspect the damage on shore in time to see the Merina finish reloading their three 16-pounders. He yells a warning just as the smoke appears, the thunder a moment later, and a dusty longing rises in Penfentenio’s throat. A creaky courage pinches his limbs and he wishes, how he wishes!, he was twenty years younger and they were a British force and his battle lust, rising now at the smell of blood, would not be quenched until late, late into the night. The Merina are making a much better showing of it this time around.

Their three shots hit the Terpischore one more time. The Merina are aiming at the gun deck—Penfentenio curses Brady for teaching the Merina tactics—and two of the three hit home. The third lands astern but perforates Terpischore’s rudder. Not important now, but potentially devastating if she should need to beat to sea. On the main deck now a skeleton crew mans the rigging while Fénix’s two hundred soldiers and hundred Yolofs prepare belowdecks for a landing. They cannot launch under the fire of the battery—longboats as fish in a barrel—so Gourbeyre must take out the shoreside guns before he can take the town. All the men he can spare currently work the gun deck, and in one more minute the larboard broadside will fire again.

Penfentenio watches the native gunners at the battery—inefficient with the worm and the sponge, but competent with the powder, and the minute passes in quick-slow battle time. Then Gourbeyre yells, the lieutenant yells, the gunnery sergeant yells, and the Terpischore fires again its twenty-two black-winged angels and once the smoke clears on the fo'c'sle Penfentenio sees one of the battery guns collapse under a direct hit from the ship. The Merina are now outgunned eleven to one, and Penfentenio counts at least fifteen men bleeding on the sand. The half-breed commander of the Merina force can read
the field as well as he—the battery strikes its colors and the Merina begin their retreat. The instant the battery strikes Gourbeyre gives the order for the landing, and suddenly the main deck is swarming with soldiers and sailors launching the longboats.

Captain Fénix leads a landing party of four hundred men. His lieutenants, along with Blévec, political leftist and Governor of Sainte-Marie, command the French forces while the Captain himself heads the Yolofs. While the longboats row to shore, three hundred Merina foot soldiers fill the beach, pounding their spears and waiving their muskets. Gourbeyre fires a shot from the bow-chaser, and the ball skips through the Merina force until they pull back out of range. The Merina are pressed against the first row of houses in the town, and the shoreline is clear for the French landing. Overeager Merina fire their muskets before the longboats are well in range, and bullets plink the sea ahead of the landing party. The two forces hurl curses at each other across the waves, waiting impatient until they can hurl more deadly ammunition.

Captain Fénix judges his range, and finally gives the order to fire, one boat after the next. The French aim is very bad in the heaving boats, and the Merina stand without flinching in the rain of lead. The landing party has just enough time to reload before the longboats drag the sand, and Gourbeyre fires another shot from Terpischore’s bow-chaser to cover the landing. Without waiting for orders to form up, the French forces rush the Merina and the melee at last begins, the French firing their muskets haphazardly, never bothering to reload and instead chasing the Merina with their bayonets.

The Merina are finally in a battle they understand, knives and spears and hand-to-hand combat, and the body of the Merina, the bodies of the Merina engage the French man to man, and for a long time there is chaos on the sand. Groups of blue coats eddy and swirl, form and dissolve, as different groups of bare black skin surround and penetrate, or buckle and collapse under the pressure of French destiny. The sand soaks up the blood but it cannot swallow the stench of bile and filth and fear and lust, the lust for
power over another man, the passion for violence that carves every man into a savage and a killer. The air bursts with the sounds of battle, of hatred, of cruelty and love, of pain and joy, of screeching death. A man disembowels his enemy and tastes his life sweet on his tongue, his life filling his wet mouth, but in an instant his fortune turns as another knife sweeps and slices him to the bone. For the foot soldier, Luck rules the battlefield as She has from antiquity.

But the corporal strength of the Merina can be no match for the training of the French, and finally the Merina forces soften, slacken, and finally scatter, spreading throughout the town, heading for the jungle. The French follow, anxious to kill before the enemy disappears, and with their blood high they chase the Merina through the labyrinthine streets, farther and father away from the ship and the shore. In the town there are no more troops, no more units, or forces, or regiments, or companies. There is no leadership. There is only lust. Groups of blue coats chase groups of black skin, chase them around blind corners and down narrow allies until it seems the Merina must be caught, but then they twist through a gate into a courtyard and they are off again, a pack of French at their heels.

The Merina know something the French do not. They lead the Frenchmen through the town and past the last line of houses, bursting into a open field cut from the jungle just yesterday. The Merina keep running, they run to a redoubt that mounts seven guns—guns moved from the shoreline batteries, dragged through the town just yesterday. The Merina keep running, but the French stop, checked, and suddenly their blood is no longer running high, suddenly their training takes over, and the French lieutenants start to shout orders: Form up! Battle lines! Load your weapons! But the command to Fire! issues first from the Merina position as the seven great guns flash and roar, shooting grapeshot into the forming French ranks.

The grape tears through the French force. Soldiers lie screaming on the matted jungle green, but the French officers know their business, the French troops are trained for this, and they work to reform
their lines while the Merina guns reload. Captain Fénix and his Yolof troops, through luck or instinct or possibly good discipline, arrive just after the first volley from the guns. They form up to the east of the field and attempt to flank the Merina, facing resistance only from the remnants of Prince Corroller’s garrison. Captain Fénix thinks that if he can achieve the rear of the guns, they can still win the day. He knows the Tamatave garrison is tired.

But before they can engage the guns fire again, grape and canister directly into the main French force, and then the jungle spawns four thousand Merina warriors rushing the battlefield, screaming and cursing and pointing their spears like lances, ready to skewer the blue coats and the hearts that beat beneath. A ferocious Ratiandrazana charges at the head of the Merina horde. He will revenge Tamatave. He will revenge Hivondrona. He will redeem the honor of Hivondrona’s women, and he will protect the lives of Foulepointe’s children. He will restore his own place in Antananarivo, and he will carry home the spoils of war.

In the face of the guns, in the face of the screaming savage men, in the face of ten-to-one odds, the French panic. They run. And now groups of bare-chested men chase the sleek blue coats, they chase them through the town, around blind corners and down narrow allies and sometimes the Frenchmen are caught. Bertrand Hercule Blévec, political leftist and Governor of the Island of Sainte-Marie, is caught. Captain Fénix is caught and killed. Frenchmen and Yolofs fall with a lance in their backs or a knife in their sides because they don’t know this town and the Merina do. The Merina run to cut off their retreat, they run to take the beach, but the ship is still there and Penfentenio, hearing the sound of the guns in the distance, remembering the chaos of the landing, understands what might have happened and Gourbeyre beats his sailors to quarters and the larboard guns are ready to load. Even still, Penfentenio couldn’t have imagined the complete route he witnesses on the beach.
Gourbeyre orders one gun to fire intentionally short. The ball splashes into the water and what’s left of the French officers understand that the ship will cover their retreat. But the ship cannot yet fire into the sand lest the *Terpischore*’s guns hit her own troops. So the officers yell urgent orders and the French form into tight patrols, fighting their way to the longboats. Finally the *Terpischore* has a clear shot and she fires a half broadside onto the beach not five yards behind the last Frenchman. A space opens up between the chasing Merina and the fleeing French. The ship continues to fire her larboard guns, one after another, sweeping the beach, covering the French as they load the longboats.

Ratiandrazana orders his men to let them go. Be gone and do not come back here. I will unman you and devour your testicles with my rice. I will feed your fingers to my dogs.

Some hours later, Ratiandrazana stands on the beach, waiting. The surf laps at his bare feet while offshore the *Terpischore* makes ready to sail. Ratiandrazana watches tiny men scurry about the ship, up and down, around and around, their movements as mysterious to him as his stillness would be to them. Ratiandrazana watches one man in particular—a man with more gold on his clothes than the others. According to the boy, the man is the Governor of the Island of Bourbon, and he stands on the highest deck arguing with the man who is in charge of the ships. Behind Ratiandrazana two of his personal guard hold between them the dying form of Bertrand Hercule Blévec, political leftist and Governor of the Island of Sainte-Marie. Ratiandrazana watches Penfentenio on the fo'c'sle of the *Terpischore*.

Ratiandrazana waits while Blévec moans and bleeds.

Finally he sees what he is waiting for. A sailor talks to Penfentenio and points with his finger at Ratiandrazana on the shore. Penfentenio raises a long glass to one eye and aims the glass at Ratiandrazana. The lens flashes in the sun. When Ratiandrazana knows that the Governor of Bourbon is watching, he nods to his two men who force Blévec onto his knees on the wet sand. Ratiandrazana lifts
his machete and with a stroke powered by all the hatred a man can hold, severs Blévec’s head from his shoulders. Ratiandrazana’s men let the body crumple to the sand while Ratiandrazana picks up the head by its hair. He takes a spear from one of his soldiers, and with a strong thrust mounts the head on the spear. Gore oozes down the shaft. Ratiandrazana stands on shore, facing the Terpischore, holding Blévec’s skewered head. Another glass rises on the fo’c'sle, and the three men stand watching each other until Ratiandrazana sees the other glasses fall. He turns, still carrying the laden spear, and with his men disappears into the forest.

At the fort at Tintingue, Penfentenio sits at a desk writing dispatches to Paris describing the recent action in Madagascar. He praises the bravery of Bertrand Hercule Blévec and Captain Fénix at Foulepointe, and declines to lay blame for the disorderly landing and the resulting route. He commends Commodore Gourbeyre for his foresight in preparing the Terpischore to cover the French retreat on the beach. He exaggerates just a little the victories at Tamatave and Hivondrona, but he describes in plain terms the action at Foulepointe. In total, the French lost eleven men dead and twenty-six wounded, while the reports he’s received estimate seventy-five Merina dead and fifty wounded. He emphasizes in his report the discrepancy between these numbers, and calls Foulepointe a “disappointment” rather than a “defeat.”

Commodore Gourbeyre has rendezvoused with his other five ships here at Tintingue, and while repairs are made to the Terpischore, the Governor and the Commodore make plans for their next assault. As soon as the Terpischore is repaired and resupplied, they intend to proceed against a Merina position at Pointe à Larrée. The Governor writes to Paris that to replace Blévec he has appointed an interim governor for the Island of Sainte-Marie, a man named Tourrette, Blévec’s senior and most competent clerk. But perhaps Jean-Louis Joseph Carayon, a merchant who developed the island’s trade and later
became its first French governor, could be reappointed permanently? Penfentenio is composing a new variation on his constant theme outlining the need for more troops, more ships, and more resources in the Indian Ocean when a knock on his door interrupts him.

The messenger is a boy, perhaps twelve, a midshipman from the dispatch Hector. He makes his obedience to Penfentenio, and holds out a packet of dispatches from Paris. “We came in on the tide, sir. There’s news from Paris. Captain Dambané sends these with his compliments, and invites you and Commodore Gourbeyre to dine with him aboard the Hector after you’ve had a chance to read the letters, sir.”

Penfentenio is still thinking about his arguments to Paris. He flips through the dispatches and asks, half-distracted, “What news from Paris?”

The midshipman looks at his feet and stammers a little. “Captain Dambané gave me orders, sir, not to say anything to you until you’ve had a chance to read the letters. He says, sir, begging your pardon, that they’re urgent.”

Penfentenio looks up sharply at the boy, then down at the most senior dispatch. He notices the seal is wrong. He looks again at the boy, “This is from the Minister of Marine?”

“Yes, sir.”

“This is not the seal of the Minister of Marine.”

“It is now, sir. Begging your pardon.”

Penfentenio sighs. “Urgent indeed.” He sets the stack of dispatches on his desk, the one from the Ministry on top. He turns back to the boy, “Has Commodore Gourbeyre received his orders yet?”

“Yes, sir. I delivered his then came straight to you.”

“Thank you, Midshipman. Please give my compliments to your captain, and reply that it will be my pleasure to dine with him in one hour’s time.”
“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” And the messenger is gone.

Penfentenio sits at his desk for a moment, looking down at the sealed document from the Minister of Marine. He wonders if he cares what’s inside, and decides that to the extent this news affects a lavender field in Provence, he cares. Otherwise, not. He reaches out with hands still steady but brown with liver spots. He breaks the seal and begins to read.
CHAPTER 17

...In which we learn of the origin of the Merina people, and an announcement is made by the queen

Antananarivo, 1829

Part 1: There Is No Child

The Prince of the East Andriambahoaka, they say, was moved to pay a visit to his grandfather, Sky Father an-dRalanitra. He took his children with him, Grey-Eyed-Man Ingarabelahy, Young-Man-Worth-Six Izatovotsiota, and Manly-Princess Andriambavitoalaha, and his subjects, Many-Cares Imaroahina and Many-Close-Ones Imaromanaihy. He took ten bulls and ten cows with their young from the Kingdom of Many Itanimaroanio and the Valley of Many Trees Isakatriniba.

The Prince of the North, too, was moved, and he took with him his sons To-Be-Powerful and Powerful’s-Father.

The Prince of the West too was moved. He took sons Smith-of-the-Silver-Gods and To-Be-Powerful and his eight daughters.

The Prince of the South too was moved. He took his sons Well-Shaped-Man and Cat-with-Big-Mane and his eight daughters.

They wanted to visit Sky Father. They were his grandchildren. To welcome them their grandfather picked from his herds a bull named Big-One-No-Turning-Aside and a cow Big-Wader. Reunited with his grandsons, grandfather Sky Father said, “I am pleased. No swine or curs will inherit my land.” Sky Father was happy. He fired a cannon and a gun and he fed them.
From the top of the hill overlooking Andohalo four cannons fire followed by a salute of one hundred guns. When the roar subsides, Todisoa turns to Ani and says, “The shot from the guns is like the many great-grandchildren of Sky Father, scattering through the land. No swine or curs will inherit the land because Sky Father has many progeny.” Todisoa smiles wide when he says this, and gives the childless Ani a look that says, *You are large and powerful with the queen, but you have no children and therefore I am richer than you.* Todisoa knows this story by heart—the story of Ibonamasiboniamanoro, He of the Clear and Captivating Glance. Todisoa and the hundred thousand Merina who crowd the plain of Andohalo today have grown up on this tale, and still they listen as if it was for the first time. They are children at the feet of their storyteller.

Then came the Prince of the Center, the Great-King-Maker, and his wife Beautiful-Rich Rasoabemanana. Even the sky was stirred, and the earth trembled where they passed with their subjects The-Clan-of-a-Thousand-Warriors and The-Clan-of-Gathering-a-Hundred-Warriors. Grass dried up, herb stalks tangled together, and the earth rumbled at the passing of the clan Too-Many-to-Call. The Prince of the Center too wanted to visit Sky Father, because he was the eldest of his grandchildren.

When the Prince of the Center arrived, Sky Father said, “I am pleased, dear boy, that you both came to call on me. For the four who came before you I had the guns and cannons fire a hail of bullets. The meal of welcome which I gave them was all fruitful things because they have many children. But you I will treat differently. I will order the guns and cannons fired. I will have them loaded with one single stone and I will have the fired into the ground.”

Todisoa whispers to Ani, “By firing the cannon into the ground, Sky Father honors the Prince of the Center, but he cannot send the shot out because Prince of the Center has no children.” Todisoa
attends to the *kabary* with a look of intense concentration; he sometimes mouths the words of the story along with the speaker.

Then Sky Father sent for cattle as the welcoming gift, and said, “Take these cattle,” and he named them, seventeen in all...

Todisoa recites the names the cattle with the speaker.

“...And take a hundred oxen and a hundred bulls. Also take a hundred rams and a hundred ewes, a hundred fattened fowl and a hundred capons.” And all these animals were gathered before him. Sky Father had begotten Heaven-Watcher, who had begotten these five brothers: Prince of the East, Prince of the West, Prince of the North, Prince of the South, and Prince of the Center. Then Sky Father said, “Bring Heaven-Watcher...

*He was not there before*, Todisoa says to Ani.

“...and I will offer the meal of welcome for my children, Prince of the Center and Beautiful-Rich.”

When Heaven-Watcher came, he called his five sons. Sky Father went out to mount his golden throne, and he made a speech:

*This is a good part!*

“Now I have readied the gifts of welcome for the four men but not for Prince of the Center. We will set two groups facing each other, with a hundred bulls, a hundred oxen and the rest. I have had the guns and cannons fired with a single charge, and the discharge was lost in the earth, because there is no child to cry.”

Todisoa’s eyes in the sun sparkle with tears. “There was no child to cry!” he keens. A suspicion unfolds and settles in Ani. He scrutinizes the royal dais. Ranavalona sits under her scarlet canopy, too far away for Ani to see her properly. Andriamihaja stands behind her in his usual spot, but Ani thinks he
may be leaning a little closer, a little more proprietary. Ratiandrazana stands also with the royal party, his face unreadable. A knot of conservative nobles, including Ratiandrazana’s brother Rainiharo and the nobleman Andriamamba, congregate in Ratiandrazana’s orbit. But Ani sits with the multitudes, and the dais is too far away. It’s been just over a full year since Ranavalona’s husband died, and Ani knows that Ranavalona is childless. Ani wonders if his suspicion is right, and if it is, what the implications might be. Possible futures play out in his mind.

Sky Father said, “Beautiful-Rich is barren! Prince of the Center has fathered no child. What I have to say to you Beautiful-Rich and Prince of the Center is this: All is well, excellent is your greatness, but there is no child to cry!”

The multitude erupts in yelling and clapping and stomping of feet, and a pounding roar echos through the natural amphitheater at Andohalo. Steep hills surround the hollow, and in addition to the fifty thousand people gathered in the open space, another twenty thousand watch from houses built on the sides and top of the hills. Around the perimeter of the amphitheater Ratiandrazana’s army of twenty thousand men musters in their dress uniforms and muskets. Near the center of Andohalo the royal party sits under its scarlet canopy at a small space where no grass grows. A bare blue rock surfaces there, and none but the sovereign may set foot on that rock.

Now, Queen Ranavalona sits on her throne, her feet brushing the sacred blue rock, and Ani listens to the story of Ibonamasiboniamanoro, He of the Clear and Captivating Glance. He listens to how Ibonia’s warrior mother Rasoabemanana, Beautiful-Rich, conceived him. When the uproar quiets, the speaker continues, and Ani listens with a different kind of attention, listens for a different kind of meaning.
Part 2: Her Quest for Conception

When Beautiful-Rich heard the words of Sky Father, she was upset. She wept, she cried out, she covered her husband Prince of the Center with tears up to his neck. Then she said, “Prince, men are assembled here; much wealth is here. Only a single calabash is denied us...

Todisoa makes a circle with his arms in front of his belly, like a round squash or a pregnant woman.

...and swine and curs must inherit this kingdom and this land.” The Prince of the Center said, “I will take no second wife...

*Good princes are loyal! I would have taken a second wife.*

...Go you. Get help from Great-Echo, the diviner, and get from him a childbearing charm.”

So Beautiful-Rich set out to get help from Great-Echo the diviner. With her she took ten women and a hundred men carrying guns, spears and muskets.

*She brought an army with her!*

When they reached Great-Echo’s place, he said, “The ‘line for two’ is not made by my foot, and the ‘line for four’ is not made by my hand...

*The sikidy, the diviner, is the channel, not the creator of the divination signs.*

...What will happen next year, I see this year. What will happen tomorrow, I see today. So I know even before you open your mouth what brings you here. Grieving, it is your need for a child. How many men are with you? How many women are with you?”

Beautiful-Rich said, “A hundred men carrying a hundred guns, a hundred spears, and a hundred muskets. And ten women, carrying ten round stones.”

“Aaaayyyyy!” said Great-Echo.
Aaaayyyyy! cried Todisoa. Aaaayyyyy! cried a hundred thousand voices.

“A formidable man will he be on earth. In your womb a thousand men, inside you one hundred men, ten years will you carry him, Rasoabemanana.”

Ten years! cries Todisoa.

Great-Echo said to Beautiful-Rich, “If you will agree, then that is what I give to you. If you will not agree, you will have no other child. Go home, then, for this child is a disaster child. Disaster, that one, a calamity child. He is thunder, he is lightening, on earth he will kill his father, in the womb he will kill his mother!”

Todisoa’s hands are clasped together tightly as he waits for Beautiful-Rich’s answer. As if he doesn’t know. As if this story has not already been told a hundred thousand times.

Then Beautiful-Rich said, “Ahhh—it is bad to have nothing. Even disaster is better than nothing, and the child is the heir to the father.” Great-Echo said, “So be it. If you agree, then go to Male-Rock-of-a-Thousand-Corners...”

At the name of the stone, Todisoa giggles like a young boy making a dirty joke.

...There will be lightening, there will be animals, there will be deadly things. When you go there, have each of your women carry two cannonballs and you carry three. A locust you will get there as your childbearing charm. There a thousand strong men will meet you, but those thousand strong men will flee, for that one locust will be a raging bull. Thus you will pass over the Male-Rock-of-a-Thousand-Corners.”

So Beautiful-Rich set out. When she arrived near the rock, waterspouts, winds, thunderbolts, hail fell upon her. So did all deadly things. Seven times did the ten women fall, but Beautiful-Rich did not fall. When she came to the north of the rock, there was the locust on top of it. Male-Rock-of-a-
Thousand-Corners sank down level with the ground. Again did her ten servant women fall, crushing their hands, but Beautiful-Rich did not fall.

The locust was bombarded with bullets so that Beautiful-Rich could catch it, but the locust did not die. Then Beautiful-Rich bound up her loins like a man to catch the locust, and she did catch the locust. Male-Rock-of-a-Thousand-Corners carried them up, flying. They almost reached the sky, but Beautiful-Rich would not fall, for she was sitting atop the rock.

_The stone hated her and that’s why she was barren, and it was fighting her for the locust so she could have a child._

Then it came down to earth, and if fell into the same place as before. Beautiful-Rich slid into the stone, and took the locust to make a childbearing charm.

The crowd again erupts into cheers. _Hail Beautiful-Rich!_ Todisoa jumps up and down, adding his voice to the cacophony.

Then each of the oldest trees in the world began to speak:

_Beautiful-Rich needed another part for her childbearing charm, a part from one of the oldest trees in the world. But she didn’t know which tree, and the trees tried to trick her._

“_I am the childbearing charm,”_ said Does-Not-Wither-When-Transplanted. “_I am the childbearing charm,”_ said Does-Not-Dry-When-Transplanted. “_I am the childbearing charm,”_ said Hundred-in-the-Womb. But Beautiful-Rich went into the forest and climbed up Single-Trunk.

_Beautiful-Rich was smart! She knew the right tree._

When she reached the top of Single-Trunk, it was the locust who seized the charm. Then Beautiful-Rich came back, traversing spiderweb to spiderweb, not touching the sky, not touching the blossoms on the trees as she passed, not walking on the ground.
Then the childbearing charm that Beautiful-Rich gathered in the forest showed itself to the prince of a nearby village and said, “Say your prayers, for Beautiful-Rich is in battle!” Then came Beautiful-Rich from the forest on her spiderwebs, and settled in her own village Long-Standing Iliolava. Its stones smashed each other, its grass dried up. It was a town that could withstand anything, and thus its name, Long-Standing.

In the northwest of Andohalo, two hundred and fifty people stand up and start dancing and clapping, chanting this last part of the epic over and over again. Soon the crowd around them is clapping and chanting as well. Todisoa leans over to Ani and says, “Those are the villagers from Iliolava. They’re very proud of this part of the story. They always do this.” Todisoa frowns, disapproving, and Ani chuckles a little to himself. Village rivalries are the same through time.

Part 3: The Locust Becomes a Baby

When Beautiful-Rich came to the village, her thousand men went to gather firewood to roast the locust and give it to her to eat. When the firewood had come, they lit all of it at once in one hearth and roasted the locust there. The locust shone fiercely in the flames. The fire was hot, and high, but the locust wouldn’t cook.

So Beautiful-Rich sent for Great-Echo the diviner. But even before her messengers reached him, Great-Echo had a vision. He said, “Now then, Clever Slave Girl, what is that in the east?” The girl went to look and said, “See! Seven men are coming from the east. They hasten with their spears, they brandish muskets.” “Ah,” said Great-Echo, “They are from Young-Woman-with-Disaster-Child.” When the messengers reached his place, he said, “I understand the unsignified, I know the unsaid. How many men have blown the conch? How many men have fired muskets? How many men have beaten
drums? How many men have gone for firewood? How many men have fought bulls around the house? How many men have killed bulls?"

And they said, “None of that has been done, grandfather.” The Great-Echo said to them, “First, go bring together a thousand fighting bulls, a thousand muskets to shoot, a thousand conchs to blow. Seventy drummers, thrice seven bulls for slaughter, a hundred rams for slaughter. I will wait until the Friday of the new year. Then a new king is enthroned, decrees are executed in the capital, and no one is unjustly killed...

Ani remembers this line, “No one is unjustly killed.” He memorizes the exact language, and hopes he will not have to use with with the queen.

...For that child has a potent fate. Go you now back to Beautiful-Rich.”

When the messengers returned to Beautiful-Rich, they told her his words, so that they could gather all those things before Great-Echo arrived.

_They kept the fire burning, but the locust wouldn’t cook._

On the appointed Friday, Great-Echo set out for Beautiful-Rich in her village of Long-Standing. When he was at her door, he said, “Fire the cannon around the village.”

A great volley of cannon fire sounds from the hilltops of Andohalo. The crowd starts, and looks to the east. Ani’s suspicion turns to certainty.

On the east slope of the hill, put up the idols The Only Uplifter and The One with Many Victims. And in the east the keepers of the idols hold up the two sampy, and the crowd exhales an _ahhhh_.

The cannon was fired around the village. A thousand bulls fought around the town. There was shouting and rejoicing, and the hundred rams and the thrice seven bulls were killed.

Todisoa again leans over to Ani and whispers, “The two idols were placed east of the village
because the boy’s rival lay to the east.” Ani nods, but his mind is on other things. He is looking at Ratiandrazana, who has not moved in the hours of the storytelling.

Only then did Great-Echo enter the house of Beautiful-Rich to approach the locust. When he stepped over her threshold the locust broke away from the hearth and went to the ridgepole of the house. Fire spread before Great-Echo and the locust. Then Great-Echo gave orders, saying “I see that child is a disaster, I see that child is a calamity. I see a formidable man on the earth. Yet I am the one who gave him to Beautiful-Rich of Long-Standing. If you are not to come to term, go south or north, and do not throw yourself into the fire. But if you are to become human, to be an unstoppable animal, to be a unique ruler, then throw yourself into the fire!”

Todisoa stands up and with the people around him, they join the speaker in the next line.

And the locust dropped into the fire and was cooked!

Todisoa cheers, the Merina cheer, and the storyteller waits for the noise to subside across Andohalo.

The locust cooked in the fire, then jumped out of the fire and perched on the head of Beautiful-Rich. It pierced her head and settled in her womb, took shape, and became a child. And when the baby was formed in Beautiful-Rich’s womb, then the ten bulls and the hundred rams were killed. Beautiful-Rich ate them all herself, but from then on she ate no more. She allowed only wind into her mouth until her baby’s birth. Ten years was the baby in her womb!

And that’s how the barren Beautiful-Rich conceived the child Iboina! To the great roaring of the crowd, the speaker steps off the podium and walks to his seat near the royal party. Cheering and clapping and singing fill the amphitheater at Andohalo, the noise a pressure, squeezing Ani between the earth and the sky. He watches the queen, Andriamihaja, and Ratiandrazana. Ratiandrazana still has not moved, his face carved from stone. The queen watches her subjects, and Andriamihaja watches the
queen. In the cacophony, people are getting up and moving around, and Ani takes the opportunity to excuse himself from Todisoa’s company and move closer to the center of the kabary space. The crowd makes room for him as he towers over the multitude, and Ani knows from the subtlest shift in focus that he has caught Ratiandrazana’s attention—the general watches him momentarily out of the corner of his eye. But still his face does not move.

Ani finds a place closer to the dais, and yes, he can see the flush in the queen’s cheeks, a new softness in the features of her face. He guesses she is three months along. The queen turns to Andriamihaja, and he helps her up from her throne. As she moves from her seat and stands on the sacred stone, Ani hears the march and clang of military maneuvers, and all the crowd turns to see the army forming up into a corridor. A battalion of one thousand men escorts thrice seven bulls and a hundred rams into a pen already prepared. With the thousand muskets march seventy drummers and a hundred trumpets, and Ani feels as if the thunder and lightening of Rasoabemanana’s battle with the stone are here made manifest in Andohalo. The trumpets sound a fanfare and the queen raises her hands for quiet. She takes her time, allowing the crowd to settle again. And then, to complete silence in the amphitheater, she speaks.

“My people. You have heard of the great battle we have recently fought with the vahaza. I know you agree with me when I say we will perish before seeing these pirates seize possession of one acre of our land. These white men are like frogs—in their element while on water, but clumsy and stupid when on land. Seabound in their ships they are invincible, but once they step ashore...” The queen breaks off, pauses a moment for effect.

“The great and noble Ratiandrazana has recently returned from Tamatave, where he drove the greedy vahaza back to their boats and they ran under full sail back to their islands!” A great cheer rises from the crowd, but it quickly fades as the multitude waits on the queen’s words. “To this, I say three
things. First, to Ratiandrazana I give the crown’s share of the spoils from the conquest.” Ani sucks in his breath; it is an extraordinary gesture. He guesses she makes it in part to soften the blow of what is to come. But in one stroke, she has made Ratiandrazana a serious contender for the richest man in the kingdom and the most powerful man at court. Ani looks at Andriamihaja, but his expression hasn’t changed. Ani thinks, *He knew she was going to do this.*

“Second, I now decree that as of this moment, all trade with the French is hereby prohibited on pain of death. French traders be warned—your stand in Imerina is tenuous; we will be watching you. You may continue to live among us in peace, but we want nothing more of your stolen goods, your lies, your arrogance and your greed. Furthermore, we find that we are no longer bound by the treaty that the great King Radama signed with King George IV of Great Britain. The representatives from the London Missionary Society may stay, at my pleasure, as long as they continue to teach the people of Imerina useful things. But we hereby decline to receive the equivalent which the British government has been accustomed to sending to Radama.”

Again, Ani is stunned. He will have to think on the repercussions; he will have to listen carefully with his spies. The prohibition on trade with the French will boost the importance of the Arab traders in Imerina, and the French may turn to the Sakalava for trading partners. Even if they do, however, this is a significant blow to the slave plantations on the French Island of Bourbon. How her repudiation of the 1820 treaty will affect the British in Tana is unclear—Griffiths and Jones will be relieved that she is allowing them to stay, but the language of her proclamation leaves their status still somewhat tenuous, subject to expulsion at any time. Ani wonders how serious she is about the trade ban. He wonders if her repudiation of the British treaty is a lead-up to the expulsion of the missionaries and the resumption of slave exports. Perhaps she is just flexing her muscles.
“Third. It has been twelve months since my husband the great King Radama turned his back on the world. Twelve months since I adopted the ambaniandro as my children. Like Rasoabemana, I have fought a great battle. Tonight, a thousand royal bulls will be slaughtered to celebrate the victory of Ratiandrazana at Tamatave.” *And the people will eat well tonight*, Ani thinks. “I myself will eat these thrice seven bulls and hundred rams, and after that, I will allow only wind in my mouth, until my baby, the son of King Radama and heir to the throne of Imerina, is born!”

And now there is no holding back in the crowd; a hundred thousand people are suddenly on their feet, yelling and shouting, “Blessed Ranavalo-manjaka!” “Sacred child of King Radama!” “Cheers for the heir to the throne!” Andohalo has erupted into cheering chaos, Ani can smell *toaka* in gourds, *besakosako* in sugarcane containers. Ani has learned that public brawling is both common and generally unpunished in Antananarivo—indeed, it is practically a national sport—and he suddenly wants very badly to get out and away from Andohalo. He looks over at Ratiandrazana, their eyes meet, and with a small nod of his head, Ratiandrazana invites Ani to join him and his allied nobles. The queen is leaving with her escort and Andriamihaja, and Ani accepts Ratiandrazana’s invitation.
...In which the conflict between the executioner and the general is resolved

Antananarivo, 1829

Three hours later in the courtyard of Ratiandrazana’s house, Ratiandrazana presses a spear to Ani’s breast. The sharp point of the spearhead sends a tickle of blood down Ani’s skin. Ratiandrazana is very drunk. He stands less than an arm’s length from the towering executioner, choking up on the spear shaft with both hands as he challenges Ani with fierce eyes. *I will enjoy killing you*, those eyes say to Ani. *I am savoring this moment, but one moment only, and then you will be dead.* Goshawk feathers tied to the shaft flutter with the two men’s breath. Ani exhales, the feathers float toward Ratiandrazana; Ratiandrazana exhales, the feathers float toward Ani. Ani feels the even pressure of the spearhead in his skin: drunk, Ratiandrazana is a better warrior than most of the men Ani has faced.

The scar above Ratiandrazana’s eye, the souvenir from his battle with the Sakalava at Mahajunga ten years earlier, puckers with concentration. Ani remembers Todisoa’s stories of the massacre at Mahasoabe, the messenger at the gate to Ikongo with his throat slit. Without breaking Ratiandrazana’s gaze, Ani waits for the compression of muscles in the Malagasy’s legs, belly, back, and arms, that will come an instant before he thrusts the spearhead home.

His eyes still locked on Ratiandrazana, Ani allows a small smile to develop on his face. He is genuinely pleased, because now he knows. This moment, this spearhead poised between life and death—this is why Ratiandrazana invited him to his home after the *kabary*. This is why the nobleman nodded to Ani when the towering Egyptian sought refuge from the drunken Malagasy masses. Ratiandrazana has been itching to put a spear through Ani since the first day the executioner arrived at
court. Ani sees in Ratiandrazana’s eyes a feral love for the kill. It lurks like a red stain across the inside of Ratiandrazana’s skin. Without glancing down, Ani knows that Ratiandrazana’s loincloth bulges with excitement. Men with that stain sometimes seek Ani out, thinking to befriend him. Ani loathes them. This passion, this adulation of pain and death, it works like a poison, corroding the character of the men who carry it. Ratiandrazana is cruel.

Ani has no doubt that Ratiandrazana will press the spearhead home. The courtyard in which the two men stand smells of dust and toaka, and banana leaves spotted with leftover rice, white like maggots, litter the tsihy mats. Twelve other men including Andriamamba and Rainiharo sit, squat, and stand in Ratiandrazana’s courtyard, drunk from the revelry, enjoying the entertainment. They yearn for blood, for an iron tang to dispel the perfumed stench of Andriamihaja that hangs like a miasma through their celebration. Andriamihaja, who snatched away Ratiandrazana’s victory, who stole like a thief the mighty thunder Ratiandrazana brought back from Tamatave. Andriamihaja, who is now feasting with the queen, possibly now fucking the queen. Andriamihaja, who will prance like a king, a king indeed in all but name.

Ratiandrazana cannot kill Andriamihaja, not yet, although the need will grow with Ranavalona’s belly. It doesn’t matter if the child is actually Andriamihaja’s—all that matters is that the queen and the court believe that it is. And clearly they believe it. They believe that the child is both Radama’s and Andriamihaja’s. This is women’s business, their schemes as inscrutable to Ratiandrazana as the rut of a cyclone across the island. And as easy to battle. Ratiandrazana wants to thrust a spear into the heart of the court, fillet the body of the nobility and devour it before a raped and broken queen. That would be the natural order of things.

But the Merina have been polluted by foreigners, and the way of things is upside-down and backwards, like inside-out clothing that leaks away your wealth. Ratiandrazana and his allies put
Ranavalona on the throne in order to rid Imerina of the foreign poison. And now they must endure a
twoman who insists on acting like a sovereign. A queen who is in love with her fool. It was
Ratiandrazana who was supposed to take her for wife, not the fop Andriamihaja. It was Ratiandrazana
who was supposed to rule.

No, Ratiandrazana cannot kill Andriamihaja. Not yet. But Ratiandrazana can kill the foreigner.
He can kill this tall Egyptian, this man who takes no joy in his work. He can kill him, cut out his heart,
and feed it, still warm, still beating, to the men scattered like black maggots across his courtyard.
Ratiandrazana tastes Ani’s blood in his mouth, grinds the tough meat between his teeth. He smells the
iron tang, blowing away the perfumed stench of Andriamihaja.

In this liminal moment, Ratiandrazana lusts for soft, liquid fear in Ani’s eyes. He will find none,
but still he will press the spearhead home.

Ani waits for the gathering of strength that will come an instant before Ratiandrazana thrusts the
spear through Ani’s chest. The dribble of blood itches Ani’s skin. The feather floats on the tension
between the two men. And then Ratiandrazana’s eyes sharpen to pinpoints, his feet root into the ground,
his arms and his chest contract like a spring and Ani is moving sideways, the spearhead dragging across
his breast, drawing a line in bright blood. The spear plunges forward, but Ani isn’t there anymore and
the spearhead slices through sticky air. Ani twists faster than Ratiandrazana lunges, which is very fast
indeed, but Ani dances sideways, seizes Ratiandrazana’s arms and uses the warrior’s forward
momentum to knock his legs out from under him and throw him onto his back on the ground. The force
of the fall shakes the earth as the nobleman lands with a thwack and a grunt, his lungs vomiting air.

But the spear points up, and even before Ratiandrazana’s body has recoiled from the fall he
sweeps the spear sideways, aiming at the back of Ani’s calves, and though Ani dances again and the
spear misses his Achilles tendon, it opens a deep wound in the muscle of his calf. Ratiandrazana uses his own momentum to roll out of the fall and he is on his feet again while Ani stumbles on his bloodied left leg. The two men face off, Ratiandrazana brandishing the spear, his feet rooted into the ground in fighting stance, the muscles of his legs, arms, and chest smooth and bulging inside his slick skin. Hate burns in his eyes.

Ani calculates, coldly. Ratiandrazana is strong and fast, armed, and intent. His spear neutralizes Ani’s reach and size advantage. The other men have backed away to the edges of the courtyard, leaving an open area for the two men to battle. The fight is unlawful but culturally acceptable, and the rules are understood by everyone there—the other men will not interfere. Ani briefly considers killing Ratiandrazana, but he cannot for reasons both moral and political. Above them, the blue stars gaze upon the two men like the eyes of Ratiandrazana’s ancestors, like the eyes of Ani’s gods, and Ani feels his heart beating in a pan, balanced against the feather of justice. Ani is a servant of Law, and he cannot kill this man.

Ratiandrazana’s eyes burn with hate, and Ani knows what to do. Many years ago, in a monastery in the mountains of China, Ani received a lesson from a master of Wu Shu fighting. The master broke thirty-two bones in Ani’s body, slipped a knife sixteen times into Ani’s skin with a degree of precision that left Ani alive but wishing fervently he would be allowed to die. Ani learned about fire, passion and anger and impatience. So Ani stands, cold, calculating, while Ratiandrazana seethes, building up pressure that will explode at Ani with deadly force and speed.

Ani watches, warm blood running down his leg, slippery on his foot. Ratiandrazana hangs on the moment, breathing hard, until the pressure inside him bursts and he strikes like a snake, unbelievably fast, the spear pointed down at Ani’s belly and groin. Ani glides sideways, the spear grazes his left hip as he twists around Ratiandrazana and rams a sharp elbow into the middle of Ratiandrazana’s back. The
warrior lurches forward, off balance, and Ani clamps onto the shaft of the spear and jerks, trying to tear it out of Ratiandrazana’s hands.

But Ratiandrazana will not let go and he uses Ani’s weight on the spear shaft to shove him sideways, turning to bring the point again to bear. But Ratiandrazana has exposed his flank, and Ani slams his open palm into Ratiandrazana’s ribs. Bones crack in the night. Ratiandrazana flinches and Ani’s left leg snaps forward in a fan of blood, the instep smashing into Ratiandrazana’s ear. The warrior’s neck whips sideways and he falls to the ground, dazed. Careful to stay out of range of Ratiandrazana’s strike, Ani moves through the man’s space and collects the spear. Ratiandrazana struggles to bring his body back under his own control, but Ani knows he has a moment or two before the black behind Ratiandrazana’s eyes clears.

Holding the spear in his right hand, leaning on his right leg to favor his injured calf, Ani presses the point of the spear into Ratiandrazana’s breast. He sends a tickle of blood down Ratiandrazana’s skin. He plants his bloody left foot onto Ratiandrazana’s throat and leans, feeling Ratiandrazana’s trachea pinch down under his heel. Ani’s blood flows down Ratiandrazana’s neck. Fighting for breath, Ratiandrazana pounds with both his fists the injury on Ani’s leg, and fireworks of pain burst into Ani’s ankle, knee, and hip. But Ani has experience with pain, and enough self control to keep the pressure on Ratiandrazana’s throat. Not enough pressure to kill him, but enough to make him wish he would be allowed to die. Ani holds the warrior on the painful, panicked edge of unconsciousness for two solid minutes, Ratiandrazana flailing with decreasing strength at Ani’s injury, until finally the Merina’s arms collapse onto the ground and the only fire left in him is the hatred in his eyes.

Ani closes Ratiandrazana’s windpipe with his heel and sends him into unconsciousness. Then he steps back, still holding the spear. He looks down at Ratiandrazana on the ground, then looks up at the
men still squatting on the edges of the courtyard. He stands up straight, his left leg a pillar of fire, and says to them, “I am not your enemy. Tell Ratiandrazana this.”

Ratiandrazana’s brother, Rainiharo, stands and faces Ani. “I will tell him, Ramanany Executioner. But know this of my brother Ratiandrazana:

He is the descendant of powerful bulls.
When he is angry,
The top of his head bristles.
When he raises his head, the sky bursts open;
When he bends, the earth bursts open;
When he tramples on trees, they twist;
When he tramples on the earth, it splits;
When he tramples on the sky, it thunders.”

Ani nods at Rainiharo, and says, “Your brother is a powerful man and a dangerous enemy. But you should know this about me:

I am not the husked rice that does not sprout,
nor the fold empty of cattle,
nor the earth that has no choice,
but I am a stone thrown at a cardinal,
unafraid of the falling rice.

It’s not me your brother hates, nor me who hates your brother. Remind him of this. I don’t want his friendship, but I do require his respect. He has mine. Tell him that, too.”

Rainiharo says simply, “I will tell him. You should leave now.”

Ani replies, “Goodnight,” then turns slowly, still carrying Ratiandrazana’s spear. Under the gazing blue stars he limps out of the courtyard and down the road toward his own home.
CHAPTER 19

...In which a farmer prepares his fields for planting

Anjozorobe, 1829

On Saturday—the day of the blue lamba, the day of children and young people, the day of scars when one is easily wounded in a fight—on Saturday the ambiaty bloomed. The cold winds and drizzly showers of August have given way to the warm air and clear skies of September springtime in Imerina, the time the Merina call lohantaona, the head of the year. The land, bare and uninviting in the dry winter months, has begun to stir. Insects formed from the new abundance of heat and light fill the air, and from the insects come the birds and the lizards with their sharp beaks and quick tongues. Todisoa has been watching the trees beginning to green, he has been watching the flowers beginning to bud, and he has been watching especially the ambiaty shrub replace its feathery dead leaves with new ones shiny and sharp. And on Saturday the ambiaty bloomed. His three sons ran into the village from where they were minding the cattle, calling “vaki ny’ambiaty!” And when Todisoa and the other villagers went out to inspect their rice fields, they found that indeed the bushes were covered in a great frothing of violet flowers.

Todisoa is moved as he is every year by this simple act of resurrection, the land coming back to life, and he feels in himself a kind of resurrection as well. He feels his body lifting itself out of its cold-induced stupor, preparing itself once again for the upcoming months of work in the fields. On Saturday he returned to his hut from his rice fields and gathered the seed rice he saved from last year’s harvest. His slaves brought water from the stream and poured it into tightly-woven baskets; Todisoa poured in the seed rice and there it soaked for two days. Since then Todisoa has been moving his seeds back and
forth between the warm sun during the day and the warm rafters during the evening, and now the seeds have sprouted their white worm sprouts and it is time for the first sowing in the tanin-ketsa, the seedling grounds.

This morning Todisoa and his entire family walk with full baskets out to the rice fields. He and his older sons carry the seed baskets; the women and children carry food and cooking implements, for today will be the first of many long days and today they will eat in the fields. The sun is not yet up, and the moon reflects off the flooded fields ghostly and silent amid the eerie whir of the grasshoppers and the licentious croaking of the frogs. One of the younger boys begins to cry as a water rat splashes to safety. His older brother teases him, saying the rat was once the lover of a witch who used her evil magic to transform him when he abandoned her. Todisoa’s wife shushes the children—she does not want to listen to talk of witches with the moon wavering weirdly in the fields.

During the days while he was waiting for the seeds to sprout, Todisoa and his sons prepared the nursery fields. They repaired the drainage and irrigation canals, and around the edges of the fields in strips about three feet wide they dug the soil into large clods. They mixed the clods with manure then spread the earth back out over the tanim-ketsa. They will treat the larger portion of the fields the same way while the seedlings grow, and after the rains have begun in earnest they will transplant the seedlings. But now the nursery grounds have been flooded for three days and the earth is soft and wet and ready to receive the seed.

When they arrive at the rice fields the women and small children unroll a tsihy mat under an old acacia tree and start to prepare the morning meal. The men take the baskets of sprouted seeds and wade through Todisoa’s moderate expanse of rice fields, he and his sons spreading out so each covers a section of the tanim-ketsa. The water is not deep, not even reaching his ankles, but his feet sink into the
cold mud and unseen creatures slither across his toes. When Todisoa arrives at his corner of the field, he reaches into his basket for a handful of seed rice then casts the seeds upon the water. They sink to the ground, settling. Tomorrow he will drain the *tanim-ketsa* and the seeds will root and grow.

Handful after handful he broadcasts the seed rice thickly across the narrow strip of land. The work is both satisfying and monotonous, and as he moves mechanically down the length of the field his mind worries the most recent problem with his sons. Two weeks ago the village elder called a *fivoriana* for all the *fokonolo* of his village. The tax collector was there, as well as a man whom the elder introduced as a census-taker working for Her Majesty the Queen. The census-taker spoke for a long time about the greatness of Imerina, and about the honor bestowed on those who serve Queen Ranavalona. During the hours of talking Todisoa and the other villagers learned that the queen plans to expand the royal *fanampoana* units, specifically for the military, the stonemasons, the gold and silversmiths, the oil extractors, and the makers of gunpowder, cartridges, military clothes, watches, crates, wire, dye, and horn utensils. The census-taker expounded at length about the need for Imerina to become self-sufficient, to not rely on *vahaza* goods. He described in glorious terms the recent military victory against the *vahaza* invaders at Foulpointe. He left the villagers to draw their own conclusions about the threats to Merina sovereignty, and hinted at the power and wealth that might come from military service.

After the census-taker’s *kabary* the village elder spoke, and all the men of the village spoke, and after two days of talking and after everyone was satisfied that they had had their say, Todisoa knew that the crown would have one of his sons. Todisoa has five sons over the age of ten, and one of them must go either to the missionary schools where he might learn to read but will certainly be drafted into the military, or to one of the *fanampoana* units the census-taker named. Todisoa’s wife wants to send their fourth son to the schools. Of all her children he is the most clever, and she imagines he will become *deka* to a powerful officer.
If he goes to the schools the missionaries will provide for him until he leaves on campaign, after which he will be able to provide for himself. But if they send one of their sons to a *fanampeana* unit, they will have to support him. Todisoa reminds his wife that half the men who leave on military campaign don’t come back; they mostly die from starvation and disease. His wife responds that their fourth son was born under a lucky *vintana*, and she threatens to consult the *ombiasa* who will tell them their son’s destiny.

He and his wife argue as if they were fighting across a field of *tsingy*—they tear at each other with sharp words and stay far away from the edge of the canyon called Ikongo. Todisoa knows that his wife is right—their fourth son is clever, he would do well in the schools, and he was born on a lucky day that points to a successful and lucrative career. But Todisoa loves his son and does not wish upon him the likes of Ratiandrazana and Ikongo and Mahasoabe.

The sun breaks the horizon just as Todisoa tosses a handful of rice seed in the air. The seeds catch the dawn and fall like a rain of orange light, plopping into the thin water. In the basket he wraps his palm gently around another handful of seed, careful not to damage the sprouts. He withdraws his hand and tosses again. His basket is almost empty, he will have to go back to the acacia tree for more seeds, and he hopes his morning meal will be cooked when he gets there.

Today is not a good day to argue with his wife. Now that the seed is sown they must be careful to nurture the growing seedlings, and discord in his house could be a disaster. He will simply tell his wife: It is time for their eldest son to marry. They will find him a proper wife and then they will send him to Ranavalona’s *mpanao sotro* unit where he will learn to make utensils out of the horns of cattle. His eldest son is a respectful boy—he obeyed his parents without complaint when they refused his marriage to the market girl. His son is a dutiful boy and will obey his parents again when they send him to learn a trade. It will be good, Todisoa thinks, to have a son who knows a trade. Todisoa’s other seven sons are
plenty for the fieldwork, and sometimes it is good thing to send an eldest son away to make his own life. His parents and his wife’s parents and his wife will help him, and if he keeps his taboos and pleases the ancestors and the queen, he will make a good life.

Todisoa gathers the last handful of seed from the bottom of the basket. He tosses it so the sun-and fire-warmed rice travels first through the air and then through the water before settling into the earth. He has covered a very small portion of his *tanim-ketsa*, and he and his family will be out until after night falls and the frogs start croaking again. He wades back through the cold and gluey mud to where a warm fire and warm rice wait for him.
CHAPTER 20

...In which we see the workings of an iron mine, and the general gives the queen a gift

Ambatolehivy, 1829

Ani is traveling with Ratiandrazana and the queen on a five-day trip to the iron mines in Ambatolehivy, where the queen will inspect the work of the government laborers who mine and smelt iron ore to supply the capital. They travel in palanquins and are accompanied by a modest train of four of the queen’s women, twenty palace guards, and thirty servants who manage the queen’s chests of silks, tableware, and bedding. Two of Ratiandrazana’s servants carry boxes that contain special presents for the queen—presents Ratiandrazana brought back with him from Tamatave that he will present to the queen in private. They travel in October, on the cusp of the rainy season when the weather is cool and the roads are still good.

Ani thinks he was included on this trip as a tangled attempt by Ratiandrazana to build a better rapport between the two of them. Since their contest at Ratiandrazana’s house, they have only seen each other in passing, and have not spoken. The court gossiped about their fight for less than a week before other diversions distracted the nobility, and the altercation has been all but forgotten except by the two men themselves.

Ratiandrazana hates foreigners on principle, but he cannot deny that the vahaza are better gun-makers than any tribe on the island of Madagascar. The queen knows this too, and will be probing Ani to determine if he harbors secret knowledge that could improve the quality of metal goods produced by the Merina. Ani does—good steel is essential to the practice of his trade. He has spent time with steelmakers in Damascus, and owns a sword, a knife, and an ax blade made to his specifications by
metal smiths there. Here in Imerina, he must be careful to avoid conscription into the ironworking trade. Ani knows his role at court, and he would rather avoid a confrontation with a queen who might become determined to reassign him. On this trip, Ani will observe and remain as silent as possible.

They arrive on the evening of the second day to a self-important reception by the commander of the garrison in charge of iron production at Ambatolehivy. The morning of the third day they begin their inspection of the mines. Ambatolehivy’s seventy or eighty houses rest comfortably in a valley about seven miles wide. A clear stream bubbles down the length of the valley, and hills dark with forest rise seven hundred feet above the valley floor. Vertical belts of clearcut stripe the hills where lumber was harvested to make charcoal to supply the furnaces. Unlike most of the rest of the valleys near Tana, carpeted in the patchwork green of the ricefields, the valley surrounding Ambatolehivy resembles a field after an artillery battle. Hundreds of mining pits, each about three feet square and none more than eight feet deep, pockmark the land surrounding the village. Very little vegetation grows in the wasteland of the mines, and when the rains come, the bare soil washes into the stream and turns it the color of blood.

As they royal party travels away from the earthen houses of the village, they encounter increasing numbers of rude shelters constructed from one wall of sticks, three or four feet high, supporting a grass roof leaning down to the ground. These shelters house the government conscripts who work the mines, and the miners outnumber the villagers perhaps five to one. Filthy men with matted hair, covered in mud, and wearing only loincloths billowing around their waists dig with rude blades at the bottom of the pits. They extract ore fragments ranging in size from small pebbles to rocks the size of Ani’s fist. The royal party halts near one pit mine, and the emaciated miner at the bottom quits his work and drops his head in deference to the queen. The queen looks down into the pit and does not see a man hungry and almost worked to death. Rather, she sees an honorable man offering his labor to the crown
and enriching all of Imerina in the process. Ani, who walks next to the queen’s and Rantiandrazana’s palanquins, calls down to the miner to throw him up a rock.

He catches a chunk about the size and shape of a chicken egg, earthy umber mottled with silver-black, and heavy in Ani’s hand. He turns it around in his fingers a little, careful to keep his expression quizzical, like he doesn’t know what to look for. But from its weight he assesses the iron content of the ore at about sixty-five percent, and a slight yellow tinge, the faintest odor of rotten eggs, suggests that the ore is contaminated with sulfur. Trace amounts of sulfur remaining after the smelting process would account for the poor quality of the spearheads he finds in the royal armory. He throws the rock back and forth between his hands, then playfully tosses it up to Rantiandrazana.

Rantiandrazana catches the rock and looks at the queen with dancing eyes. Her red silk parasol flutters in the breeze. She has been watching the movement of the ore stone from the bottom of the pit to Ani to Rantiandrazana, and now she watches as Rantiandrazana closes his left hand around the stone, hiding it. He draws his steel knife with his right hand, and with a dexterous twist of his wrist, flips the knife so that it lies flat in his right palm, the point extending four inches past the tip of his middle finger. He opens his left hand and slowly moves the iron ore toward the tip of the knife. When the rock is within an inch or two of the knife point, the knife pivots so that it points toward the rock.

The queen claps her hands once and exclaims, “Extraordinary! Show me again.” Rantiandrazana does, and the queen insists on an explanation. Rantiandrazana tells her: “Of all the metals, iron is closest to humanity.” Rantiandrazana is being clever with words. The Merina word for iron is “vy,” and the name for a magnet is “andriamby” or “noble iron.” The word is formed by adding to “vy” the prefix “andria-,” “noble,” a prefix also added to the names of the highest-ranking Merina families such as “Andrianampoinimerina” and “Andriamihaja.” Iron is therefore the noblest of metals. Rantiandrazana continues, “The iron in my knife recognizes the iron in the rock, and is attracted to it. It is the proper
way of things for like to attract like.” Here Ratiandrazana looks pointedly at Ani. “The fewer the
impurities, the stronger and more virtuous the connection.”

The queen laughs. She tosses the rock back to Ani and says, “Poor Ramanany. Ratiandrazana
thinks you should go home, and be with your own kind.”

Ani catches the rock and bows slightly in the direction of both palanquins. “I am sure noble
Ratiandrazana is correct. But I have traveled to many places and known many people, and now I am of
the unfortunate opinion that all of humanity is my own kind.” The queen furrows her brow, although
whether in thought or disapproval Ani can’t tell. He steers his comments to safer terrain. “Or perhaps I
am so enamored of beautiful Imerina and her people that I can’t bring myself to leave.”

The queen laughs again and says, “Some people, I will not say who, argue that I should driv
you foreigners out of our beautiful Imerina.” Ratiandrazana’s eyes are fixed on a group of women
pounding rocks by the riverside. The queen ignores him and asks Ani, “What do you think of that?”

Ani knows that a political argument now would be unwise. He replies mildly, “This is of course
your royal prerogative. But I would miss Imerina very much if Your Majesty asked me to leave.” Ani
wonders if this is true. Unlike the queen, he cannot ignore Ratiandrazana, and looks directly at the
general when he says, “Fortunately for me, as Your Majesty knows, I have work to do.”

The queen chuckles at Ani’s neat diversion of the argument. “Work that involves steel. Yes.
Show me what happens to the rocks after they are dug up from the ground.”

Ratiandrazana leads them to the riverside where next to the river the women work. The wives of
the miners carry baskets of rocks from the mining pits, wash the rocks in the stream, then place them in
the huge mortars normally used to hull rice. Two women pound the rocks with pestles as tall as they are,
alternating their strokes—one up, one down, one up, one down—in a rhythm as familiar to Ani now as
the beat of a drum calling men to war. The mortar and pestles are women’s work; every day across
Madagascar women hull rice for the next day’s meal. But these women in the mine field have no rice, they are unpaid government conscripts, and their work today is to crush rocks in instruments designed for food. Ani cringes at the women’s sparrow-like arms—arms that should be strong from their labors but are wasted from hunger, their faces pinched with want. The queen looks through the woman, watching only their work and its product.

When the rocks are shattered, none of them larger than a tangena nut, the women wash them again in the river, threadbare lamba tied up around their thighs, cold, clear water flowing through the open-weave baskets. Downstream the village women draw water to cook rice and do the washing, downstream further still the villagers bathe and use the stream for a toilet. The queen’s servants will walk far upstream to find clean water for her to use. They are already preparing the midday meal at a spot on the riverside chosen by her steward for its privacy and its pleasant view. A view unmarred by sparrow-like arms, matted hair, and threadbare lamba.

The queen watches the work of the women in the river and from many conversations Ani can guess in what direction her mind is turning. She is calculating, thinking about the supply of iron and the demand for iron and how the one is smaller than the other. She is thinking how dependent Imerina is on iron imports, and thinking of ways to break that dependency. But Ani’s mind turns in a different direction—he is calculating the price of iron in human and natural wreckage. If it were up to him, Ani would slaughter a bullock and feed these people. He is beginning to understand why Todisoa curses fanampona, the conscripted labor that the people pay to the government in lieu of taxes. These miners live off the work of their sons, who manage without them the planting and harvesting at home and who must deliver rice as often as they can get away. Those without families must survive on charity. Some don’t survive at all. Ani imagines thievery here must be rampant, and mob-law severe.
Ratiandrazana directs the queen and her executioner toward the furnaces. The precise method of smelting the ore determines the final quality of the wrought iron, and Ani is interested to learn the Merina technique. Ratiandrazana leads them to a small cylindrical structure, about three feet high and six feet in diameter, covered with a conical lid and flanked by two hollowed-out tree trunks about the same height but smaller around, maybe six inches in diameter. He explains that to build the furnace, the smelter digs a hole in the ground a foot or two deep. He builds up the sides of the furnace with stone, then plasters thick clay onto the outside. The tree trunks serve as bellows. Two short lengths of bamboo connect the furnace to small holes near the bottoms of the tree trunks. A piston is fitted into the tree trunks, and two men working the pistons provide a bellows for the furnace.

The peasant whose furnace Ratiandrazana is discussing arrives, his back hunched and his head bowed, and Ani, more politely than Ratiandrazana would probably like, asks the man to demonstrate how the furnace works. The man looks at Ani terrified, pointing his eyes in any direction away from the queen who sits high in her palanquin and watches, thoughtful. The man mutters absently to himself as he reaches into a large basket of charcoal and lays a thick layer on the bottom of the furnace. He lights the charcoal and as they wait for it to catch, Ani looks meaningfully at the deforested stripes on the hills. He asks Ratiandrazana, “This charcoal was also made using fanampoana?”

Ratiandrazana nods his head. “Ambatolehivy’s iron works employ about six hundred people. Four hundred or so are miners, the rest turn trees into charcoal for the smelters. We Merina are rich in wood, rich in iron, and rich in labor, are we not?”

Ani looks up at the queen and her yards of spotless, colorful satin. “Rich indeed,” he says, and declines to comment further.

When the charcoal glows yellow-hot, the miner reaches into a basket of washed ore. He spreads a layer of ore directly onto the burning charcoal, then spreads a layer of charcoal on top of the ore. He
continues loading the furnace, alternating layers of ore and charcoal, and when he reaches the top, he
caps the furnace with the conical lid. When the furnace is sealed the peasant moves to work one of the
bellows, and before anyone can say anything, Ani is working the other. The fit of the piston is tight
inside the cylinder, and though Ani is strong, extraordinarily strong, still he uses his back, his legs, and
his arms to move the piston. The two men alternate—one up, one down, one up, one down—in a motion
identical to the women pounding rocks by the riverside. During this mindless, physical labor, Ani tastes
metal on his tongue, and imagines the changes to the ore taking place inside the furnace.

The charcoal layered among the ore draws off some of the impurities found in the raw iron stone.
As the charcoal burns, it releases the impurities as a gas. The temperature in the furnace need not be so
hot as to melt the iron, but merely hot enough to cause the charcoal to interact with the iron ore. Other
impurities coalesce in the furnace and pool within the iron as slag. After many hours of working his
bellows, this peasant will open the furnace and remove the “bloom,” a spongy mass that he must beat
with a hammer to drive out the impure slag. Once it’s been beaten, he will return the bloom to the
furnace for final reduction. Ani imagines the garrison commander collecting the iron bars, the miner
watching the fruits of his labors, for which he has received no compensation whatsoever, shipped off to
the smiths in Tana to make pots and sickles and spearheads.

While Ani muses, another miner arrives at the bellows and offers to take over for Ani. The queen
and Ratiandrazana have been joking together, watching Ani work, commenting that he makes a fine iron
miner. So Ani gives up his place, thanks the smelter for his kindness, and the royal party follows the
steward to the place up-river where they will eat their afternoon meal.

The place upriver where they eat lies by the side of the stream under a seventy-five-foot tall
mango tree. Its broad crown shades the queen and her entire retinue, as well as the commander of the
garrison and his assistant and the village elder and his wife. The garrison commander’s chest puffs artificially in the presence of the queen—Ani is afraid he will be a tedious meal companion. The village elder, Ani thinks he’s at least seventy years old, truly ancient in this culture, seems unaffected by the presence of royalty, and he and his wife eat heartily of the queen’s rice, chicken, and salted cassava leaves.

The hills above them sing with cicadas, the small stream burbles garrulous, and Ani identifies at least seven different kinds of birds calling above the din. A sudden iitsi, kitsi, kitsi, kitsi issues from a low branch just before a kestrel of a type he’s never seen before swoops down and plucks a frog from the stream. The green lump dangling from its claws, the raptor catches a thermal and soars into the forested hills.

When the rice arrives Ratiandrazana signals to one of his servants to bring the boxes he’s been saving to present to the queen. At almost the same instant, Ani hears what he thinks is the sound of a baby crying, and he looks around but sees no source. The Merina watch him search for a while, then laugh. His mouth full of rice, the garrison commander says, “What you hear is one of the many cries of the drongo.” He points with his finger extended, and Ani spies a medium-sized black bird perched on a low shrub about thirty feet away from the party. Its chest fills and it calls again, and Ani understands why he mistook it for the the cry of a baby. He listens for another minute while the bird cycles through four different calls, all unique. Then, having said what it wanted to say, the bird lifts its proud crest and turns its head away from the party.

The garrison commander tells Ani, “The drongo is the king of the birds. Do you know the story?” Ani nods and laughs. He remembers Andriamihaja perched on a post above the royal cattle pens, and says, “All the birds chose him because he has a beautiful face,” Ani indicates with a sweep of his arm his own face, “and a long crest,” he draws his hand up from his forehead indicating an elegant
feathered crown, “and he is able to make many different calls.” The queen laughs out loud at Ani
imitating Andriamihaja, and the others laugh along with because rarely do they see Ani make a joke.

The commander’s fingers drip red oil from the chicken and he licks each individually. Ani looks
back at the drongo still perched on the shrub, and Ratiandrazana’s servants arrive carrying two wooden
boxes. One is large and stamped with the name of a French shipping company, while the other is
smaller, perhaps a foot and a half on each side, well-sealed with twine but clearly home-made.
Ratiandrazana stands and formally presents the boxes to the queen. He calls them “the spoils of war.”
Using his knife, he pries open the lid of the larger box and withdraws a bottle of good whiskey, a few
strands of straw trailing from the label. He calls for glasses and pours generous portions for each of the
guests. “To the monarchy!” he says, saluting the drongo, and everyone laughs and drinks.

Ani helps himself to more rice and cassava leaves while Ratiandrazana explains. “We found this
left behind in Tamatave. This case of whiskey and a case of French wine. I gave the weaker wine to the
junior officers, but saved the good stuff for Your Majesty.” Ani cringes at the image of Merina junior
officers guzzling a case of Château Latour just for the inebriation value. He sips his scotch and lets the
image fade as the garrison commander takes a chicken drumstick from the common serving bowl. The
queen finishes her scotch and gestures for a refill. One of the servants pours her another glass while
Ratiandrazana slices through the twine of the second box.

He pauses before he opens it. “You will forgive me, Your Majesty, for not presenting this to you
as soon as I returned from the coast. But as you will see, it needed time to cure.” He lifts the lid off the
box and reaches inside. “May I present to Your Majesty, Bertrand Hercule Blévec, Pretender Governor
of the Island of Sainte-Marie.” He lifts the desiccated head out of the box by its hair. Rice hulls powder
the shrunken, gray skin, but the features of the Frenchman are still recognizable. The garrison
commander emits a strangled cough, then excuses himself hastily to vomit in a bush. Ani looks down at
his food—he’s seen plenty of severed heads, but not generally during a full-course meal. He remembers King Herod and a silver platter, then pushes his food away, his appetite gone.

Queen Ranavalona tips up her newly-poured glass of scotch and finishes it in one swallow while gesturing for Ratiandrazana to bring her the head. A servant pours her a refill while she inspects the relic. With a silk handkerchief she tenderly brushes away the rice hulls—they fall silently from the eyelashes, the hairline, the skin of Blévec’s cheeks. She cleans inside the nostrils and between the closed lips. She spends a long time simply looking at the relic, tracing its bone structure with her fingers. On a professional level, Ani admires the mummification process. Ratiandrazana crudely but correctly removed the brain and the eyeballs, and it seems that rice hulls serve as an effective desiccant. He files that information away.

With the side of her palm, the queen strokes the cheek of the mummified head as she might touch the face of a lover. “They are very ugly, the vahaza.” She looks up at Ani. “The Europeans.” Ani nods, and the queen continues her reverie. “Their noses are too sharp, like tsingy, and their lips too thin, deflated, as if the passion has been sucked out of them. Their white skin is like this, too, pale and lifeless. Still half-air, not yet fully materialized. They are like lôlo, ghosts, or lôlo vôkatra, phantoms raised from the dead. It is no wonder their women eat the hearts of our children—the vahaza are weak, and need us to make themselves strong. They are ugly, and I despise them.”

Ratiandrazana says, “And still they want to treat with you.”

Ranavalona sighs, “I know,” and hands the head back to Ratiandrazana, who places it carefully back in its box. Ani is puzzled. “The French want a treaty now?”

The queen says, “Thank you Ratiandrazana. It is a magnificent gift. I hope you bring me many more just like it.”

Ratiandrazana says, “It is my most fervent wish to bring you as many more as you desire.”
Ranavalona says, “I desire a great many more.” To Ani she says, “The French are afraid of us now. They are desperate to reopen trade, and have sent a man named Tourrette to work out an agreement with us.”

Ani asks, “What do you intend to do?”

The village elder has been quiet since almost the start of the meal. But now he speaks, and from respect even the queen stops to listen to him. “There is another story about the *drongo*, you know.” His voice flows in the sing-song of a storyteller. “In many parts of Imerina, it’s *fady* to shoot and eat the *drongo*. Do you know why? I will tell you why...

“Once, in the time of the great Sakalava king Andriandahifotsy, a small Merina village heard that a Sakalava raiding party was approaching their village. So all the villagers went to a nearby cave and hid. They could hear the Sakalava tearing through their village, looking for Merina people to capture and make into slaves. The villagers were terrified, and hid very quietly, but suddenly a small infant started to cry in the cave. Even though the baby’s mother put her hand over its mouth, its voice had already carried to the village and to the ears of the Sakalava warriors. The villagers shook with fear, thinking that they would be found and killed, or captured and turned into slaves.

“But then they heard, off on the other side of the village, the sound of another baby crying. The villagers knew that it must be the *drongo*, but the Sakalava did not know that it was the call of the bird. They thought it was the call of the village baby. So the Sakalava warriors went looking for the *drongo*, and they searched and searched in the forest but could not find the villagers. And so the villagers were saved.

“Ever since then, it is taboo for Merina to kill and eat a *drongo.*”

When the old man finishes speaking, the hills still pulse with cicadas, and the stream babbles on without meaning. Queen Ranavalona picks up her satin skirts and walks her heavy body over to the old
man. She kneels down in front of him and his wife, spreading her skirts around her, her head high and her eyes bright. She looks at the old man and says, “Grandfather, you are very wise. I am honored to have spent the day with you today.”

The old man grins wide and looks down into the queen’s ample cleavage. Ani sits next to the old man, and the queen now turns to her executioner. “The French want to treat with me. What do I intend to do? I despise the French, and have no intention of treating with them. But I do not want to spend the lifeblood of my people and the length of my reign fighting the abominable vahaza. So Ratiandrazana has developed a good plan.” She giggles a little, and turns to Ratiandrazana with a look as pregnant as her belly.

Ratiandrazana says to Ani, “We’re going to send them the King of the Birds. We’re going to send Andriamihaja to treat with the French.”

Ani looks at the queen in surprise. She still grins mischievously, and Ani wonders what game is afoot. And whose. Andriamihaja is a skilled diplomat, perhaps none better in Ranavalona’s court, and it may be as straightforward as that. But Ani is learning that among Ratiandrazana, Andriamihaja, and the queen, very little is straightforward. Ani will have to listen hard with his spies to understand the meaning of Andriamihaja’s trip to treat with the French representative Tourrette. Ani thinks of the drongo in the old man’s story. He wonders if the Sakalava ever found the bird that had drawn them away, and what they might have done to it if they did.

The next morning, as the royal party packs up for the return trip to Antananarivo, the garrison commander finds Ani as he’s breaking his fast. With the commander is the miner whose furnace Ani helped work the previous day. The garrison commander bids Ani a good morning and says, “This man insisted on seeing you this morning before you leave. He has something he wants to give to you.”
Ani looks at the commander, then the peasant. He wonders if there’s a way to politely dismiss the commander without giving offense, so he can speak to the miner privately. Probably not, he thinks, so he invites the two men to sit with him, and calls for more rice from his servant. When the rice appears the miner hesitates, then attacks the food as if he was trying to dig a hole through it to the center of the earth. Ani calls for tea, and in his servant’s native language gives specific instructions for wrapping up the rest of the rice they have on hand. The servant will lag behind the royal party after they leave, then find the miner and deliver the rice to him once he is alone. The servant will be discreet.

While the miner eats, the commander makes pompous comments about the head of Bertrand Hercule Blévec, Pretender Governor of the Island of Sainte-Marie—how Blévec got exactly what he deserved, how the commander hopes to see the shoreline of Imerina lined with the severed heads of her enemies. Ani comments only, “A gruesome sight,” and lets the man bluster on. Finally the commander elbows the miner, and says, “Give the noble what you came here to give, then let him be on his way.”

The miner wipes rice from his mouth with his arm, and still chewing, places in front of Ani a small package wrapped in cloth. “With your permission, sir...” He unwraps the cloth to reveal a standard-sized bar of wrought iron, ready for the smith. “This is the iron that you helped with the smelting yesterday.”

Ani laughs. “A few blows with the bellows hardly counts as helping. This is your work. But I am grateful for the gift.” He looks at the garrison commander. “The crown does not mind the loss of an iron ingot?”

The commander puffs his chest again. “I have determined that one iron ingot to a nobleman such as yourself is not a great loss to the crown. Perhaps it will help you remember us here in Ambatolehivy.” The commander seeks patronage, but given the conditions of the site Ani is singularly disinclined to help him, unless it’s to help him into retirement. The commander says, “I know a smith in Tana—if you
take this to him he will work it into something rare.” Ani doubts it. The iron is of average quality only, good for a shovel or slave manacles, but nothing fine. Nonetheless Ani replies, “Please give me his name and I will be sure to visit him.” Ani doubts he will have this iron worked, but he may keep the ingot for its meaning.

The miner is clearly uncomfortable in the presence of so much authority, so Ani thanks him again and sends the two of them on their way. On the two-day trip back to Tana, he thinks hard about how to broach the subject of *fanampoana* with the queen.
In 1829, the language of Imerina has had a written alphabet for less than ten years. Since the time the first Merina king defeated the vazimba and settled the high plateau, the people of Imerina have preserved their traditions and their history by telling each other stories. The Merina therefore remember what they hear with a precision that astonishes foreigners who grow up surrounded by paper. Ani’s spies possess these aural memory skills, and repeat to him, word-for-word, the conversations they hear in the houses of the Merina nobility.

“You’re sending me away.”

“I’m doing you a great honor, Andriamihaja. Any other man on my court would feel privileged to represent me with the French. Why are you so angry?”

“Any other man except Ratiandrazana. He will be here, and I will be away.”

“I can’t send Ratiandrazana. And you know why. If I send him, we will be at full-scale war with the French in less than three days. I need to send a diplomat, not a brute.”

“Why would war with the French be so bad? It would improve our alliance with the English. I keep telling you, they hate each other. Why don’t we play them off of each other?”

“Andriamihaja.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry.”
“What if we lose? Have you thought about that? What if the French come with their guns and their ships and their well-dressed, deadly soldiers? What if they march their men to Antananarivo and attack this place, the center of Imerina, the seat of Andrianampoinimerina’s victories. Imagine this, Andriamihaja, French soldiers swarming through our city, killing and raping and pillaging. Massacres at the market. The palace on fire. The French will dig up the graves of our ancestors and make pens for their cattle. They will burn our sacred idols while we watch, and laugh at our lamentations. They will mock our taboos, and serve us pork and eel instead of rice.”

“Ramovo...”

“And do not tell me to ally myself with the English, because the English are the same as the French. In India, the English send sepoys to fight their wars for them. They throw away these men’s lives like they are nothing. And they prohibit a widow from following her traditions and the dictates of her sacred texts. We know what the English are doing at the Cape, in Singapore, on the Gold Coast, at Botany Bay. Do you know that the French talk about turning Madagascar into a penal colony, as the English have with Botany Bay? The French and the English are the same—the French are direct, and the English are sly, but in the end it will be the same.

“The vahaza will tear down our homes with the west-facing doors and build houses that point to the southeast. They will cut off our doctors’ hands and dump our medicines into the sea. They will put out the eyes of our diviners. They will allow unlucky babies to live, and they will send our children to their schools where they will learn to hate everything that we love and honor and cherish. With guns at our heads we will bow down and pray to their invisible dead god. The vahaza will destroy everything we are. They will steal our land, they will destroy our culture, and they will sell us as slaves, send us alone to distant places never again to see our parents, our friends, or our children. And then it will not matter if we are dead or not. We will be gone, and no one will mourn us, and no one will remember our
ancestors. No one will remember Queen Ranavalona, except as the pathetic last sovereign of the Merina.”

“Ranavalo-manjaka, we will not let this happen.”

“No, I will not let this happen. I will die cutting off the penis of the new French king before I let this happen. And so I am sending you to treat with the French in my name. The French require cunning and delicacy, so I am sending you, because you are a man of cunning and delicacy. Ratiandrazana is not. So I am sending you.”

“Ratiandrazana will seduce you while I’m gone. When I come back, you will be lost to me.”

“So what if he does. I will have whatever man I want. But you are the father of my child, and should be well satisfied with that.”

“Radama is the father of your child. I am merely the instrument. But I am a man, Ramovo, and would posses you as a man possesses his wife!”

“Do not reach beyond your grasp, Andriamihaja, or you will lose your balance and fall. You will go to the French, and you will negotiate with them as I have instructed. And you will show the world what a great honor it is to represent Queen Ranavalona of the Merina, Ranavalona the Strong, The Wise, The Mother of her Merina Children. Ranavalona, who will destroy her enemies without mercy.”

The spy asks Ani, “Is it true Ramanany? Would the French really turn the graves of our ancestors into cattle pens? Would they really force us to eat pigs instead of rice? Would they really send all of their criminals to live here with us?”

Ani replies, “Yes, these things could happen. The British and the French have done similar things—and worse—in many places where they have sent their soldiers and their government. But ask yourself—how do the English missionaries behave here?”
“They are mostly good people, and they treat us kindly. But they say that our traditions are immoral. That we act viciously when we follow the customs of our fathers and our father’s fathers. They want us to abandon our fomba, our culture. They want us to change what we do and who we are so we are more like them.”

Ani says, “Yes, this is what the vahaza do. For them, their way is the only right way. The missionaries work peacefully, but the government and its soldiers will not be peaceful. If they come, they will come with guns. And then you will do what they say or you will die.”

The spy replies, “Then I hate the vahaza, too, and hope the Queen sends them all away.”

Another conversation Ani hears from one of his spies, this one in the house of Ratiandrazana. Ratiandrazana speaks with Andriamamba, the head of the conservative faction at court.

“You did it.”

“I did it. She’s convinced. Andriamihaja leaves in two weeks to deal with the French.”

“Where?”

“The Queen has ordered Corroller to keep the vahaza in Tamatave. Any French movement into the interior will be taken as an act of invasion. She’s asked me to put together an army of twelve thousand here in Tana, ready to march on a day’s notice in case the French start massing in force.”

“Twelve thousand!”

“Twelve thousand. Probably half will be slaves.”

“Fodder for the guns. But slaves will keep the men in the fields for the harvest. If she isn’t careful, her fanampoana is going to depopulate the countryside.”

“So what if it does? They’re just peasants.”
“Those peasants grow our rice, my friend. If she taxes them too high, we’ll wind up with less, not more.”

“You worry too much. In any case, I can gather twelve thousand and they’ll still get the harvest in.”

“How did you convince her? About Andriamihaja? That can’t have been easy.”

“It was easier than I thought it would be. What is it the vahaza say? ‘Give a man enough rope and he will hang himself with it.’ She has him on a long leash, and he’s working hard on the hangman’s knot. Between you and me, he wants to be king. He hides it well, but his vanity won’t accept the title of mere “consort,” especially now with the child. I told her only a man of great importance should treat with the French. Diplomacy, politics, etc. Played to his vanity, and hers. I don’t know what’s in her head—who can know what a woman thinks—but she agreed to it. The alcohol helped, but she agreed.”

“So he will be gone.”

“He leaves in two weeks. She decided that was the proper amount of time to keep the French waiting.”

“For how long?”

“Probably at least several months.”

“Long enough.”

“Long enough. Unless the French really do attack again.”

“They won’t. There’s a new king in France, and territorial claims to Madagascar are not his priority. He’s already withdrawn most of his warships to Bourbon or the Cape. They’re refitting now, with orders to return to France once they’re fit to sail.”

“You have good information from Bourbon?”

“Yes.”
“Then this army that I’m gathering...”

“Superfluous. Don’t worry about keeping them strong enough to fight. They almost certainly won’t be needed. Not this year. How was the trip otherwise?”

“Uneventful. You should have seen the executioner working the bellows like a peasant. I was laughing like a fool. He’s a strange one. I can’t tell if he’s very cunning or very stupid.”

“He beat you.”

“Yes, he’s strong, I’ll give him that. And fast. But he’s like a woman—who knows what’s going on inside his head. I am watching him, but I don’t think he will interfere. He’s under heavy obligation to someone and I wish I knew to whom or to what. But I don’t think it’s related to anything but his work.”

“Ratiandrazana, you should speak with Raombana about the vahaza concept of ‘honor.’ He learned about it when he was in England. It’s different from our ‘laza’—it has more to do with a man’s heart than his face. I think ‘honor’ is our executioner’s obligation.”

“You know him, then?”

“No, I don’t know him. But I watch what he does. Who he visits, who he receives. He is no more friend or enemy to the liberals, or the French, or the English, or the queen, than he is to us. Leave him alone, I think, and he will leave us alone. As you say, I don’t think he will interfere.”

“The queen likes him.”

“How much?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think she knows herself. I think he both frightens her and intrigues her. She was very keen to have him on our trip.”

“She may think he knows something about iron-working. Does he?”

“I don’t think so, but again, with him who knows.”

“Is she attentive to him?”
“She’s ‘attentive’—as you put it—with most men. The woman has a hungry ego. The important question is, how serious is she. She’s been remarkably steadfast with Andriamihaja. She takes other men to her bed, but no one for long, and always she goes back to him.”

“Well. We’ll see what you can do when Andriamihaja is away for several months. I will tell you now, Ratiandrazana, any ambition you have to be king, you must kill it now. She will smell it on you like a rotten fur. You must be merciless with your desire for a title.”

“Uncle, you have known me since I was a child. It is substance I crave, not names. As long as I rule, she can call me the court dog for all I care. As long as I am the one to make the decisions about the Sakalava and the vahaza and the army. As long as I decide who is promoted and who burns for desertion, which tribes and where we will raid next year. As long as it is in my power to protect Imerina. I will follow in the footsteps of the great Andrianampoinimerina, and the shores of Madagascar will be the limits of my rice fields.”

Ani pays this spy double, sending four chickens to her seven children, fatherless in the countryside. And while he is in the countryside delivering chickens Ani’s servant hears hints, not even yet whispers but shadows and echoes of other men whispering. The Arab traders know something, something about the French. Something about a certain French stoolie visiting in secret an island in the Comoros where a Merina prince now lives in exile. Ani’s servant sings for him the echoes he heard, signs for him the shadows he glimpsed on other men’s walls. Ani knows something now, too—the thing itself is indistinct, insubstantial—but Ani knows now where and how to listen.

Alidy ibn Saleh ibn Tariq ibn Khalid al-Fulan directs a fully-laden cart through the gate to the Rova. A guard escorts him and his four servants to a house recently built in the south part of the palace.
Construction equipment still litters the courtyard, and the place smells of newly-cut wood. In the cart Alidy brings articles for Andriamihaja’s new house: tapestries, cushions, lamps, European-style tableware, window-coverings, a Moroccan round table with a pressed-leaf top and a tea set to go with. The order for these goods was brought to him three days ago by a palace servant.

A slave meets Alidy and his cart at the door to the new house. He invites Alidy inside and settles him at a European-style table while he directs the cart and its caretakers in the unloading. Andriamihaja appears almost immediately, greets Alidy warmly then joins him at the table. Alidy has not seen or spoken to anyone at court since Andriamihaja put a knife in Alidy’s prize slave’s belly. Alidy arrives at Andriamihaja’s new house still chafing from the insult, his resentment circling like a goshawk, waiting to strike. But Andriamihaja is a master of the social graces, and is very knowledgeable about the trade situation in Imerina. After settling at the table and calling for refreshments, he asks intelligent questions about how the queen’s prohibition against French trade has affected Alidy’s business. Alidy answers him honestly and directly: It’s been good for business, Alidy says, as you might expect.

Andriamihaja pours Alidy a large glass of rice-water, and offers him rum. Alidy declines the rum with a small wave, but Andriamihaja serves himself a frugal measure. They are attended by only two servants. Andriamihaja asks Alidy, “You primarily work the slave route out of Mahajunga, yes?”

Alidy lets his rice-water cool before drinking it. “I used to, yes. But when Radama of Blessed Memory and his English...” here, Alidy almost says “keeper” but catches himself, “...counselor Hastie took Mahajunga for the Merina, he of course banned the slave trade.” Alidy corrects himself awkwardly. “He banned exports. I still have a hand in the imports.”

Andriamihaja laughs at Alidy’s clumsy cover-up. “You need not worry. Her Royal Majesty is not yet here, and I will not spill your secrets.” Andriamihaja looks around the new house, still mostly bare inside. The alter to his ancestors sits in the far northeast corner, and dried herbs hanging from the
rafters ward off sorcerers and bad health. The picture of Napoleon and the mirror in its sea-monster frame lean against the south wall. Alidy’s servants unload the cart into a hidden back room. “I should probably call this my ‘Mahajunga house,’ since it was paid for by port duties from both the legitimate and the shadow trade.”

From his chair Alidy examines the house with new appreciation. “Then I paid for a significant part of this house.” He points to the west wall, droll. “Perhaps I should claim that wall over there.” He raises his glass. “To Mahajunga. And my money well spent.”

Andriamihaja touches his glass to Alidy’s and meets his eye. “To Mahajunga.” He sips his rum then puts his glass down. “Tell me about your business.”

Alidy is wary. He doesn’t understand the purpose of this meeting. But Andriamihaja smiles openly and his charm is difficult to resist. “As I said, you need not worry. You are high in the queen’s favor right now. When she arrives, you will receive a formal apology from me for destroying so thoughtlessly the magnificent gift you presented to Her Majesty at the banquet.” Here Andriamihaja’s voice drops low, in mock conspiracy. “I’m still a little angry with you for that. I have trouble enough keeping the queen’s favor with every nobleman at court clamoring for it. I don’t need more competition.”

Andriamihaja is joking with Alidy, but Alidy takes the point. “You are the first of noble gentlemen, and I’m sure have no trouble keeping the queen’s attention. But you are right, and I apologize—I had not thought to make your position more difficult.” Alidy pauses and looks quizzically at Andriamihaja. He thinks he may have found... not so much a vulnerability, but a tender spot. He decides to apply a balm, and hopes it doesn’t sour. He says to Andriamihaja, “If you will pardon a small personal observation, I will say that it’s clear to every citizen of Antananarivo the high regard in which Her Majesty holds you. A woman’s regard, not just the respect of a monarch for her counselor.”
The comment was a gamble, and it paid off. Andriamihaja fairly beams. “Our beloved queen, our regal and noble monarch, is, after all, also a woman. With a woman’s passions.” Andriamihaja looks slyly at Alidy, and Alidy laughs out loud. But this is dangerous territory, and Alidy changes the subject. “You asked about my business. The French in Bourbon are panicking. Ninety-five percent of the rice and cattle they feed their slaves comes from Madagascar, and eighty percent of that is Merina-sourced, mostly shipped out of Tamatave but a little out of Mahajunga. The French traders that used to work the east coast are now scrambling to make contacts with the Sakalava, both the northern and the southern tribes. They’re hoping to establish themselves in Toliara and Antisiranana.”

Alidy’s servants walk through the room carrying three bolts of heavy brocade, and Andriamihaja waits for them to leave before asking his question. “How long before the French are able to make those contacts?”

“The situation in Bourbon isn’t critical yet. They have some stockpiles, and they’re buying up everything they can from the Sakalava ports. The price for a bullock in Toliara today is five times what it was before Her Majesty’s decree. As you know, Sakalava goods have always been a little more expensive than Merina goods, because the Sakalava don’t charge port duties to French merchants. Did you know that the port duty at Tamatave practically doubles the price of a bullock for the buyer?”

“Yes, I know.” Andriamihaja looks meaningfully around his house. “But the effect is the same. On the east coast, in Merina ports, the vahaza deal directly with the Merina villagers, and so the price goes directly to the man who raised the cattle, while the port fee goes to our central government.” Alidy thinks, Most of it goes to the central government, minus the dock master’s “administrative fee.” Alidy suspects Andriamihaja is well aware of the customs of customs officers.

But Andriamihaja is still outlining the competing trade structures, circling around his point. “On the west coast, in Sakalava ports, the Sakalava chieftains don’t allow vahaza direct access to the
villagers, and so the French must deal through middle men.” Alidy smiles at the term “middle men.” He is a middle man. He has good relations with several Sakalava chieftains. They allow him to buy from their villages and in return take a cut of his profits. But Andriamihaja is right—in the end, it’s slightly cheaper for the Mascarenes to buy from the Merina and ship from Tamatave. This is especially true for cattle, where every extra day in a ship’s hold increases losses to the herd.

Alidy has been feasting with wealthy, powerful men all his adult life. He is a foreigner, always an outsider, a status which has protected him in the past. He decides to drive to the center of his own concern. “Noble Andriamihaja, I will ask you this question directly. I hope you will forgive my bluntness. Did Her Majesty think through the ramifications of her decree that prohibits trade with the French? Because she is on the verge of making the Sakalava chieftains very wealthy. And the French can pay in guns and powder. They know that they cannot eat their bullets, and will now happily trade them for rice. Surely this was not her goal—to put more guns in the hands of her enemies.”

Andriamihaja is not pleased with Alidy’s question. The servants are still unloading the cart, and with a set jaw Andriamihaja watches his slave carry two oil lamps through the room. Alidy thinks he may have pushed too hard. In an even tone, the nobleman asks, “Do you care, Alidy ibn Saleh ibn Tariq ibn Khalid al-Fulan, whether the Merina kingdom destroys the Sakalava, or the Sakalava destroy the Merina? I know, for example, that for twenty-five years you have been trading with us both—using Mahajunga as your base to move goods among the Merina, the Sakalava, and the markets at Zanzibar. You have taken advantage of your foreign status to make yourself rich off of our resources and vahaza need, vahaza greed.

“I know you export slaves through a Merina port despite Radama’s prohibition, despite the British treaty, despite the vahaza warships that lie in wait for your slaving dhows. Why do you care which side has the most guns? For the past twenty-five years, through political upheaval both here in
Madagascar and in the vahaza world outside, you have stayed neutral, and you business has always been profitable. So why do you care if Her Majesty’s proclamation puts more guns in the hands of the Sakalava?”

Alidy answers very carefully. “My interest is purely practical. The situation as it stands now is unstable. As you have said, I have been working this trade for twenty-five years. The younger men are eager to make a quick fortune and go home to their women. Those young men will cash in on today’s French desperation. But what happens tomorrow? I am thinking about tomorrow.

“The prices charged in Sakalava ports right now are not sustainable, and they could collapse the economies of both the west coast and Imerina. They could spark another French invasion. They could create famine on the slave plantations, which could lead to rebellions in the Mascarenes. I am not an arms dealer. Rebellions and wars are bad for my business.”

Alidy pours himself another cup of rice-water. He watches the rice float in his glass, and swirls the cup to make them swim. He drinks, then looks again at Andriamihaja. “You asked me, how long before the French establish firm trading ties with the Sakalava? From what I hear from my ‘middle men’ contacts, I think you will start to see new ships running between Bourbon and Toliara in two months time, two and a half for Antisiranana. It will probably take six months for those ties to solidify, and for the trade structure of Madagascar to change permanently.”

“Two months...” Andriamihaja muses. “Are you sure?”

“No. But that’s what I’m hearing from my colleagues in Sakalava ports right now.”

Andriamihaja is about to say something more, but a servant announces the queen, and both men stand and bow. She is alone with only two of her guard, who position themselves outside the west door and turn themselves invisible.
“Alidy ibn Saleh ibn Tariq ibn Khalid al-Fulan,” the Queen is all mollifying grace, “It is a pleasure to see you again.” She nods at Andriamihaja. “We left you on unhappy terms, and we hope today to repair our relationship, so that we may, from now on, be good friends.” She turns to Andriamihaja and says in the voice of kabary, “Reflect on regrets, Andriamihaja.”

Andriamihaja stands formally and faces Alidy.

“I reflect on regrets. They do not look in at the door to be told, ‘Enter!’ They do not sit to be told, ‘May I pass?’ They do not advise beforehand, but they reproach afterward. They are not driven along like sheep, but they come following like dogs; they swing behind like a sheep’s tail.

I regret destroying the fine and rare gift that you gave Her Majesty at the executioner’s banquet. The slave was not mine to destroy, and I am grateful Her Majesty has the grace to forgive me. But the insult was to you as well, and I apologize for my actions. I regret what I did, and those regrets follow me through the day like dogs, they follow me through the night and into my dreams, and I ask for your forgiveness as well. Please excuse my impetuous action, so that I may drive away my pack of regrets.”

Alidy is slightly embarrassed at this man, the most powerful man in the Kingdom of Imerina, humbling himself before a merchant. Alidy knows this is not the way of things, and now wants nothing more than to put the world to rights and move on. He is not as skillful in kabary as the Merina nobleman, but he tries. “Noble Andriamihaja, you do not need to apologize to me. The slave was a gift. My forgiveness is like the song of the vanga—unnecessary, but if it will please you to hear it, then I give it freely. Please, let us speak no more of unpleasant things.”

The queen and Andriamihaja watch his reaction closely, and seem satisfied with his response. In truth, if the incident at the banquet brings him royal contracts, Alidy has come out well in the bargain. The purchase they make today of goods for Andriamihaja’s house is substantial—Alidy will make a
comfortable profit. Alidy thinks, if he can become a regular supplier to the royal couple... He turns over in his mind how to best approach the subject.

But the queen is speaking. “We are friends, then.”

Alidy smiles at them both and bows. “Of course. I am Your Majesty’s servant.”

Ranavalona seats herself in the third and last chair at the table, and with a wave of her hand invites the men to sit also. Andriamihaja pours her a small glass of rum. The servants stopped unloading the cart when the queen arrived, and have disappeared somewhere, presumably to the cart outside. Ranavalona and Andriamihaja exchange a glance, and Andriamihaja speaks.

“In two weeks time, I leave for Tamatave to meet with a French representative named Tourette.”

Alidy nods—he has heard of the man. “We will discuss their invasion of our sovereign lands and the subsequent sanctions we have imposed.”

Alidy thinks, *They understand the implications of the embargo*. He wishes he could ask what they plan to do, but of course he cannot ask. He hopes they will tell him, and that’s the reason why he’s here. When Andriamihaja falls silent, the queen speaks, a little unsure of herself. “Just over one year ago, at the close of our mourning for our beloved Radama, I placed orders for certain merchandise with several artisans in Paris.” Alidy does the math. Contrary to what the queen claims, the order would have had to have been placed well before the end of the official morning period. “Last week, I received a letter from the captain of the ship carrying those goods. His ship has arrived at the Island of Bourbon, but because of the trade embargo, he is afraid to sail into Tamatave to deliver the goods. He wrote to ask what I would like him to do.”

Alidy remains silent, although secretly he’s amused by the problem the queen has created for herself. He can taste her anticipation at the arrival of her shipment, and her frustration that it has been
delayed. He knows now why they three are sitting here at this table, talking like this. He has several ideas about what to do about the problem, but he waits to see what the queen has to say.

“I would like you to travel with Andriamihaja to Tamatave. You will officially serve as a counselor during the negotiations—your trade experience will be most helpful. But also, I would like you to take the payment for the shipment from France. If you agree, I will write to the captain, M. Ravis, that he is to land at Tamatave at night under American colors. There he will unload his cargo into your care. You will pay him what he is owed in addition to a substantial gift, for his trouble, and see the shipment safely to Tana.”

The queen and Andriamihaja watch Alidy closely, and the merchant frowns. He knows the plan is workable—it is similar to the plan he would have suggested himself. But he is a trader and instinctively hides his approval. He says, “I don’t think the captain will be pleased to sail under false colors. It’s highly... dishonorable.”

Andriamihaja speaks carefully. “We know that some French ships now sail under British colors, in order to avoid the embargo.” Alidy knows this, too, but is a little surprised that Andriamihaja knows it. “So we think the captain will be agreeable. But if he refuses, you will find a neutral ship in Tamatave—British, Dutch, Portuguese, American, we don’t care. You will sail to Bourbon, transfer the cargo there, then bring it to Tamatave.” Alidy thinks, This will be more expensive, securing a second ship, and an extra transfer increases the possibility of damaging the cargo. He understands why the queen does not like this option. But it is a good back-up plan.

Alidy thinks for a moment. “I would travel with Andriamihaja on the way to Tamatave?” The payment for this shipment will be substantial, with extra funds to bribe the captain or hire a second ship, or both. Alidy has traveled in the past with a large amount of coin, but when he does, he always takes protection.
Andriamihaja answers, “Yes. I will be traveling with a sizable force of soldiers. You will return separately from me, but you will have an honor guard, as befits a counselor to the queen. Would five hundred soldiers be sufficient for the return trip?”

“It depends on the nature of the cargo I’ll be transporting.” In fact, five hundred soldiers will probably be the correct number. Enough to deter even the most ambitious of bandits, but not so much as to attract the attention of a marauding army. Traveling as a counselor for the negotiations makes a good story. And an Arab trader unloading cargo from an American ship will not draw the same attention as a Merina trader unloading from a French ship. Alidy thinks the plan will work. But he wants to know the nature of the cargo before he agrees.

The queen hands him a piece of paper. “Here is the manifest for M. Ravis’ ship, the *Quiétude*. Please, take your time and look it over. We hope that you will agree to help us. Please send us your answer as soon as you can, and if you do agree, provide us with the details of what you will need from us—letters of introduction, etc.—as well as the amount you will require personally for your expenses and your fee. You are our good friend, and we trust your discretion in this matter.”

Alidy immediately reassures them. “The noble Andriamihaja has made substantial inquires into my business dealings, and I’m sure he received reports of my honesty. You can trust my discretion, whether I agree or not.” It’s a very difficult thing to keep a secret in Tana, and Alidy doubts that the two people at the table with him are the only ones who know of this ship and its contents. But others won’t find out about it from him, and the royal concern for secrecy reassures him a little. “Let me look into the logistics, and you will have an answer from me in three days, if that suits Your Majesty.”

The queen stands, and the men stand with her. She holds out her hand and Alidy takes it and bows. She says, “Three days will be fine. Return here for your payment for these goods, and give us your answer then.” Alidy understands that he is being dismissed. He bows again to the queen, and to
Andriamihaja, and leaves the house. His servants sit with the half-unloaded cart, waiting, sweating in the sun. He tells them to wait until Andriamihaja’s slave gives them permission to finish unloading the cart. They may wait all day, but they will wait. He goes back to his house to read the manifest, and think if he should accept this commission.

That evening, his servants returned, his cart empty, Alidy opens the paper given to him by the queen. He makes notes on a separate sheet of paper as he reads.

Two coronets for use on occasions when her more massive crown would be impractical or inappropriate: gold circles surrounded with foliage of the same metal, and flowers ornamented with jewels, mounted upon flexible stalks. One crown has for its peculiar ornament a globe on which stands a hawk, the symbol of the Merina nation.

Ten dresses of velvet or scarlet woolen, lined with silk of the same color. Four scarves of red cashmere or velvet, also lined with silk. These dresses and scarves covered with gold embroidery, the designs of which were provided by Antananarivo. Three pairs of red shoes, embroidered in gold. Ten pairs of silk stockings, embroidered with gold of considerable thickness. Three pairs of gold-embroidered gloves.

For the Queen’s boudoir, an armchair à la Voltaire of rosewood with incrustations. A second armchair to be used as a throne. A palanquin, light and strong, and a red parasol ornamented with a quantity of gold embroidery.

A knife and a fork of exquisite workmanship, the blade of one and the trident of the other of massive gold, the handles of pink coral delicately carved with flowers and fruit. Twenty-five thousand muskets. A solar microscope. Organs with a number of exchange cylinders. A machine for making butter. Apparatus for making coffee and tea.
From his notes, Alidy makes some quick computations. The purchases here represent what he estimates is a significant percentage of the crown’s annual income. Transporting the *piastries* to pay for them will require careful planning. But he can do it. Not many men working on the Island of Madagascar could handle a shipment like this—Lastelle’s company probably, but they’re French, and the British East India Company’s representative on the Cape of Good Hope. Perhaps one or two other Arab traders he knows working out of Mahajunga. He acknowledges the spasm of fear, the thrill of excitement aroused by the commission—highly lucrative if successful, potentially fatal if not.

But Alidy has handled shipments of slaves worth almost as much as these goods, and he refuses to be intimidated by the scale of the project. Alidy is already rich, and he is not stupid with greed. What attracts him to this venture is the challenge. How to transport fragile goods over bad roads, with porters who are at best unreliable and oftentimes thieving, through a tangle of jungle that could hide an army of five thousand men? It’s a neat problem, which pleases him.

He decides he will accept the commission. He calls to his secretary, and the two of them talk late into the night, planning.
CHAPTER 22

...In which we witness two rituals from somewhat unusual perspectives, and Andriamihaja journeys into the tsingy

Antananarivo, 1829

Andriamihaja dreams.

In the courtyard of the queen thirty Merina nobles and one hundred soldiers stand in hushed expectation. The stars shine like the bright eyes of the ancestors, and Andriamihaja feels his father and his father’s father watching him. Radama observes him with the eyes of the forsaken. Rakotobe stares at him with eyes full of horror. The stars loom over him immobile, fixing his fate.

Ratiandrazana, Andriamamba, and the rest of the conservative faction wait in the courtyard with Andriamihaja. They stand under the veranda of the Tranovola, but no light issues from the palace and no torches flicker in the yard. Bony darkness binds the company together. They wait for the queen to appear, to make her kabary. Andriamihaja knows what she will say. She will announce that he is the father of her child, and that she and Andriamihaja will marry, and he will be king. Waiting, the people stand as silent as the stars and as still as the twice-wrapped dead.

He and the nobles wait in the darkness but the queen does not appear. People begin to shuffle their feet, and whispers eddy through the crowd. Slowly, one by one, the soldiers draw their machetes, the starlight reflects on bright steel, and Andriamihaja is surrounded by a hundred knives shining with a thousand eyes. The knives grow and grow until they are a hundred feet tall, and Andriamihaja is alone in a labyrinth of sharp gray steel, now sharp gray limestone, and he is lost in the tsingy of Ankarana. Brittle stone walls rise high above him, their black edges lost in the starry night. Eyes flash from rain-washed
hollows, glaring silently. Something skitters beneath his feet, and the dark-stained wind whispers secrets in a language he doesn’t understand.

He reaches up to climb his way out, but the jagged rock shreds his hands. He curses, too-loud, shattering the silence, and digs at a shard of stone lodged in his palm. Blood flows down his arm, he smells it, and the hairs on the back of his neck rise at the sudden attention of a predator. He is prey, and now he is being hunted. A shadow, formless and hungry, slips over the top of the jagged outcrop of stone, launches itself at him, and Andriamihaja runs, runs for his life, the stone flaying his bare feet but the shadow is like a spear, flying straight for him and he must outrun it or he will die. Andriamihaja races through the labyrinth, skidding around blind corners and launching himself over black chasms until he turns into a dead-end canyon and, his predator breathing ice across his back, he is two hundred feet from running out of room, running out of time.

Still Andriamihaja tears ahead, the claws of the shadow of death sunk deep into his heels, and fifty feet into the canyon his shoulder blades explode through the skin of his back, seventy-five feet into the canyon his wings unfurl, a hundred feet into the canyon he beats them for the first time, his feet leave the ground but he is tired and his muscles are weak from disuse, but a hundred and fifty feet into the canyon, fifty feet from certain death he beats his wings again and his feet leave the ground and he skins his right hip on the canyon wall and black feathers fall slowly, gently, as he lifts himself above the serrated stone and into the starry sky. His feet turn to talons and the shadow-claws fall away, and he is soaring above the labyrinth of stone knives, safe. He lifts the crest on his head and calls, not the call that sounds like crying, but a joyful call, melodic, plinking, like the sound of rain on the surface of a pond.

The mpisikidy is weeding his rice field when Andriamihaja arrives bearing a spring lamb and a thick silver piastre. The diviner is perhaps thirty-five years old, handsome, with a ready smile and eyes
that see straight through Andriamihaja, reading his ancestry in his bones. The diviner leaves his rice field and washes his feet clean before he greets Andriamihaja formally, “Mandroso, tompko.” They walk together to the northwest corner of the village, discussing the rains and the state of the rice harvest. The diviner complains about his oldest daughter, who is willful and too clever. The young man pens the lamb in a small enclosure—he might eat it, or he might rear it and sell the wool. Either way, it is a handsome price. The silver piastre is worth more than everything in this small village put together. But always with a divination there must be a coin. A token, a hasina of some kind. Andriamihaja brings Spanish silver.

The diviner invites Andriamihaja into a small hut off the side of the main house. The hut is windowless and dark, but when the diviner strikes a lamp the inside flares bright from the reflection of a hundred hundred coins, mounted in the woven slats of the wall. Andriamihaja guesses that all together they are worth a small fortune. But these coins are tokens for the sikidy, payment for passage into the land of secrets and hidden causes. The tokens live in the hut of the diviner, but they belong to the secrets, and Andriamihaja shudders at the curses that would plague the stupid man who would steal even one of those coins.

Casually, as he arranges a small mat between them, the diviner asks Andrimihaja why he has come. The nobleman explains his fears about leaving the court, his suspicions about the queen and Ratiandrazana. He tells the diviner of his dream in the tsingy. He wants to know if the child is really his. He wants to know if the queen... He hesitates. What does he want to know about the queen? He could articulate his need, but it’s too intimate, too personal. Too much is at stake there, more even than his life, and he cannot admit it to this man, this stranger. So he says, Never mind about the queen. I want to know if I am doomed, and if so, if my doom can be deflected.
The mat that lays between them is woven with colored blades to form a grid, the lines of which the *mpisikidy* aligns precisely north-south. The diviner places a small bag of acacia seeds on the mat, and awakens the *sikidy* with his customary incantation:

“All, Andriamanitra, to awaken the sun! Awake, O sun, to awaken the cock! Awake, O cock, to awaken mankind! Awake, O mankind, to awaken the *sikidy*—not to tell lies, not to deceive, not to play tricks, not to talk nonsense, not to agree to anything indiscriminately; but to search into the secret, to look into what is beyond the hills and on the other side of the forest, to see what no human eye can see.

“Wake up, for you are from the long-haired Arabs, from the high mountains, from Raboroboaka and others.” Here the diviner invokes a list of nine long names, the provenance of the divination practice. “Awake! for we have not got you for nothing; you are dear and expensive. We have hired you in exchange for a lamb with tender meat and soft wool, and for money on which there was no dust. Awake! for you are the trust of the sovereign and the judgment of the people.

“If you are a *sikidy* that can tell, that can see, and does not only speak of the noise of the people, the hen killed by its owner, the cattle slaughtered in the market, the dust clinging to the feet, awake here on the mat!

“But if you art a *sikidy* that does not see, a *sikidy* that agrees to everything indiscriminately, and makes the dead living and the living dead, then do not arise here on the mat.”

The diviner pours a pile of acacia seeds to the side of the grid on the mat, and asks Andriamihaja to choose a handful of seeds from the pile. Andriamihaja allows the seeds to spill slowly through his palms into a new pile on the mat, and the *mpisikidy* begins to withdraw the seeds in pairs, replacing them in the original pile. When his is done, a single seed remains on the mat and he places it precisely in the first of the sixteen woven squares. Andriamihaja chooses a handful again, and again the diviner
replaces them by twos. This time, two seeds are left and the diviner places both seeds in the second of the sixteen squares. In this manner, the diviner fills the grid, with either one seed or two, depending if Andriamihaja chose in his handful an odd or an even number of seeds.

After the grid of sixteen squares is filled, the diviner spends some time making calculations, filling two further grids with seeds. He counts by brushing the fingers of his left hand against the ground, then depending on the count places more seeds with his right. When he is done, the mat between them might resemble, to an imaginative mind, a rice field, where plants of one stalk or two grow in neat rows and columns. The diviner stills himself. He compares certain rows and columns to each other, reading if the Fahasivy corresponds to the Asorotany, the Trano to the Lalana, or the Fahatelo to the Harena. In the twinkling golden light, he deciphers the *vintana*, and Andriamihaja waits.

Outside the hut, women returning from the rice fields gossip across the swept dirt of the village before they prepare the evening meal. The air inside the hut stagnates, and the oil and smoke from the lamp glazes Andriamihaja’s skin. After a long while, the diviner speaks in a low voice. “Here are the people,” he says. Andriamihaja remembers, but remains silent. A little later, the diviner speaks again. “He is caught by young men seeking meat.” And again, “He is caught by red earth thrown up.” And finally, “His friends and relations are supporting their faces with their hands.” After this pronouncement the *mpisikidy* remains silent for a long time, until finally he lifts his head and looks at Andriamihaja, his face neutral and kind.

Andriamihaja is not comforted by the diviner’s kind face—the pronouncements rang bleak and heavy, and he dreads their interpretation.

The diviner repeats the first sentence, and then the rest. “‘Here are the people,’” he says. “You are in danger from people collected together. These people are complicit with you—your collective action is the root of your doom. ‘He is caught by young men seeking meat.’ This means that there will
be a funeral where meat will be served. ‘He is caught by red earth thrown up,’ indicates that they will
dig you a grave. And your friends and family will mourn you, supporting their faces with their hands as
they grieve.”

Andriamihaja watches the twinkling walls as he listens to the diviner. His skin turns cold in the
hot, oily air. He fixes his eyes on a coin of a kind he has never seen, round with a square hole punched
through the middle. Writing he does not recognize surrounds the square hole to the north, south, east,
and west. The coin is made of bronze, and a fine dusting of green colonizes the metal like mold. Still
looking at the coin, Andriamihaja asks, “Is it possible, this may not be my funeral?” The mpisikidy
doesn’t answer for a moment, then says, “All the interactions of the sikidy are in your house, not the
auxiliary house of another.” Andriamihaja closes his eyes. In the pen outside the hut the lamb bleats for
its mother. Still dignified in his pleading, Andriamihaja says, “Please. Tell me how it can be averted.”

The diviner has been practicing his trade for twenty years, and Andriamihaja is not the first, nor
even the hundredth person for whom the sikidy has foretold bloody death. Always the reaction is the
same—tell me how to stop it. Give me a faditra to avert this fate. Now, at the age of thirty-five, the
diviner knows that when he is told of his own death, he will not ask how to stop it. Just as he cannot
spend the money on his walls, he cannot divert his destiny. His father practiced for forty-seven years and
died content. The people who seek him out, he directs them as best he can, and sometimes the faditra
works, and sometimes it doesn’t. With this man, this nobleman, this lover to the queen, his doom is
heavy. But because the diviner is a kind man, he directs the nobleman as best he can. And because the
diviner is a happy man, he forgets about the nobleman not long after he leaves.

Andriamihaja rides on the back of a bullock led by one of his servants. On top of the bull’s head
the nobleman holds with his left hand a gourd full of pig’s blood. In his right hand, outstretched, he
cradles the mouth of a small basket and an old piece of crumbling granite. *Tsikobondanitra* herbs and a sprig of the *tsiavaramonina* tree adorn the bull’s horns. The servant leads Andriamihaja and the bull into the *tsingy*, leads them for half an hour through the sharp, shadowy labyrinth, leads them so far that Andriamihaja feels desolate, severed by the limestone knives from the saturated world of the court and its queen.

Deep in the limestone canyons wet decay clings to Andriamihaja like a funeral shroud. A family of white *sifaka* leap silently from outcrop to outcrop, following him like his doom. Stunted pachypodium trees stippled with inch-long spines guard the canyons like soldiers. When Andriamihaja feels completely lost in the labyrinth of canyons, he tells his servant to stop. Invoking the incantation prescribed by the diviner, he throws the basket and the crumbling dead stone as far away from him as he can, discarding gossiping mouths and lifeless, decomposing things. He takes the gourd full of blood, cold and congealing now, and pours it slowly over the head of the bullock, entreating the animal to carry away his fate, to become lost forever among the silent gray stone.

He dismounts the bullock and swats it hard on its rump until it runs away from him, down the canyon and out of sight. Andriamihaja watches for a long time to make sure it doesn’t come back. Then he and his servant follow their footprints back out of the *tsingy*, and as they walk Andriamihaja examines his own heart for any signs of light—an opening up, a spreading of wings, a soaring freedom as he felt in the dream—but his heart and his feet remain stubbornly earthbound.

Andriamihaja stands at the back of David Griffiths’ chapel at Ambodin’Andohalo. About fifty people fill the rough benches to capacity, family members sitting on each other’s laps to make room. Another hundred and fifty stand inside the chapel or outside, reaching their heads through the unglazed windows. Andriamihaja has never been in the chapel before. Griffiths and his family live in the northern
third of the two-story building, but the southern portion has been divided off, the chapel downstairs and
the school upstairs. Andriamihaja has been to Griffiths’ house, as has the queen, and he has been to the
school, but never before to the house of worship. The inside of the chapel is neither opulent nor rough—
the benches have been worn smooth in the ten years since the chapel was built, and Mrs. Griffiths has
garnished the space with just enough color to give it life, just enough gold to satisfy the demands of
station. Over the heads of the people leaning in, the multitude of windows draw in sunlight and a breeze
carrying hints of wood smoke, orchids, rats, and, far away, the green growing rice.

The entire congregation and as many onlookers have come today for the first Christian wedding
in the history of Imerina. Andriamihaja attends on special dispensation from the queen—he tells her he
is spying for her, but he has his own reasons as well. The executioner, Ramanany, is present also,
standing as silent as a shadow in the southeast corner of the room. The two men nod to each other but
otherwise do not interact while they wait for the ceremony to start. Surrounded by family and dressed in
new *lamba*, the bride and groom fidget nervously in the front row. The groom, Paul, is one of the
Christian survivors of the attack on Ikongo. Ratiandrazana’s great debacle. The bride, Rasalama, is
Griffiths’ own housemaid.

The ceremony takes place under the queen’s edict of a week previous. After repeated requests
from Griffiths that she clarify and reaffirm her support of the Christian mission, she sent six court
attendants to the chapel last Sunday with a proclamation. “Your mistress, the Queen, grants complete
liberty to all who so wish to become baptized, participate in the Lord’s Supper, or to marry in the
European fashion. I neither compel nor prohibit, neither command nor forbid anyone to do these things;
no one will receive blame for doing them. Says Ranavalomanjaka.” Andriamihaja knows that the queen
privately oscillates between banning Christianity and exiling the foreigners, allowing the foreigners to
stay and worship but prohibiting Merina from converting, and allowing complete freedom to her people.
But she has not publicly reversed her position, and the proclamation stands. Griffiths took her at her word. He has performed over one hundred baptisms and holds services every week, but today is the first marriage in the European fashion.

Today Andriamihaja is looking forward to Griffiths’ kabary—marriage is an occasion for great speeches, and he is interested to hear what a vahaza kabary will sound like. When Griffiths arrives the congregation makes room for him as he walks with his attendant to the front of the church. Griffiths has lived in Antananarivo since 1821, and his command of the native dialect is perfect. Andriamihaja has heard from others that he is a passable orator, although Jones is better. In addition to the kabary, Andriamihaja is interested to see what a vahaza ceremony will look like. So far, he sees a multitude of people dressed in their best lamba gathered together in a house to listen to the elder speak. With the exception of the benches, so far it is not so different from a Merina wedding.

Griffiths reaches the front of the church and stands facing the congregation. He smiles at Rasalama and Paul, and motions for them to rise and stand side-by-side before him at the front of the church. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this congregation to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church. Which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and the first miracle that he wrought in Cana of Galilee...” Andriamihaja has heard of the magic of the Christian god: feeding an army with only a handful of rice, curing people cursed by witchcraft, bringing the dead back to life. He doesn’t doubt the truth of any of these claims, but he questions the wisdom of bringing a man back from the dead.

“...And is commended of Saint Paul to be honorable among all men: and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and
appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained.” Suppressed giggles and some outright laughter breaks out among those present in the chapel. Of course the purpose of marriage is to satisfy men’s carnal lusts. What else would it be for? Andriamihaja thinks he may have underestimated the Christians’ capacity for hypocrisy.

As he’s thinking this, Griffiths expounds on the vahaza ideas concerning the purposes of marriage: “First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of His holy Name.” Yes, Andriamihaja agrees. The purpose of marriage is to produce children who will revere you as an ancestor after you have turned your back on the world.

“Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.” This part confuses Andriamihaja. The vahaza seem to have a very strange idea about the connection between marriage and sex. It sounds to him like they think that sex is bad but marriage is good, and now he wonders, do married vahaza not have sex? They must—they have children. He determines to ask Griffiths about his sex life the next time the two men talk.

“Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.” Two hundred people hold their breath, wondering if one of the queen’s counselors will interrupt the ceremony. Andriamihaja thinks that Griffiths is very wise to ask this question—in asking it, he has given the queen her chance, and thus absolved himself, the couple, and everyone present of any wrongdoing. The pause lengthens, and the queen declines to comment, so Griffiths continues with his kabary.
He turns to the man and woman standing in front of him. “I require and charge you both, as you will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment why you may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, you do now confess it. For be you well assured that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's Word doth allow, are not joined together by God; neither is their matrimony lawful.” Rasalama looks down at the ground but does not say anything. Andriamihaja wonders what is allowed under “God’s Word,” and what secrets might prevent a woman from getting married according to the Christian book.

Occasionally, if a woman is especially intransigent or her husband especially cruel, a man might divorce a woman in such a way that she is prohibited from remarrying. But Rasalama is young, perhaps thirteen, and Andriamihaja doubts that she has been married before. And she and Paul certainly do not share the same mother or grandmother, otherwise someone in the congregation would have objected. The bride and groom belong to the same social caste, and so Andriamihaja can’t imagine what the young woman’s hesitation might be. Perhaps it is simply nerves. In any case, she remains silent, and Andriamihaja is content to leave the secrets of her heart to be disclosed to her new god on his dreadful day of judgment.

“Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?” Paul’s station in life is clear to Andriamihaja—the boy will never afford two wives, and so this promise to “forsake all others” seems harmless enough. Strange, but harmless in this case. Andriamihaja wonders though about the marriage contracts of wealthy English men. Do they, too, promise to keep only unto their wives? How could they possibly be faithful to that promise? Why would they want to? Paul answers easily enough, “I will.” But Andriamihaja wonders.
“Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?” Andriamihaja approves of this promise, to obey and serve and be faithful to her husband. This is a woman’s place, and after what has gone before, he is surprised that the Christians got this one right. But they did, and Rasalama answers, “I will.”

Griffiths asks, “Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?” An old man, a member of the congregation who, from the look of him, is not related to the girl, stands and takes the bride’s hand. He gives her hand to Griffiths then steps back for what follows. Again, Andriamihaja is puzzled. Usually it is a girl’s parents who arrange the marriage, or the mother and a close male relative. Andriamihaja wonders if the girl’s family are not converted, and therefore disapprove of this wedding. That would explain her hesitation—she is now disowned. Or she was disowned before, and the wedding compels her to confront her alienation. The thought makes Andriamihaja melancholy and he now feels sorry for this couple, caught and cornered by the incompatible demands of two competing cultures. Still, they chose this, but today should be a day of joy.

Griffiths takes the girl’s hands gently from the old man, then passes them to the groom, and the two young people stand facing each other holding hands while Paul repeats what the minister says. “I Paul, take thee Rasalama to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.”

The girl smiles at Paul and some of the joy of the day shines through, and she too repeats the words of the minister. “I Rasalama, take thee Paul to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this
day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.”

Griffiths nods to another man seated in the first row of benches. As he stands, Griffiths takes a book from a small table nearby and holds it out to the man, Andriamihaja thinks it is the groom’s elder brother. Paul’s brother places on the book a ring made of brass and coin made of silver, and Andriamihaja inwardly nods his approval. The coin will be presented to the queen’s representative as the couple’s hasina—their contribution to the crown that makes the marriage legal. The queen can have no objection now on judicial grounds. Griffiths is being careful.

The groom releases Rasalama’s hands and takes the ring off the book. Repeating again after the minister, he slides the ring onto the forth finger of the bride’s left hand. “With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” Andriamihaja has in the past noticed a gold ring on the same finger of the minister’s wife’s hand, and now he understands. The ring marks the woman as taken: Be warned, this woman belongs to another man. He wonders if vahaza woman are so faithless that their men feel the need to mark them. Or perhaps vahaza men are so insecure that they fear the potency of other men. In any case, Andriamihaja thinks the symbol useless—a ring is easily removed.

The minister says, “Let us pray,” and the bride and the groom and all the members of the congregation kneel. Andriamihaja remains standing—he will not kneel to a foreign god or his representative. Ramanany remains standing also, along with a smattering of people inside the church and all the others outside. In a voice Andriamihaja has only heard before used by Her Majesty when she issues proclamations, the minister speaks to his god. “O Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, Giver of all spiritual grace, the Author of everlasting life: send Thy blessing upon these Thy servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in Thy name; that, as Isaac and Rebecca lived
faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made, whereof this ring given and received is a token and pledge, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to Thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Griffiths raises the bride and groom, but the congregation remains kneeling. He joins the right hands of Paul and Rasalama, and says, “Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.” And in the voice of authority again, he marries the two. “For as much as Paul and Rasalama have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a ring, and by joining of hands, I pronounce that they be man and wife together. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

Before the minister has even finished speaking the congregation is cheering, so that the last of his words are almost drowned out. The cries of “Congratulations” and “Amen” fill the small chapel, spilling into the thin air of Andohalo and streaming across the city, Andriamihaja imagines all the way to the palace itself. He wonders what Ranavalona is doing right now. He can feel her here in this room, her eyes watching, her hand moving rhythmically as she fans herself. He imagines what she would say to him right now if she were here—something droll regarding the social status of the newlywed couple, how the Christians can only attract the most lowly. Christianity is a religion for the slaves, she might say, although neither the bride nor groom are slaves. But he can also imagine her calculating, counting the number of people present, thinking, “This many people I have lost as my subjects. They will no longer revere me, whom the ancestors have appointed as the living god. No man can serve two masters.”

Andriamihaja looks around the church, and thinks, She would hate this. She would fear this. Andriamihaja catches the eye of the executioner. Ramanay is also scrutinizing the scene, calculating, and he wonders if they are thinking the same thing.
After the ceremony the guests move from the chapel to the courtyard outside where a great feast is being prepared. The minister’s wife and about ten women of the congregation huddle over huge cauldrons bubbling with rice and beef stew. Andriamihaja learns that the girl has in fact been disowned by her family, and that Griffiths purchased the bullocks for the feast. He acts in the capacity of her father, but he also celebrates the first Christian wedding in Imerina, and he is as proud as any father of a bride could be. Paul’s family are converts, and so attend the feast with both satisfaction and pleasure.

As high-ranking court nobles, Andriamihaja and Ani are seated near Griffiths and the newlyweds. Paul and Rasalama sit together on a tsihy mat on the ground, a handsome silk lamba draped over both their shoulders. They eat from the same bowl of rice, and the father of the groom stands to give them his benediction. He wishes them numerous offspring, an abundance of cattle, many slaves, and great wealth. He exhorts them to increase the honor of his family, and reminds them that they now represent to the rest of the citizens of Imerina the whole Christian community. Andriamihaja thinks it is a heavy burden to place on the shoulders of two people so young, and says as much to Ani sitting next to him.

Ani replies, “They are both strong people. The boy, Paul, he survived Ikongo. And the girl has the strength of character to stand up for her principles, even to the point of leaving her family.” Ani looks at Andrimihiaja. “You know better than I the social status of a disowned child. I can’t imagine it was easy.”

Andriamihaja nods. “She must love her new god very much.” A thought occurs to Andriamihaja, and he turns more fully toward Ani. “You have traveled through Christian lands, have you not?”

Ani says, “I have,” and waits for what’s to come.

“You must know the Christian book, then.”
Ani muses. “I know it a little. There are others who know it much better than I.” He looks toward Griffiths, but the minister is deeply engaged in a conversation with the groom’s brother.

Andriamihaja says, “I’ve heard that in the Christian book, people with wings live in the sky. Is this true?”

Ani laughs. “Are you asking me, is it true that the book talks about this, or are you asking me, is it true that people with wings live in the sky?”

Andriamihaja looks down, pained. He regrets asking. Ani backpedals quickly. “I’m sorry—I shouldn’t make light of people’s beliefs.” Ani thinks for a moment. “To answer your question, yes, the Christian book speaks of people with wings who live in a place called ‘heaven.’” He uses the English word. “And it’s not just the Christians. The Jewish and the Muslim books also speak of ‘angels.’ As for whether or not the books speak truly...” Ani looks directly at Andriamihaja. “I cannot say.”

Andriamihaja avoids Ani’s too-direct gaze by looking over at the newlywed couple. They talk and laugh with the guests sitting around them. The groom holds a banana suggestively. The nobleman says, “These people with wings, are they still alive, or do they only grow their wings after they’re dead?”

As Andriamihaja speaks he turns to look at Ani, and finds that the executioner followed his gaze and is watching the bride. Just as Andriamihaja finishes his question he sees the bride laugh gayly, and the executioner’s face loses all its color. Ani closes his eyes momentarily, then opens them and turns again to Andriamihaja. Whatever it was that came over him, Andriamihaja expects Ani to have recovered himself, but when the executioner faces the nobleman once again what was the beginning of a smile turns slack and Ani inhales, then exhales very slowly. He looks at Andriamihaja with eyes like the diviner’s—eyes that read his fate as if it was scrawled into his bones. Eyes that remind Andriamihaja suddenly and forcefully of the man’s profession.
In less time than it takes for a firefly to blink on and then off again, Andriamihaja sees mercy flare and then fade in Ani’s eyes. It is the same mercy that Andriamihaja saw in the eyes of the mpsikidy, and the need for mercy settles in Andriamihaja, it brands his face irreversibly, and in that moment, a moment of time stretched backward to the cause and forward to its conclusion, in that moment the nobleman and his executioner face each other and say nothing. There is nothing to say. In the silence, across Andriamihaja’s skin wafts a breeze from the beating of mighty wings.

Ani stammers a little, “You’ll have to excuse---”

But Andriamihaja interrupts. “No, it is I who must ask for your pardon. Talk of death has no place at a wedding.” The nobleman reaches for a gourd of rum and pours a generous portion for both himself and the executioner. He raises his cup and looks at Ani, “To life!” He smiles slyly and tips his glass to the newlyweds, “And its carnal pleasures!”

Ani looks at Andriamihaja with a new kind of respect, nods his head and says, “To the newlyweds.” The two men drink their rum, and Andriamihaja quickly pours and drinks another measure. He turns to talk to the man sitting on his other side, and when he turns back again, Ani is gone.
CHAPTER 23

...In which the Arab trader travels through the forest and makes a dangerous river crossing

Antananarivo, 1829

Securing the coin intended to pay for the queen’s shipload of luxuries takes a week of Alidy’s time in the capital. Alidy commissions the construction of one hundred wooden boxes—twice the number he actually needs—and secures a measure of dried grass enough to fill the boxes. The queen sends over the coin in two large chests accompanied by a discreet compliment of soldiers. In the section of his house that Alidy uses as warehouse storage, he and his secretary roll the coin into mats they create from the grass. They stuff the mats into the boxes, and when the boxes are sealed and lifted, they are heavy but silent. Stones from a local quarry, similarly treated, fill the other fifty boxes. Alidy marks the boxes in his own personal script so that anyone who does not read Arabic would not be able to tell the difference between the ones filled with stone and the ones filled with silver.

The day before he and Andriamihaja leave the capital for Tamatave, sixty men arrive at Alidy’s warehouse and wrap the boxes, one hundred plus another twenty filled with Alidy’s personal goods, in thick pandamus leaves. They tie the leaves tightly with the vine of a creeper abundant in the forest near Tana, and wrapped like this, the boxes are waterproof even in the heaviest rains. Tamatave lies two hundred and twenty miles to the east of Tana, a week-long trip in perfect conditions that usually takes two or three weeks to travel, even in the dry season. The road to Tamatave is cut and maintained by bare feet and bullocks hoofs, and admits of neither wheeled carts nor pack animals. The sixty men will carry the the one hundred and twenty boxes on their shoulders, one box tied to each end of a thick bamboo cane.
The sixty men who arrive as porters are government conscripts—Alidy is responsible for feeding them, but otherwise they receive no compensation from the crown. Three chiefs manage the sixty men. The usual bickering over who will carry the lightest boxes is somewhat mitigated by the fact that most of the boxes are all the same size and weight. When they are just finished preparing the boxes, Alidy makes a short *kabary*, thanking the men for their service and calling for a peaceful and speedy journey to the port. He promises them good food on the road—meat and rice and fruit, as much as they can eat, twice a day. He tells them that every man who arrives in Tamatave with his boxes intact will also be paid one silver *piastre*. He tells them that the money is in Tamatave, so he cannot pay them now or on the road—they must complete the journey to see their silver. The last is a lie, but a necessary one. Alidy knows never to pay the ferryman until he gets you to the other side.

The porters express their elation with typical noisy enthusiasm, and even the chiefs seem happy. They then shoulders their burdens and march off to the military barracks where they will spend the night, ready to leave with Andriamihaja and the army at first light the next morning. Alidy also goes to the military barracks to arrange last-minute details with the captains there. Andriamihaja’s plan is to travel as quickly as possible—one compliment of soldiers at the front and one at the rear, with the palanquins and the porters in between. The boxes, the officers, and Alidy will stay in government way-houses established for that purpose along the road. The porters and soldiers will camp rough on the outskirts of each night’s village. Alidy doesn’t see Andriamihaja at the barracks, and he imagines that the nobleman is spending one last night with the queen. After finishing his arrangements, Alidy himself returns home to spend one last night in his bed.

The next morning the men are up and preparing in the dark, and the first compliment of soldiers passes through the eastern gate before dawn. Alidy is attended by his usual eight servants—they carry
his palanquin in shifts of four men each, and otherwise see to his needs on the road. Alidy’s travel palanquin is not much more elaborate than a hammock built into a sturdy frame, and includes a roof and curtains of raffia cloth that can be left open in fine weather but drawn closed to keep out the rain. Alidy will walk the greater portion of the road, but the demands of station insist he leave the capital borne on the shoulders of his servants.

The east road out of Antananarivo runs along the tops of dykes built among the rice fields. Now, a month in to the rainy season the paddies reflect back at Alidy the orange dawn. The sky in front of him coaxes away its darkness, the purple disappears, then the violet and the red, and the sun attains the horizon as a tangible orange force that drives away the last wisps of the night. Alidy can no longer bear to sit, so he calls for his servants to stop and set him down. He climbs out of the palanquin without grace, and as soon as his feet touch the red earth the worries of this journey disappear like the purple night. Surrounded on all sides by the flooded fields, he thinks of the missionary story of Christ walking on water. This is how it must feel, he thinks—buoyant and powerful, expansive and free.

His bearers know his habits, and they stack some of his personal belongings in the hammock and carry them that way. They drop back to give him his silence, and Alidy is alone with his thoughts. He imagines the sands of the desert back home—he hasn’t seen them in thirty years, but he remembers their texture in the dawn, sinuous shadows across the wind-brushed waste. Here, the land is limpid, there it blows sand in his eyes, but both places are loose, fluid, shifting and unstable. He imagines the forests of the Europeans as dense and unyielding, like their trees that turn to stone. The water in these paddies is as still as a mirror, but only on the surface, and only temporarily.

Ahead of him a family walks out into a field to plant. They wear wide-brimmed hats and their mud-spattered clothes tied up around their waists. The husband is shirtless, and an older daughter minds the five younger children. They carry bunches of seedlings in baskets and they walk like ibis, picking
their feet up high with each step and sending mud swirling through the clear water. Alidy watches as they spread out in a row, bend over, and with movements as efficient, as exact, as repetitive as a machine, take seedlings from their baskets and plant them in the flooded earth.

Alidy walks, and the family plants, and though he moves his body differently from theirs, his movements and theirs are equally innate. Alidy walks—it’s what his father, and his father’s father, and his father’s grandfather before him did. These farmers have been planting rice since before they could walk. It’s what they were born to do. Alidy has known since he was a boy that he does not merely walk the road, but is driven by it. The road is his sovereign, his wife and his master, just as the people of Madagascar are ultimately servants of the rice.

All day Alidy walks across the rice fields of the central plateau. Every step that Alidy takes on this road is further east than he has ever been. The high plateau of Imerina stretches for thirty miles to the east before it drops off at the great cliff of Angavo. Fifty years ago the forest of Angavo stood at the feet of Antananarivo, but since Andrianampoinimerina gathered the thousand villages to make his great city, the forest has steadily retreated, until now it cannot be reached in a day’s march. Alidy walks twenty-two miles to the village of Manjakandriana, where they will stay the first night. The company of fifteen hundred is strung out along the road, about half ahead of him and half behind. When he arrives in the last light of the day, the soldiers have already spread across the north side of the village. He smells cook fires and hears the simple banter of tired men. He asks a filthy child of indeterminate sex where the government house is, and offers a piece of sugarcane for safe conduct. The child grabs the sugarcane out of his hand and runs hollering through the village then disappears. The child’s mother points wordlessly, and Alidy finds his way to the hut. His servants somehow arrived before him—it’s a favorite trick of theirs, to pass him on the road without him noticing—and have slung his palanquin from the rafters to make his bed for the night. Outside the house his rice is cooking.
Alidy sits for a time and watches the rice cook, then asks where he can bathe and is directed to a spot on the stream where the men go. He takes a gourd and a bar of soap with him. The spot is secluded, a small widening of the stream that might form a clear pool had not fifteen hundred people suddenly descended upon the town. Alidy strips naked, steps into the ankle-deep stream, scoops up the dirty water with his gourd and pours it over his head. The initial shock of cold water, awful and familiar, revives him. He wets himself down, soaps himself up, then rinses with more gourdfuls of water. Halfway through his bath a group of village men arrive; as they walk through the streamside vegetation they gossip about the soldiers, until they see him in the stream. The men exchange polite greetings with Alidy, but after that they stay silent, staring openly at his light skin and full gray beard, his pubic hair and genitals, while they themselves bathe. Alidy finishes his bath, shakes as much sand out of his hair as he can, then dresses and returns to the village.

Before he eats his evening meal he walks through the camp of the porters and speaks with each of the three chiefs in charge. All of the men and their packages arrived safely. Alidy inspects a few of the boxes to make sure, but the pandamus wrappings remain intact and none of the boxes seems damaged. They will buy more rice in Moramanga tomorrow. The rice will be expensive—now, at the beginning of the rains, is the hungry season. Not much rice is left from last year’s crop, and now is a time of intense physical labor for the peasants as they plant. Rice right now is dear, and many peasants go hungry. But Alidy has coin and other goods to trade, and the chiefs seem certain that there will be a supply in Moramanga. Alidy tries not to worry—either there will be rice or there won’t, and if there is, he will have it for his men.

On his way back to the government house for his dinner, Alidy runs into Andriamihaja sprawled on a tsihy mat eating and drinking with his captains. They form a merry company, making crude jokes at each others’ expense, comparing the size and dress of the companies of soldiers to each man’s ability to
father children. With a wobbly wave of his hand and a sloppy but cheerful greeting, the nobleman invites Alidy to join them. He doesn’t even listen as Alidy makes his excuses and moves on. But Alidy sees that Andriamihaja is popular with the soldiers. And Alidy is not so thick that he doesn’t recognize the political implications. Ranavalona will always suffer from the weakness of being a woman—she cannot command the army, and is beholden to the man who can.

Alidy performs the ṣalāt aẓ-ẓuhr at noon while his servants prepare a cold midday meal. He finds a place with clean, flat stone at the top of the escarpment, and sets his sajjāda on a north-south line that points directly toward Mecca. From a bowl of water provided by his servant, he washes three times then prostrates himself, praying for a safe journey and the successful completion of his trade with the French ship. As always, he recites his favorite passage from the Qur’an: “To God belongs the East and the West, Wheresoever you look is the face of God.” And as always he is reminded that these men, too, are part of God’s creation.

When he is done he rolls up his rug and gives it to his servant. He stands at the edge of cliff, the westernmost extent of the mountains of Angavo, and looks out at the view. His servant, who has traveled this road before, describes the land ahead of them. Below him, invisible beyond the forested and folded mountains of Angavo, lies the little valley of Vahala. On the eastern boundary of the valley rise the Ifody mountains, and on the other side, the broad valley of Ankay stretches for thirty miles to the east. Sixteen hundred feet below him at the base of the Ifody mountains the great River Mongoro flows down the western boundary of the Ankay valley. They will have to cross this river by ferry, if the water is not too high, if the crocodiles are not too hungry.

Once they cross the river, their road should be easy across the valley until they reach the village of Moramanga where Alidy hopes they will find rice. After Moramanga, more mountains, more forest,
then the descent onto the coastal plain with its swamps and accompanying fever. Andriamihaja hopes to reach Tamatave in seven days. Alidy admires his ambition—only men in peak condition could do it, and then only if they encounter no mishaps on the road. Alidy admits he may have to be carried for part of the journey.

He asks his servant about the aye-aye. He has heard that the animal can be found in the forests of the east, and hopes that he will have a chance to see one in person. The tales of the aye-aye are stupendous, stretching credulity. The animal is *fady* everywhere he has been—it is a bad omen, a harbinger of ill fortune. If an old man sees an aye-aye, an old person from the village will die. Or, if a person sees a young aye-aye, then a young person will die. An aye-aye will come out of the forest to perch on the roof of a house, and within two weeks someone in the house will fall ill. Entire villages have been abandoned at the appearance of an aye-aye, lest the villagers be doomed to sickness and death. Alidy has even heard that aye-ayes eat people.

According to his servant, killing the aye-aye and tying it to a pole at a crossroads will purge the bad luck, either because killing the animal dispels the danger or because others traveling the road carry away the ill fortune. His servant says that he knows a man who knows a man who once ate an aye-aye. Apparently the animal came out of the forest and into the village and was killed by one of the men. All the children of the village gathered around the dead animal and were told to cry—those who would not cry were hit with a stick until they did. When the weeping was over the dangerous miasma was dispelled and the aye-aye could be eaten safely.

Alidy believes none of this, but his Bezanozano servant clearly does. The servant somewhat reluctantly promises to help Alidy find an aye-aye in the eastern forest, but he looks at Alidy now with a measure of caution, as if he has discovered in Alidy some inexplicable strangeness. Why would someone seek out bad luck? For a moment Alidy’s reason is vanquished by the superstitions of the
island. Why indeed? The distinction between pretending to believe and actually believing dissolves, as if his actions determine his culture instead of the other way around.

So Alidy does what he always does when he needs to clear his head—he puts the road under his feet. For lunch, he and his servants eat cold rice and dried beef supplemented with avocados they pick from the trees. In half an hour they’re traveling east again, and the demands of the road return him to solid reality. The path, not more than a few feet wide in places, drops steeply and cuts straight into the side of the mountain. Alidy walks slowly, overly careful with his feet. Above him the cry of a hawk tempts him to look up, but he keeps his eyes on the path. If he trips, he will fall five hundred feet to his death.

Mercifully, he enters the forest not long after he starts his decent, and although the steepness of the path doesn’t abate, he is no longer exposed to the thin air. Three hundred year old ebony trees shade the road with a canopy forty-five feet high. Orchids sprout from trunks and branches, some singly but most in crowds of color: saffron red, sunset purple, champagne yellow, some striped, some with spots, some painting the thick air with tendrils of perfume. An understory of ferns holds the steep slope in place, heat rippling their round, delicate leaves or long, sharp blades, their stems shivering red in the shadows. Always Alidy hears water cascading in the distance, near then far then near again, and as he walks he crosses several small streams tumbling down the mountainside.

Bird calls echo through the forest like the cries of a haunting shade, and once again the stories of his servant seem inescapably true. The forest is a fabric woven from a thousand thousand threads: the ebony and the orchids and the ferns and the stream and the birds and the crab spider whose web momentarily veils his face, the blue mantella frog, no bigger than his thumbnail, that jumped away at the last stream. The threads all connect with each other—remove one, and the rest must adjust, follow any one thread in the pattern and it could lead you to any other. And the complexity of the design—only
with monumental hubris would a man think he could apprehend it all. Hold the forest in his head like God. So who’s to say that the aye-aye is not a harbinger of ill fortune? Maybe it’s not superstition. Maybe it’s knowledge of a kind that reaches beyond his own limited understanding. Maybe it’s a forest kind of knowledge.

The air is so heavy he feels he could reach out and capture a handful of green light. All around him the forest breathes. It hunts, it mates, it kills and it eats according to its own fomba, its own fady. Alidy moves through it mostly unnoticed, insignificant, and he feels like a mouse creeping into a house at night to eat. He intrudes in a place that lives and loves independently of his presence. He treads, small and alien, through a world where time oozes full and thick like the air, a world that is too strange and much, much bigger than he.

The road drops, then climbs, then drops again. Up and down and up and down as he walks through the mountains and forest of Angavo. He thinks of his wife in Mahajunga, the little roll of fat around her belly, how he likes to play with the disheveled hair under her arms when they are relaxing in bed together. She is alone now, in the stone house with the ten slaves. If this mission goes well, he thinks he will move her to Tana. He doesn’t know if he will completely abandon his ties in Mahajunga, but the Sakalava seem to be losing ground to the Merina. Now, six years after the rebellion, Mahajunga is definitively governed by the Merina garrison there.

Alidy lost both his sons in the rebellion. When Radama took Mahajunga he outlawed the export of slaves in accordance with the treaty he signed with Hastie and the British. Alidy and his sons found themselves working outside the law, and his sons hated it, with good reason. The shadow trade was both more expensive and more dangerous, and involved a matter of honor they could not let go. Over the course of a year they gathered around them other young men, Arabs and Indians and Sakalava, who for many reasons were also dissatisfied with Merina rule.
During the military season of 1825 the northern districts of Maroa and Betsimisaraka revolted when Radama’s army demanded they surrender their guns. Alidy’s sons led an uprising in Mahajunga. They didn’t have a chance. In the middle of the night they took the town without firing a single shot—the town readily capitulated—but the next day the army marched down from the garrison, killed every Arab, Indian, or Sakalava they saw, and under orders from Ramanetaka set fire to the entire city. Eight hundred houses burned. In the aftermath, in the wreckage, Alidy found his sons lying in the crooked streets dead from bullet wounds and knife wounds and pride.

In six years all of Alidy’s silver has not plated his wife’s grief, and now she barely leaves the house—she cannot walk those streets, she says. And now Ranavalona sits on the Merina throne. Ranavalona, who for the security of her throne sent an army to Mahajunga to kill Ramanetaka after Radama’s death. But Ramanetaka outwitted Ranavalona’s army and escaped to the Comoros with his three wives and his two hundred slaves and all the wealth he had squeezed from Mahajunga’s traders. The wealth he had squeezed from Alidy. Ramanetaka now lives like a king on the Island of Johanna and feasts with the Sultan Abdullah, the King of Johanna and also an émigré from Mahajunga.

Alidy has heard whispers, from friends and partners and fellow tradesmen who ply the ports between the Comoros Islands and Madagascar, and the whispers say that the French have been talking to Ramanetaka. The French want to conquer Imerina. They want to rid themselves of this woman who hates the vahaza, who threatens the life of their sugar plantations, who will not accept two-hundred-year-old French claims to certain territories on the Island of Madagascar. The recent attack on Tamatave was the first skirmish of an invasion campaign. The French want to land troops and march them to Antananarivo and depose the queen Ranavalona. They want to install Ramanetaka in her place, as a puppet king. And so now, while the French talk treaty with Andriamihaja in Tamatave, they plan for war with Ramanetaka.
In truth, Ramanetaka has more of a right than Ranavalona to rule in Antananarivo. He is Radama’s first cousin, and sitting the throne would restore the royal bloodline. But Alidy thinks the French do not understand Ramanetaka—they do not see that he will make a poor puppet. Alidy remembers Ramanetaka from his days in Mahajunga. Of all of Andrianampoinimerina’s scion, Ramenetaka is the most like the great king. Strong, charismatic, competent, and ruthless. He would have made a great king, perhaps even better than Radama. But Alidy doesn’t care what the French think about Ramenetaka—Alidy hates the man for the death of his sons. So Alidy will help the queen and he will help Andriamihaja because he cannot stand the thought of Ramanetaka on the Merina throne.

If this mission goes well, he thinks he will relocate to Antananarivo. Mahajunga is dying, its three mosques only half full, its still-black buildings like missing teeth in a hungry mouth. And Alidy smells a shift in the winds that drive the slaving dhows. Yes, it’s time for a change. For his wife, for his dead sons, for his business.

Alidy thinks of his wife, of the fountain in the garden in Mecca where he met her at the hajj. Alidy and her brother argued over a piece of roasted lamb at a street stall in Mecca, and during the argument discovered that her brother and his uncle are neighbors in Damascus. The men became friends, and Alidy married the sister, a fourth daughter, before he left Mecca. She followed him to Mahajunga two months later. But Alidy can still remember the play of the fountain when he first saw her, veiled head to toe, her kohl-lined eyes terrified and young. He remembers the smell of jasmine, and the sound of water falling gently into a pool.

Alidy has walked into the late afternoon, down the mountains of Angavo, across the little valley of Vahala, and down again the Ifody mountains. As the road levels, the forest thins then breaks onto the flat, grassy plain of Ankay. Alidy looks out across the plain, thirty miles wide, and knows they will not reach to Moramanga today. Dark clouds gather in the sky and thunder cracks in the distance. The rain
here is always violent, spilling from the sky in a flood, the clouds flashing and booming as if a battle rages in the sky above. Alidy remembers the quiet fountain in Mecca, thinks of the gentle, steady rain drumming the silky leaves of the silvertree at the Cape of Good Hope. He longs for water that is benign. This rain will make their road difficult, but they are now into the rainy season, and they were lucky that yesterday was dry.

Alidy’s servants wait for him at the government outpost at Ambodinifody. They tell him that half the troops are marching another two miles to the village of Andakana, where they will spend the night before taking the ferry before daybreak tomorrow across the Mongoro River. The rest of the troops will stay in Ambodinifody. Andriamihaja has requested that Alidy, his porters, and his packages join him in Andakana. Alidy is tired, and the skies are angry, so he permits himself to be carried the last two miles in the palanquin, drawing the raffia curtains against the wild rain.

The next morning, Alidy gets up when the sky is barely gray and performs his morning ablutions and his dawn prayer. While his servants pack up his things he walks down to the river, where sleepy soldiers mill on the banks and ferrymen arrange the canoes. The rains yesterday fattened the Mangoro River so that the water now floods the streamside vegetation and the center of the river, twenty yards from the bank, flows fast and brown. They will cross in canoes made from hollowed-out tree trunks that will only hold three or four men.

The lot of the ferryman is a precarious one, especially when faced with a military force of fifteen hundred men. The army is completely dependent on him—without his boats, they do not cross the river. And so in theory the ferryman can charge whatever price he likes. But the soldiers carry guns, and can, if necessary, overpower the ferryman and simply take his boats. So he must find a price that is high enough to reflect their dependence on him, but not so high that it will provoke them to violence. Alidy
well understands the power of monopoly, and these ferrymen have a monopoly on travel across the Mongoro River.

The previous night, Andriamihaja invited the ferrymen and the village elders to table, and they stayed up drinking most of the night. He negotiated a price of two bullocks for transport for the entire army, plus a bottle of toaka for every man who loans a boat. Word spread quickly on both banks of the river, and now fishermen, ferrymen, and river merchants gather with their boats on the west bank to help ferry Her Majesty’s army across. Alidy counts almost thirty boats either milling in the shallows or on their way toward him across the river, but still he thinks that it will take all day to get the army across. Any other travelers who arrive today traveling east will have to wait until tomorrow.

Just as the incandescent arc of the sun rises above the plain to the east, the boats lingering in the shallows paddle toward the edge of the water. The men in the boats beat their oars against the water and shout warnings and supplications to the crocodiles; the soldiers wade into the river and add their voices to the pilots’, and the Merina greet the dawn with a great commotion at the shoreline. Many of the soldiers, porters, and even Alidy’s servants finger small charms hanging around their necks—ody mamba, medicine to ward off crocodiles. In the midst of the pandemonium Alidy’s Bezanozano servant strides up to the edge of the water, plants his feet so that he’s facing the opposite shore, and begins a thundering kabary addressed to the crocodiles.

The man urges the crocodiles to do him no injury because he has never done them any harm. He swears a solemn oath that he never hunted, knifed, shot, or killed any of the animal’s brethren, and that, on the contrary, he has always held crocodiles in the highest regard. Alidy’s servant goes on to promise that if a crocodile attacks him, vengeance will sooner or later find the crocodile, and that if a crocodile devours him, then all the man’s relatives will declare war against the crocodiles.
The harangue lasts a full quarter of an hour, at the end of which the man throws two or three objects into the river—Alidy can’t see clearly—then marches fearlessly into the water and boards one of the canoes. The rest of the men are clearly impressed by the power of the man’s speech, and a minor tussle ensues as soldiers scramble to board the boats and cross alongside the Bezanozano who has such a powerful rapport with crocodiles. Alidy decides he will wait.

The canoes glide tipsy across the shallows as the men sit very still in the unstable crafts, but they make the crossing safely even through the swift central current, and after unloading their cargo the pilots paddle upstream along the shoreline before heading west again to pick up the next group. Alidy alternately watches the crossing and the men on the shore, counting his porters and his packages. When the first wave of canoes is almost back to the western shore, one of the chiefs of his porters comes to sit with him while they wait. The chief reports that all his porters are on the western shore with their boxes, all still intact. Alidy has already given instructions that his porters are to rendezvous together at a designated place on the opposite bank, so Alidy can take inventory before they head out again on the road to Moramanga.

Another wave of soldiers boards the canoes, slapping the water and shouting and churning up the muddy bottom. Invisible until it moved its stone-colored bulk, a fifteen-foot crocodile fifty yards downstream slips silently into the water and disappears, and Alidy offers up a silent prayer to Allah. The chief tells him a story of a dog he used take with him on his travels. When they needed to cross a river, the dog would bark ferociously and at length at a point downstream from where they intended to cross. The dog’s howling would attract the crocodiles to that decoy place, then the dog would bound upstream and he and the chief would cross quickly to safety.

“Dogs and crocodiles are great enemies,” he says. “Once, long ago, a man grew pumpkins and squash on an island in the middle of a river infested with crocodiles. He didn't worry about thieves
because no one dared to cross the water. And he himself had powerful magic that locked shut the jaws of crocodiles, so he was not afraid to cross.

“One morning he went to work in his pumpkin patch, but just as he entered the water a crocodile caught him and dragged him into the river. The crocodile was so hungry that the man’s magic didn't work on it. Just at that moment, a dog passed by and saw the man and the crocodile struggling in the water. The dog called to the crocodile, saying, ‘Hey! Let's eat him together because I'm very hungry, too.’ The crocodile answered, ‘Well hurry up and get down here so we can eat him, because I'm starving!’ The dog said, ‘Thank you Mr. Crocodile, but I can't swim, so why don't you bring him up here so we can eat him?’ The crocodile answered, ‘Just be careful he doesn't get away!’ And the dog said, ‘I'll hold him in my mouth so he can't get away. Bring him up!’

“So the crocodile brought the man up, but when he got there the dog said to the man, ‘Go back home to your wife and your children and grandchildren.’ The crocodile was very surprised and very angry at what the dog had done. So he railed and cursed the dog, and swore that if he could he would eat the dog and the dog’s children and his grandchildren. But the man made a vow and instructed his children and grandchildren thus: ‘My children and grandchildren will do what they can for you, and be good to you.’ And this is why crocodiles and dogs hate each other, and why people take care of dogs.”

Alidy is not a natural storyteller, but he has his own crocodile story to tell, and as the two men speak the group around them grows. “There is a lake,” he says, “about forty-five miles south of Antisirianana in the north. I have been to this lake and swear this is true. The crocodiles in the lake wear jewelry—necklaces and earrings made of gold and silver and beads and jewels. I have seen them, and know it’s true.

“Once, long ago, the village of Anivorano was surrounded by desert. A thirsty traveler arrived in the village and asked for water, but the villagers were rich and proud, and the woman was poor and
dirty, and so the villagers refused to give her water to drink. But the woman was a witch, and told the villagers that soon they would have more water than they could handle. As soon as she left the village, the earth opened up and water came gushing out, and now that village is a lake. The villagers all turned into crocodiles, but they still wear their jewelry to remind them of their pride.”

Alidy has in fact been to Anivorano and he has seen the crocodiles in Lake Antanavo. But he has not seen them wearing jewelry. Alidy understands that a good story is worth more than the truth when you’re sitting at the side of a river waiting for the canoes to cross, and he has been waiting for a long time now and decides he wants to try and board in the next wave. Sitting on this side of the river or the other doesn’t matter when he’s going to be waiting for his boxes anyway, but after all the talk of crocodiles he decides he wants the crossing to be over with. Alidy has another crocodile story that he does not share with other men. So he nods to two of his servants and excuses himself from the crowd. The men go on swapping crocodile stories without him.

Along the banks of the river thick stands of papyrus poke from the water, thread-like stems bursting from the tops like a mop of unruly green hair. Rushes, sedges and thorny bushes lurk under the opaque waters, and Alidy’s footing to the canoe is precarious. Once he missteps so badly that he would have fallen in if his servant hadn’t steadied him. Alidy has always marveled at the dexterity of the native inhabitants of Madagascar—they seem to have preternatural senses. They can climb a tree like a lemur and see in the dark like a bat, they’ll hear the sound of an approaching oxcart long before he will, and can see details at a distance that are invisible to him. He thinks it must come from living so close to the land, and he envies them for it. But then, he has always had enough to eat, and for that he is grateful.

His servants shout and beat the water with sticks as he wades to the canoe, then steady the boat as he climbs gracelessly in. The canoe really is nothing more than a hollowed-out tree trunk—a massive trunk it once was, too—and with no pontoon or rudder, the boat will tip if Alidy so much as sneezes. He
plants himself in three inches of standing water in the direct center of the boat and tries very hard not to move. The ferryman sees his fear, and taking the opportunity to make himself a big man, teases him for it. “Everyone knows that crocodiles only attack the guilty. Are you secretly guilty of something, Arab man?” The ferryman laughs and rocks the boat playfully while Alidy feels his stomach lurch and fights down the urge to vomit. The ferryman laughs louder, addressing Alidy’s servants. “His skin is even whiter than before!” Merrily he paddles out of the shallows and into the fast central current of the river, where, still laughing, he uses all the strength of his body and all his boatsman skill to keep the canoe upright and moving in the direction of the opposite shore.

Alidy tries hard not to imagine a hundred crocodiles submerged and surrounding them in the muddy water. He witnessed a trial by crocodile once, in the north, near Marovoay on the Bestiboka River. A villager was accused of sorcery and brought by the entire village down to the banks of the river, which was home to many crocodiles who certainly knew the truth of the matter. The village elder slapped the water three times and said to the crocodiles, “If the man is guilty then you are welcome to eat him, but if he is innocent, you must refrain from attacking.” The man was then told to swim out to an island in the lake and swim back again. If he made it safely, the accuser would be fined four bullocks: two to go to the accused man, one to the village, and one to the king.

The man did not make it back safely. Sitting in the bottom of the canoe, crossing the Mangoro River, Alidy can hear again, as if he were there, the screams of the man as three crocodiles tore him apart. The crocodiles were sunning themselves on the island, and just as the man swam toward them they quietly and with purpose slipped into the water. The man saw them and swam away as fast as he could, but they were faster, and hungry, and with their mighty jaws latched onto him and pulled. The man’s wife had to be restrained from diving in after him, and screaming and fighting the men who held her, laid a curse on the village that was frightening to hear. Meanwhile, the water churned and frothed
red as one of the crocodiles surfaced and tossed an unrecognizable hunk of its prey into the air before devouring it.

Alidy, sickened, nevertheless watched the entire spectacle. Later, he asked the village elder what fatidra they would use to break the curse. The village elder shrugged. They would perform a fatidra, yes, but he was not very worried. The curse was only effective if the man was innocent of sorcery, which clearly he was not since the crocodiles ate him. Alidy asked what would happen to his wife and children. The elder told him that she had already left the village to return to her father’s house, and he hoped they would not see her again.

But in Alidy’s mind is a clear image of the inside of a crocodile’s mouth—the ridged white of the roof, the huge pink tongue, and the teeth, so many teeth, jutting from its jaws like spearheads on a palisade. He remembers clearly the flash of white just before those horrific teeth clamped down on the man’s arm. In the middle of the Mangoro River, the muddy water swirling and splashing around his precarious canoe, Alidy closes his eyes and under his breath quotes from the Qur’an. The recitation in his own language calms him a little and gets him through the central current.

In the shallows on the opposite shore the ferryman again decides to make fun, and paddles across twenty feet of water rocking the boat the whole way. Alidy knows that crocodiles like to bask in the slower parts of a river, and if they upset here they’re more likely to be attacked than out in the main channel. But he will not give the man the satisfaction of his fear, and sends a tired smile to the ferryman, as if to say, “Again? This joke is old.” But the boatman is too enamored of his own humor, and laughs and laughs as he pulls into the shallows. He laughs as Alidy and his servants disembark, and as he paddles away upstream to make the crossing again. Alidy is on dry land as fast as the unsure footing will allow, and his servant comments that the ferryman is certainly courageous, tempting the king of the water like he does. Alidy says nothing, but thinks that “courageous” is not the word he would use to describe
the ferryman. Alidy despises ferrymen because they take as much advantage of their position as they can. But he hates this one now with a special, orange-colored fervor.

His servants carried with them in the boat the rice and dried beef for Alidy’s mid-day meal, and they walk the quarter mile to the large mango tree that is the rendezvous point for Alidy’s porters. Alidy collects himself as they walk, so when they arrive he is able to greet civilly the fourteen porters and one chief who are already there waiting. Alidy, his porters, and their packages must make it to Moramanga tonight, and the village is still six hours of easy but strong walking across the plain of Ankay. And Alidy cannot leave until he has accounted for all his boxes. He and his servants will be up late tonight. Alidy finds a comfortable mango root to lean against, and settles himself in to wait.
...In which the farmers of Imerina plant rice, and we hear more of Iboina’s exploits

Anjozorobe, 1829

The rains have come in earnest. The seedlings in the tanim-ketsa grow thickly, and Todisoa prepares his rice fields for planting. This is men’s work. He and his sons spread manure across the field then open the dyke and flood the field with six inches of water. Todisoa releases his six head of cattle onto the field and drives them back and forth, back and forth, until his legs, his sons’ legs, and his cattle’s legs are in danger of buckling underneath them. Until the field is neither earth nor mud nor water, but an even mixture of the three. Todisoa opens the dyke and drains the field, and then he and his sons level it, for when it is flooded again the water must reach each plant equally. Todisoa does not think about anything while he prepares his fields except the preparing of his fields.

The rains have come in earnest. Every afternoon the bright sky closes, turns gray, and releases the rain. The seedlings in the tanim-ketsa grow thickly, and Todisoa’s wife prepares the rice for transplanting. This is women’s work. She and her two slaves and a daughter borrowed from her cousin in a nearby village carefully withdraw the seedlings from the nursery grounds. They gather the tiny plants into bundles in their left hand then plant them in rows with their right. Stooped over for hours on end, their feet shuffling through the shallow water, each woman plants a hundred seedlings in a minute, six thousand in an hour. They work from dawn until dusk and only sleep for a little while in the midday heat under the shade of the old acacia tree. When the sun is red in the west they are done with the day’s work and return home to cook the evening meal.
The rains have come in earnest. All through Imerina the *fokonolo* stomp and stoop their way across the rice fields. And while they prepare the fields, and while they plant the rice, stories fall from their lips as if words could be a kind of fertilizer for the land. Perhaps they can be. This year, the story of Iboniamasiboniamanoro feeds the rice fields of Imerina. The first part of that story—about how barren Rasoabemanana fought and won a child-bearing charm from Male-Rock-of-a-Thousand-Corners—we have heard the first part of that story. But there are other parts of the story as well: about how Ibonia chose his wife while still in his mother’s womb, about how he refused a hundred times the names his father proposed, about how he chose his birth place, was tested, and battled man and beast. In Todisoa’s rice fields, this is the part of the story the women tell each other, calling back and forth like robin-chats:

Rasoabemanana came out into the public square and went up to the entry gate where Ibonia was acting haughty and proud. She said,

“*Ibonia, you are bad, you are cowardly.*

*You act like Imozy’s bull*  

*shout at him, he does not roar*  

*prod him, he does not fight*  

*butcher him, his meat is not tender.*

*Ibonia, if you are so strong, go to where Manly Princess is. She is a strong one.”* Ibonia said,

“I am made by power.

*With you I am gentle, but with others I am tough.*”

And then he went to where Manly Princess was. He took his four slaves with him, and five bulls and some provisions. When they reached the village of Manly Princess, no one was there. When they
saw no one there and an empty village, Ibonia said to his servants, “Where are these people gone, men? All the furnishings of the houses are still here, but the people are not.” Then he said to one of his servants, “Stay here, my man, kill an ox, have it ready when we come back. We’ll go find out where the villagers have gone.”

As the slave was cooking and roasting the meat, it gave off a charred smell. Then a large animal came out of the water into the village. It meant to eat the one slave left there and the meal he had prepared. It was this animal that had eaten the people of the village and every living thing it found. But Ibonia was far away. When the slave saw the animal, he fled. The animal was the size of a mountain. The slave peeped through a hole at the animal, and there he was, eating the meat. He was frightened and wondered what he would say to Ibonia. He said to himself, “If I tell Ibonia about this, he will fight the animal and kill it. But if I don’t tell him, then he will not leave me alone until I tell him where the meat is gone. Well, I won’t tell him. He will do what he will do.”

When Ibonia came, he said, “Bring on the food.” And the slave said, “I left it. I had to run after the cattle. I did not see what ate it.” Ibonia was angry and said, “Now I see what my father told me: ‘They cannot take care of you, Ibonia; take more people with you.’”

Next day he left another slave there. He again ordered him to kill an ox, but that animal ate it up like the other one. He had all four men take turns; then only one ox was left. Ibonia said, “Go you and look for those people. I will be the one to stay.” The servants left, but they did not go far. They just peeped through, saying, “We’ll be in trouble if the son dies. That animal is the one that has eaten the people of this place.”

Ibonia killed the ox, cooked some of it on the fire, and roasted the rest. When the animal smelled the smell of char, it came up and said,
“Bring out what is cooked
cook what is raw.
I am here, the one it was made for.”

Ibonia was startled, looked around, and jumped when he saw the animal. Then he said to his talismans,

“What to do, O Resolute?
O Enough to Fill the Earth?
O All Raw?

If I go forward, I will be conquered by this creature.

If I go back, I will be disgraced before my father.”

The talismans trembled. He put the skewer on the fire. The animal got jumpy. It said, “Draw back! In one gulp I have swallowed thousands upon thousands of people and thousands upon thousands of cattle, and you, all alone, are blocking me?” Ibonia went on heating the skewer. When the animal was about to swallow him, he threw the iron into its mouth. The animal roared, the iron made a great noise in its mouth. It would not come out. The animal died. Then Ibonia unstitched its belly, and there were all the people and living things the animal had swallowed. And Ibonia brought all those people and living things back to life, and they were all alive.

Then Manly Princess and her people said, “We were dead and now are living. Ibonia, from now on I am your child, and I obey you. From now on, you are lord and ruler of this land.” But Ibonia refused, saying, “Be your own lord and ruler. I must still rescue Girl of Grace. But I tell you just this: go to another place. That monster may have friends.” And the people did go to another place.
Antananarivo, 1829

David Griffiths sits at his desk working on his translation of the Bible. Certain chapters in the Book of Revelation continue to vex him and his Merina students. Cultural barriers render the translation of particular passages difficult, even potentially dangerous in the current political climate. Today Griffiths struggles like Jacob with the angel over Chapter 17 and the Whore of Babylon:

And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, “Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication.” So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness, and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And upon her forehead was a name written: “Mystery, Babylon The Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth.” And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. Rasalama and her new husband Paul sit with Griffiths and argue over particular word choices.

Mostly Griffiths listens—they have reached the stage in translation where the subtle implications of each Merina word become important, and while Griffiths is completely fluent in the language, he does not have the same cultural background as the two natives. He is learning shades of meaning, how a particular word is used in a proverb or fable, and the implications of those cultural uses to the final work. Rasalama argues forcefully—she is a woman of strong character—but her translations have a tendency to cast Merina culture in a savage light. Her proposed translation of Chapter 17, for example, draws too-close connections to the current Merina sovereign. Paul argues for a gentler approach.
After working all morning with his students, Griffiths complains of pain in his hip and excuses himself to get some air. Outside the building that his home, church, and school the chilly Tana air carries the sounds of women pounding rice and dogs barking at chickens. Griffiths lights a cigarette and while he smokes listens to the approach of an as-yet-unseen body of men. Like all roads in Tana, the road to Griffiths’ house winds along the topography and twists through the neighboring houses. Ratiandrazana and his company of five soldiers are practically at Griffiths’ doorstep before Griffiths knows who’s coming.

Griffiths takes the measure of the men—Ratiandrazana wrapped in a good scarlet *lamba* and carrying his ubiquitous spear, the soldiers in full dress uniforms, also armed. Ratiandrazana frowns, but Ratiandrazana always frowns and so Griffiths cannot interpret his intentions from his face. Still, a shiver of fear passes through Griffiths, and though he tries to hide it, an answering glint of satisfaction in Ratiandrazana’s eye tells Griffiths that he will never have the knack of hiding his emotions like the Merina do. Still, Griffiths fights down his fear. These men may be here to arrest him—since Andriamihaja left for Tamatave, Ratiandrazana has become increasingly more influential with the queen, and Ratiandrazana wants nothing so much as to extinguish every whisper of the Word of God in Imerina. But if he is here looking for an excuse to make an arrest, Griffiths will not help him, so Griffiths greets the general cordially and invites him into his home.

Paul and Rasalama stand when Ratiandrazana and Griffiths enter, and the general shows his teeth when he sees them. He accepts Griffiths’ offer of wine and the four sit around the table strewn with papers and books. Ratiandrazana offers no immediate explanation for his visit, and Griffiths struggles to make genial small talk. He almost introduces Paul as one of the Christians who survived Ikongo, but catches himself just in time. He suspects Ratiandrazana knows already the identity of the two young people. Ratiandrazana congratulates them, seemingly without irony, on their recent marriage. And while
Griffiths rambles on about the rains and the state of the soap business in Tana, Ratiandrazana stares unabashedly at Rasalama.

From the table, the general picks up one of the papers and glances over it, then puts it down again. Griffiths is sure the man is illiterate—he never came through Griffiths’ school, and his reaction to the paper, a mixture of reverence, trepidation, and defensiveness, is typical of someone who cannot decipher the cryptic marks. Ratiandrazana turns to Paul and says, “You are learning the foreign writing, and you dress your wife as a foreigner.” Since the wedding Rasalama has refused to wear her native lamba, and with the help of Mrs. Griffiths sewed herself two dresses in the western style, with conservative neck- and hemlines. Rasalama addresses the general herself: “I am a modest wife, and attire myself accordingly.”

Ratiandrazana laughs out loud, a laugh that ends in mockery. “You must be very proud, to have such a... modest wife.” He smiles like a crocodile and addresses them formally. “It would be my great pleasure to invite you, Minister Griffiths, and your two students here, to a famadihana in my home village of Ambohimanambola.” This is not what Griffiths was expecting. The opening of an ancestral tomb and the turning of the bones is one of the most significant—and expensive—obligations in Merina culture. The two newlyweds look to Griffiths for guidance on how to respond, but Griffiths remains silent as Ratiandrazana continues. “My family and I will be celebrating tomorrow, and it would be an honor if you would attend. My village is a few miles from here—the journey should not be burdensome.”

Griffiths still doesn’t know how to respond. But clearly Ratiandrazana has said what he meant to say, and the silence stretches politely, then uncomfortably as the three Christians stare openly at the general. Finally, Ratiandrazana stands. “Thank you for your hospitality. I will leave you to prepare. My
soldiers outside know the way to my village—they will wait here for you then guide you to make sure you arrive safely. We will expect you tonight after the evening meal.”

Griffiths stands when the general does. He has no idea what lies behind Ratiandrazana’s invitation—he can think of several possibilities of varying degrees of malice. “We are honored by your invitation, noble Ratiandrazana, but I’m afraid we simply cannot leave Tana at the moment. As you see,” he sweeps his hands over the table, “our work is at a critical stage. Tomorrow a number of students will gather here to work on our translation of the Holy Book, and our attendance is crucial.”

Ratiandrazana ignores Griffiths and addresses Paul. “I’m sure that you will show my ancestors an appropriate degree of respect, by following our *fomba.*” He looks at Rasalama, at the dress she wears. “My family guards the *sampy* Ikelimalaza. We honor its taboos in our village. Our *fady* include pigs, pork, magpies, cats, animals with speckled hides, snails, garlic, gunpowder, guns, cannons, and multicolored *lamba.*” He turns again to Griffiths and nods his head. “Until this evening, then.”

What can he do? After Ratiandrazana leaves he will think over the dangers of failing to attend the *famadihana.* Now, there’s nothing to be done but to accept the invitation with grace. He nods his head back at the general. “We look forward to seeing you this evening.” Ratiandrazana leaves, but his soldiers remain outside Griffiths’ door.

Rasamala hisses at her husband, “That idol-worshiper will burn in hell.”

Griffiths answers her mildly. “Which is not a thing for rejoicing, child.” He leans over and kisses the top of her head.

But she will not be placated. “I will die before I ‘show respect’ to his impotent string of beads.”

Griffiths says, “No one will die today. Thanks be to God.” Griffiths exhales a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. Paul looks at him. “What shall we do, father?”
Griffiths is suddenly tired. He wants to smoke another cigarette, but these children are looking to him for guidance. No, not children. Married adults. And if things continue in the direction they’re headed, the members of his flock will soon need to make decisions on their own. “Paul, what do you think we should do?”

Paul looks down at the ground and considers. “Well, if he wanted to arrest us, he would have done it.”

Griffith nods. “Yes. If the queen had ordered us arrested, Ratiandrazana would have done it with great fanfare. With a crowd at his back as he marched us through the streets.” The minister shudders. With the political tide possibly turning, the issue of martyrdom looms. David Griffiths loves his God but has no desire to die for his faith. This vision of being marched through the streets of Tana, where he has lived for over ten years, frightens him. He briefly squeezes his eyes shut to dispel the image.

Paul thinks some more. “So the queen has not given him permission to arrest us. Perhaps she still favors us?” He looks at Griffiths hopefully.

Griffiths wishes he could provide a more substantial reassurance. “Everyday I pray to our Lord that Queen Ranavalona still favors us.” This is true. Everyday he prays for the salvation of the queen’s immortal soul. “But in any case, it doesn’t seem she wants to do us harm. And in this Ratiandrazana will not act against the queen’s wishes. The stakes are too high.” He doesn’t say what the stakes are, but he knows them: the king-ship, control over three and half million Merina souls, the livelihoods of the missionaries and their flock, possibly even their lives.

Rasalama understand immediately, and recoils. “You think we should go! To participate in a ceremony of ancestor worship! It’s blasphemy!” Her eyes burn at Griffiths as if he himself is a blasphemer.
Griffiths sits at the table and gently takes the girls hands in his own. “Rasalama. I think it will be more dangerous not to go, than to go. I don’t know why Ratiandrazana is insisting we attend. But yes, we must attend. And we will show respect to him and his family, even though they are sinners.” Rasalama looks to interrupt him, but Griffiths runs over her. “Always, we can hope and pray for their salvation.” Griffiths pauses a moment—he must impress upon her the importance of what he says next. “We will be representing the Church, and you, Rasalama, you will represent us among the women. Please, do not forget this. Your actions tomorrow reflect on our whole community.” Rasalama listens to him, finds her humility and bows her head. “Yes father.” She sighs. “I will need to borrow a lamba.” Griffiths smiles in an attempt to lighten the mood. “Of a solid color.” Rasalama rolls her eyes, but smiles back at him. “A lamba of a solid color.” Paul listens to the exchange, thinking. Griffiths releases Rasalama’s hands, sits back in his chair and waits for the boy to speak. After a moment Paul asks, “Have you ever seen a famadihana, father?” “No, I haven’t. Although of course I have heard of them. But in ten years here, this is the first invitation I’ve received.” Rasalama retorts, “And a strange invitation it is, too.” Paul looks at her, and she sets her face but stays quiet. The boy continues, “We will need to bring honey, and coins, and money for the family, of course.” “Of course,” Griffiths says. “Tell me what we will need, and let’s prepare.” As Ratiandrazana walks away from Griffiths house he thinks of the proverb: Do not scare the birds you are going to shoot. Today, he will not shoot the birds. But he enjoyed scaring them.
It’s after dark when the minister and the newlyweds set out with their soldier escort for Ambohimanabola. Griffiths rarely travels at night—night is the province of witches and sorcerers, and in Imerina people look suspiciously at anyone traveling after the evening meal. The muddy road sticks to Griffiths shoes, and soon he takes them off and walks barefoot. He decided against a palanquin in deference to Paul and Rasalama, but now he regrets the decision. He will arrive filthy, and will need to bathe and change his clothes before dawn the next morning.

The soldiers carry torches to light their way in the moonless night, and the orange light catches a chameleon as it makes its tentative way across the road. A scaly leg moves forward, touches down, moves back, pauses, moves forward, touches down, moves back, pauses, then moves forward and commits itself to the earth, then repeat with the next scaly leg. From the rice fields the croaking of frogs fills the air with things unseen: snakes, ghosts, owls, the swishing fronds of traveler’s palms reaching like brutish fingers into the dark. A splash announces an invisible predator, too late to help its unlucky prey.

From the direction of the village, a low keening slowly grows louder, more distinct. Griffiths cannot make out the words, then realizes what he hears are names, names called out into the night. A list of five names, repeated three times, then, almost a prayer: “Come home,” the voice calls. “Mipodéééé. Mipodéééé. Mipodéééé.”

Paul says, “He gathers together the dispersed, and redeems the lost.”

“Who?” asks Griffiths.

“The eldest son. Ratiandrazana. He stands now at the top of the tomb and calls the ancestors back, in case they have strayed.”
In ten years living with the Merina, Griffiths has never grown to love their music. He finds their songs and dances repetitive and mindless, full of enthusiasm but devoid of interesting content or character. He walks now in a crowd of people and their cacophony, pressed on all sides by noisy villagers and their inane chanting and clapping. The crowd of several hundred people is led by a diviner, a *mpisikidy* who named the day for this *famadihana* and who will open the tomb and seal it again. With the diviner at the head of the crowd are Ratiandrazana and his brother Rainiharo, who is holding a necklace that belonged to their uncle, dead and buried now three and a half years. Ratiandrazana carries a white flag hanging limp on a bamboo pole. With the brothers walk their seven older sons, and separate from the brothers walk their five wives and the younger of their twenty-two children. Following behind the family, women carry rolled *tsihy* mats, and musicians play drums and flutes to no particular rhythm or melody.

The tomb itself lies just to the west of the village, and while Ratiandrazana lives in a modest wood house near the Rova in Tana—a large-ish house with a room divider, but in all other ways exactly the same as every other Merina house—the tomb of Ratiandrazana’s ancestors reigns like a palace over the village of Ambohimanabola. The stone mausoleum resembles a stepped pyramid topped by a wooden house. The lowest stone terrace measures twenty feet square and rises ten feet above the ground. The second platform, fifteen feet square and five feet tall, rests on the first as the smaller and shorter third terrace rests on the second. On top of this third terrace sits the little windowless house. All of the stonework has been whitewashed with lime and to Griffiths the structure shines in the sun like a church.

As the procession makes its way to the tomb, Paul talks with some of the villagers. They tell him that Ratiandrazana is designing a tomb for himself that surpasses anything anyone in the village has ever seen. They say it will have pillars and arches and a great stone staircase, and will look like an Indian
palace. Griffiths raises his eyebrows sceptically, and Paul shrugs. He says that Ratiandrazana is a very wealthy man, and his tomb will be his life’s work.

Ratiandrazana’s eldest son takes the flag from Ratiandrazana and climbs the walls of the mausoleum, then plants the flag in front of the door of the little house. Men at the front of the procession begin to dig with spades at the center of the east wall. The women, with nothing yet to do, mill around talking and clapping with the music. Griffiths watches Rasalama standing alone among the women—the other women stare at her and won’t come near, and she stands awkwardly, not sure what to do. She turns to the woman closest to her, an older village woman with gray in her plaited hair, but the woman looks at her as if she were a leper and moves away.

When the men finish uncovering the buried stone door, the mpisikidy steps to the front of the crowd. The music gradually dies away, and the diviner begins a long kabary, naming the ancestors whose bones will be turned that day. He calls Ratiandrazana’s uncle last, and speaks at length of the life and character of the man who helped raise a rebellion with King Andrianampoinimerina against his rival Merina king Andrianjafinandriamanitra. Radama’s father, Andrianampoinimerina, favored Ratiandrazana’s father and uncle because they helped him conquer the rest of the Merina tribes, and Ratiandrazana’s family first became powerful when Andrianampoinimerina rewarded them for their service. Similarly, Radama loved Ratiandrazana, and trusted him. The mpisikidy leaves out of the account how Ratiandrazana betrayed that trust when, after Radama’s death, he, his brother, Andriamamba, and Andriamihaja helped murder the legitimate heir and took the throne and the kingdom for Ranavalona.

When the kabary is over, the mpisikidy splashes rum onto the sealed door of the tomb and mumbles so that Griffiths cannot hear what he says. Six men with long steel poles pry the door open as other men prepare candles and lamps. The flutes and the drums and the clapping and the chanting start
up again, festive in anticipation. The men working at the door finally, with a great heave, move it aside, and a cool, damp wind momentarily ruffles the lamba of the people standing near. The mpisikidy descends, followed by Ratiandrazana, Rainiharo, their sons, and many of the village men. One of Ratiandrazana’s sons breaks off from the party and approaches Paul and Griffiths. He says it is his father’s wish that Paul join them in the tomb. Paul refuses politely, saying it’s not his place, he’s not family. The man answers with a proverb: “All who live under the sky are woven together like one big mat.” It is an unexpectedly cordial response, and without looking back at Griffiths the boy follows Ratiandrazana’s son underground.

Shelves line the walls of the underground vault, and in the flickering lamplight Paul can make out five bundles wrapped in rotting red silk lamba resting on the shelves. The damp air smells of mold and rum and something sweet, and Paul brushes cobwebs from his arms and his eyes. Ratiandrazana walks with the mpisikidy around the inside of the vault examining the bundles, then points out and names the oldest, most senior ancestor. The mpisikidy splashes more rum on the wrapped bundle and invokes the name of the ancestor, asking for his blessing. Three men roll the body off the shelf and onto a tsihy mat open on the floor, then roll the body in the mat. They are not gentle, and the body is twisted and crushed as they transfer the bundle from the shelf to the mat, then lift the rolled bundle onto their shoulders and walk up the steps into the light. Watching them, Paul hears a great cheering from outside the tomb as they emerge.

Ratiandrazana stands behind Paul and says, “Your children will never honor you this way. Your name will fade and die, and you will die, forgotten and alone, never to join the ancestors. Bear witness now to what you have lost. And help with the next ancestor.”

Paul doesn’t respond, but reaches for his faith in God and eternal salvation. His wife’s comment, “That idol-worshiper will burn in hell,” now makes him sad. He turns away from the door as
Ratiandrazana identifies the next most senior ancestor, the mpisikidy calls for his blessing, and Paul helps roll the bundle onto the waiting tsihy mat. He folds one edge of the tsihy over the other, and with three other men lifts the wrapped bundle unto his shoulders. They walk up the steps out of the vault and blink as they emerge into the blaring sunlight, the bright celebration of the crowd.

Griffiths sees Paul step out of the darkness helping carry the body of the ancestor. Four or five other men join the group as they circumambulate the tomb. To the music, clapping, and shouts of the crowd, the men dance with the body, lifting it up into the air then dropping it back down onto their shoulders then cradling it low in their extended arms. They start and stop abruptly, reel and lurch, bounce, lumber, and lope, all the while the corpse twisting and turning as they carry it. They circle the tomb three times then bring it to the the extended legs of the women.

After Paul disappeared into the vault, Griffiths watched Rasalama and her interaction with the women. As the first body emerged, the female family members and some of the village women sat hip-to-hip on the ground with their legs extended, forming two lines facing each other and extending out from the door to the tomb. After his dance around the tomb the first ancestor was placed on the laps of these women. Rasalama stands alone. Around her, three hundred people move as one body, each person knows his place, and everyone joins in praising the spirits of the ancestors. Rasalama watches now as her husband, fully incorporated into the crowd of celebrants, moves with the rest of the men and deposits the second corpse with the women. Raslama crosses her arms and frowns, wrinkling her nose in the way she does when she’s feeling especially self-righteous. The other celebrants ignore her, carousing around her as if she were invisible.

Three more times bodies emerge from the underground vault, and three more corpses land in the laps of the women. The final bundle to emerge is carried by Ratiandrazana, his brother, and their male cousins. These are the bones of Ratiandrazana’s uncle, the person around whom today’s famadihana is
centered. All of the other ancestors have danced before, all of their bones have been re-wrapped before, but this is the uncle’s first turning and when he emerges the music picks up and the enthusiasm of the crowd reaches a fevered state. The uncle’s dance around the tomb is especially tumultuous, the body buffeted like a ship on a heaving sea, and when they are done, the corpse rests in the laps of Ratiandrazana’s cousins, the daughters of Ratiandrazana’s uncle.

The two sisters cannot move. Their eyes stare outward, looking at the women across from them, at the men standing behind, everywhere except down at the body of their father resting across their legs. A brother walks up behind them and, after taking a swig himself, splashes some rum on the bundle, then offers the bottle to the women. The elder sister drinks, then finally looks down at the corpse. Through the seam of the rolled tsihy mat escapes a length of rotting red silk edged with silver embroidery she herself stitched three and a half years ago. The threads are close and fine but a little too tightly sewn, tension between the stitching and the fabric born of hands held artificially still in grief. The woman breaks down, weeping silently into the reed mat. Her brother and several other women comfort her, saying, “Fifaliana fa tsy fahoriana ity.” This is an act of celebration, not of mourning.

Around the corpses men and women have produced bottles of honey and rum, cow fat and spicy European cologne. Some move from corpse to corpse, pouring rum and honey over each, others stay with a single bundle and make entreaties of the ancestor, fangatahana tsodrano, asking for blessings of cattle or children or a bountiful harvest. Paul places a coin in the folds of the most senior ancestor, among the wrappings where his head would lie. A woman bites off a stick of tobacco, chewing on one half and tucking the other half in with the bones. Hasina. All hasina for the ancestors.

Griffiths sees a middle-aged woman approach Rasalama standing isolated and disapproving at the edge of the crowd. The woman talks briefly with the girl, a conversation Griffiths cannot hear. Suddenly Ratiandrazana is at Griffiths’ side. “That is my mother’s sister’s daughter. She had the
dream—in my family she is always the one who has the dreams. Our uncle appeared to her and told her that he was cold. Three nights in a row he came to her, dressed in white, complaining of the chill and saying he needed to be wrapped in new lambamena.”

Rasalama looks up from the woman who is talking to her and searches for Griffiths in the crowd. When she finds him, her eyes are swimming and she wipes her nose with her hand. Griffiths says to Ratiandrazana, “This is cruel.”

Ratiandrazana replies, unperturbed, “Yes, it is cruel. You are cruel, to have taken these children from their families and homes, leaving them alone and unprotected. This is the life you have given them—outcasts among their own people.”

Griffiths feels his blood race to the surface of his skin and he squeezes his fists tight in an effort to control his voice. “God protects them,” he retorts, turning to face Ratiandrazana and drawing himself to his full height, six inches taller than the seasoned warrior, this killer of men. Griffiths states, “I protect them,” and at that moment he doesn’t know how far he would go to defend the members of his church, to shelter his flock from the menace of this savage heathen.

Ratiandrazana looks up at Griffiths and laughs in his face. “You protect them!” Faster than Griffiths can imagine, Ratiandrazana’s hand is at Griffiths face, and Griffiths instinctively flinches. The warrior laughs again, and flicks his finger against Griffiths’ cheek. The hit stings, and will leave a bruise. Ratiandrazana says, “You cannot even protect yourself. Be warned, vahaza, you and your corruption are no longer welcome here.” He snorts again, and walks away laughing to rejoin the celebration.

Griffiths stands rooted and repeats to himself the words of Paul to his son Timothy: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears. And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be
turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make
full proof of thy ministry.” Griffiths thinks of his ministry, and remembers the Ephesians, “For we
wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the
darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” With these words Griffiths tries to
calm himself. But as he raises his eyes from the ground he cannot help but see the celebration through
Rasalama’s eyes. The *famadihana* has been transformed into a bacchanal of the Beast, the rejoicing
Merina engulfed in flames, and Griffiths fights the vision with all his will as he has fought visions like it
all of his life, because Griffiths is a Welshman and a pragmatist, and there is no place in his ministry for
miracles.

Ratiandrazana has made his point, and Griffiths can no longer stomach the noise and the chaos
and the smell. He is nauseous, dizzy, and needs desperately to be back at the church with Jones. He
breaks away from the group of men and walks over to Rasalama who stands alone again, defeated. She
looks up at him, pleading, “Father. Please, can we leave now?” And he once again kisses her on the top
of her head and says, “Yes, we can leave now, child.” She looks around desperately, searching for her
husband. “Where is Paul?” Griffiths sees him at the same time she does, laughing and drinking rum
with Ratiandrazana’s sons. Before he can stop her—he knows how this will end—she is off to collect
him, defying the boundary between the group of men and the group of women.

Griffiths watches, powerless. The men have begun to re-wrap the corpses, rolling the bundles
from the *tsihy* mats onto a white sheet, then wrapping them again in more layers of red silk. While the
women shout advice, the men tie the bundles together with cords and strips of cloth, pulling on the ties
as hard they can, using all of their combined strength to bind up the ancestral bundles. Rasalama reaches
Paul jut as he bends down to pick up one of the ancestors with three of Ratiandrazana’s cousins.
Rasalama speaks to Paul, then reaches out to touch his arm, but he yells at her and slaps her hand away.
He takes off with the group of men, carrying the corpse again around the tomb, dancing and roughhousing amid shouts, whoops, and cries. Paul throws himself around in delirious abandon while his wife watches. She watches for a long while, then draws herself tall and stalks away.

Griffiths intercepts her, and steers her toward the road back to Tana. He tells her not to worry, that Paul will be back, contrite, and God will forgive him his sins. Griffiths reminds her that just as God forgives, she must, too. But Raslama is uncharacteristically silent, and theirs is a long, quiet walk back to the capital.
CHAPTER 26

... In which the Arab merchant continues his journey through the forest, a secret is revealed, and
a promise is made

On the road to Tamatave, 1829

Alidy squishes mud between his toes and pulls a leech off his ankle. Iron-colored blood drips down into the iron-colored mud. His knees are complaining about the steep descent, relentless since they started walking before dawn this morning. He sits now on a rock under the wide crown of a pallisander tree, the sky gray and dripping above, the leaves of the tree like dinner plates filling with water then tipping and dousing the people on the track below. Alidy is soaked through and covered in mud from using his hands and arms to balance on the steep descent, from falling so many times he's lost count. The men with his palanquin have begged him twice now to let them carry him. He knows they're right – they will make better time if they carry him, their feet steady and sure from a lifetime walking these roads. Supernatural feet to go with their supernatural senses. But if they fall... He would tumble down hundreds of feet of mountainside before something in the forest caught him, a tree slamming across his back, a vine wrenching his leg, and Alidy cannot yet bring himself to sit passively in the hammock, placing his life in the hands of his servants. He trusts them, but accidents happen.

The forest besieges Alidy with its densely-packed trees and vines and shrubs and roots, strung with spider webs, spattered with bird excrement, slithering with snakes, crawling with worms and insects and subterranean life. The road out of the forest is steep and slick and too too narrow, and for now, he will simply sit in the clammy air and the fluttering rain and dream of a time when he is free of this damnable jungle.
The mud between his toes is cold and gluey, much like his mood, and it doesn't motivate him to get back on the road. He decides he would give a significant portion of his not insubstantial fortune for a cup of hot coffee right now. Or, to just be through this forest and finished with this trip. He doesn't allow thoughts of the return to linger—the return, when his packages will be fragile, and all of this walking will be uphill instead of down. Rather, he focuses on the red earth oozing between his toes and tries to spark an internal impulse to move. But the fetid, fertile forest, the sky like damp ash, and the slippery slope that stretches ahead of him, these all sap him of strength, and he just sits as the occasional porter passes him on his way down to rice and fire and rest.

Carrying boxes tied to each end of a bamboo pole that swing jauntily as he walks down the road, one of his porters stops when he sees Alidy. He sets his burden down on the matted jungle floor and squats above the mud next to the rock upon which Alidy sits. The porter says, *Bad road today,* and Alidy nods his agreement. The porter motions for a pinch of snuff, but Alidy doesn't have anything on him except his wet, filthy clothes. The porter shrugs and doesn't move or speak for a time, watching the road above them with an empty expression. Alidy looks too, and eventually hears a thrumming, then a crashing in the forest above. The noise escalates, as if a great beast were tearing up the jungle as it charged the men at the rock, but Alidy can't see anything through the curtains of vegetation. Then, in an instant the porter is on his feet just as a herd of cattle appear in the flat shadows of the trees, the twenty oxen slipping and sliding down the side of the mountain with their cattleherd whooping behind them.

The porter throws up his arms and yells with full lungs, but the animals have no control over their descent and couldn't dodge if they wanted. Facing a trampling herd, Alidy and the porter leap onto the slippery rock as Alidy prays to his merciful God. He wonders briefly if today is the day he will die, but can do nothing except wait for the impact of black thunder, engulfing him now, his bones shivering, the earth quaking, his body hammered by the blow of passing instants and somehow he is not trampled.
Yes, they are past, crashing now through the forest below him, and he is not trampled. This time his prayer is one of thanks.

The porter cheers as he hops off the rock, happy to still be alive. Laughing, he helps a scowling Alidy back down into the mud, then picks up his pole and his boxes and makes ready to continue his journey. Alidy decides that he's had enough. He tells the porter, *If you see my servants, send them to me with my palanquin.* When they arrive he will draw the curtains and imagine they are carrying him across the beach at Mahajunga.

In Beforona, the village where Alidy and his porters stop for the night, a hundred grass huts perch on stilts in a swampy hollow surrounded by forested hills. Alidy has not seen much of Andriamihaja on the journey so far—the nobleman spends his time politicking with village elders and the captains of his troops. But this evening he stays in the government house with Alidy and the three chiefs of Alidy’s porters. He wants to know how the porters are doing, although Alidy suspects Andriamihaja already knows, from the reports of his soldiers and other men on the road. But Alidy tells him: *Less attrition than normal, probably because of the promise of silver at the end of the trip.* They’ve lost only twelve of their original sixty men, and the chiefs have had no problem replacing the deserters with men from the villages they’ve passed through. Andriamihaja asks, with an admirably casual wave, about Alidy’s merchandise, by which he means the boxes full of money. Alidy inspects his cartons at the end of every day of travel. *All present and accounted for,* Alidy says, *We haven’t lost a single one so far.* Andriamihaja laughs and says, *A good journey for you, then.*

But talking with Andriamihaja, Alidy notices a change in the man since the last time they talked in Antananarivo. There is a firmness to him now, a solidity that was lacking in the lover who flitted around court like a bird unsure of his perch. Alidy has always thought of Andriamihaja like a dancer of
the veils: obsessed with clothes and looks, gracefully maneuvering to seduce the monarch. But it seems as if now the music has stopped, the veils have fallen and the dance is over, and Andriamihaja stands revealed, stark lines etched into his face, his character bared for all to see. He has become vulnerable, but not to any person, and though he seems as in love with his life as always, he seems now also immune to the judgment of men. He seems to finally be fully himself—easy and generous, but settled into himself.

Alidy wonders what happened between him and the queen before he left Antananarivo. Alidy suspects the political landscape will have changed significantly by the time he gets back.

Two village women huddle in the house cooking for the men. One hunches over the fire while the other works a spindle nearby. Both disappear into the background as if they were parts of the house itself, like the tsihy mats or the loom. The fire heats the air and dries the men until finally Alidy feels warm, almost cozy. Rice bubbles in the pot and a comfortable silence settles in the house as Andriamihaja leans against the southern wall and closes his eyes. The three chiefs excuse themselves to discuss tomorrow’s road with the porters.

Alidy watches the woman spinning. She holds clean, carded cotton on her right shoulder, and works the spindle with her hands. She pulls the cotton into a loose line, as long as she can stretch her hands apart, then runs the spindle against the inside of her leg and drops it as it spins. The loose cotton fibers consolidate into thread, delicate and strong and ready for dying and weaving. She wraps the new thread around the bottom of the spindle, pulls more cotton into a line, and repeats the process. Over and over, the spool of thread grows, and Alidy is lulled by the familiar, repetitive motion. It reminds him of everything that is home.

Alidy thinks of his wife, and of his sons. He closes his eyes, six years disappear and he sees his sons again, arguing with the Mahajunga dockmaster over the size of the bribe they will have to pay to
export a shipment of illegal slaves. Sa’id was the articulate one, silver-tongued and convincing, while quiet Omar stood by and lent gravity to his brothers words. It was Sa’id who convinced the men of Mahajunga to revolt against Ramenetaka, but it was Omar who marched at the head of the rebellion, his grandfather’s sword flashing orange-gray in the torchlight. Alidy remembers Omar’s prayer before they left the stone house, asking only for the strength to live the next few hours well. Alidy sees their bodies again lying in the street, Omar with his belly opened by a spear point, his entrails shining and stinking as they spilled like green eels out of his body. Sa’id’s chest perforated by a dozen bullets, one of his ears hanging upside-down from its lobe. Alidy believes with all his faith that his sons died well, but his wife does not care, and would rather have living cowards than dead romantics for sons.

Alidy’s wife hates him for letting Sa’id speak, for letting Omar lead, for not chaining their sons inside the house that night so that she could keep them safe. In the past six years her hatred has scoured their home like sandpaper, so that the surfaces of his marriage now are too smooth, too slippery, and when he tries to move he cannot help but fall ungainly as his wife gawks and turns away.

Alidy thinks of Ramanetaka living like a king on the Island of Johanna with his three wives and his two hundred slaves and all the wealth he squeezed from Alidy, his sons, and their friends. Alidy thinks of Ramanetaka’s two daughters still on the Island of Madagascar, living up north in the Sakalava lands. Alidy does not question the will of Allah, but still, the tyrant has his family while the trader does not. Alidy wonders how much forgiveness he might buy from his wife if he were to present to her Ramanetaka’s downfall.

After a long day on the road, in the warmth of the hut, with a woman spinning in a corner and rice bubbling in the cauldron, Alidy is comfortable, a little bit sleepy. The words slip from his mouth like a snake might slip from a poorly attended basket. “The French are conspiring with Ramanetaka, to take Ranavalona’s throne.” And just like that, without any recompense or reward, he has given away
potentially profitable merchandise. Andriamihaja’s reaction confirms the value of the information—his eyes are open in an instant and the nobleman assesses Alidy with an expression at once suspicious, weighty, and conspiring. The air in the hut is suddenly sharp, the heat no longer comfortable. When Andriamihaja doesn’t say anything, Alidy repeats himself, less casually this time.

“The French have been negotiating with Ramanetaka for the past six months. Their ships have docked at least five times at the Island of Johanna, exchanging messages between French officers and members of Ramanetaka’s household. Six weeks ago the French envoy Robin met with Ramanetaka in person, and they discussed the beginning of a deal in which a French army would land at Tamatave, march to Antananarivo, depose Ranavalona and install Ramanetaka on the throne. In exchange, Ramanetaka would acknowledge French claims on the east coast from Vohemar to Fort Dauphin. He will exile the English and allow French traders and Catholic missionaries in their place. He will also authorize monopolies by French trading companies over certain resources and import-export goods in Sakalava, Betsimisaraka, and Bezanozano lands.”

Andriamihaja listens carefully to Alidy’s words. “How do you know this?”

“We’ve been paying attention.” By “we” Alidy means the entire Arab trading structure of the Indian Ocean. Alidy knows that such a monolithic entity doesn’t actually exist, that factions and infighting slow and corrupt the exchange of information. But Andriamihaja doesn’t know that, and Alidy’s information comes from enough independent sources that he’s reasonably sure at least the broad strokes are accurate. “The French plan would significantly disrupt important aspects of our trade. Some of us would lose a lot of money. So we’ve been paying attention.”

Andriamihaja’s eyes are fixed on Alidy, calculating. “Is that why you’re telling me this? The French plan will cost you money?” Andriamihaja’s tone is pragmatic—he understands Alidy’s
priorities, his interest in maintaining his position in the trade structure. Andriamihaja understands Alidy’s drive for wealth.

Alidy hesitates. Why is he telling Andriamihaja? Especially now, on the road? Since a week before they left Antananarivo Alidy has been thinking about the best way to sell this information, the price that it might fetch in Tamatave, in the middle of Andriamihaja’s negotiations with the French. Alidy looks over at the woman spinning. She drops the spindle and the cotton twists—from airy, disparate fibers a strong thread appears. Alidy quotes the holy book to Andriamihaja, translating into the language of the Merina on the fly:

“‘And we ordained for them therein a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and for wounds is legal retribution. But whoever gives up his right as charity, it will serve as atonement for his bad deeds. And whoever does not judge by what God has revealed—then it is those who are the wrongdoers.’”

Andriamihaja understands better than Alidy the conventions of kabary, and so does not interrupt the tradesman as he talks. “Ramanetaka,” Alidy continues, “has two daughters still living in Iboina. I had two sons—two sons only—and Ramanetaka took them from me.” Alidy’s wife loved Sa’id best—Sa’id who could flatter and cajole and charm even his mother out of a piece of honeycomb at the age of four. But Omar was most like his father, and Alidy quietly admired the strength and humility of his younger son. Alidy tells Andriamihaja, “We must judge according to what God has revealed, and if we don’t, we are ourselves complicit in others’ wrongdoing.”

The two men fall silent, inhaling the nutty smell of cooked rice. The women have started to prepare the kabaka—cassava leaves boiled with salt and served with a fried chicken egg. Andriamihaja responds to Alidy with a proverb: “Amboa magalatra ondry, ka ny fo no manefa.” The dog who steals a sheep, his heart, his life, is forfeit. “If what you say is true, Ramanetaka is a traitor. He will pay with his
life and the lives of his family members.” Alidy watches Andriamihaja think. He wonders how this information will help the nobleman at court. Alidy has never met General Ratiandrazana in person, but his reputation for cruelty is widespread, and some of the tales men bring back from his battles chill the Arab’s civilized bones. Alidy does not want Ratiandrazana to gain influence over the new queen.

Alidy tells Andriamihaja, “What I say is true. If you make inquiries among the traders at Tamatave, they will tell you the same thing. But you must know the right questions to ask: about French ships at the Island of Johanna, and the whereabouts of the French envoy Robin.” Alidy hesitates. “And I’m sure you have your own sources of information.”

Andriamihaja merely nods his head, then says, “Thank you for telling me this. I am in your debt.”

Alidy waves his hand. “Not at all,” he says, although they both know the price Alidy is asking for the information.

Andriamihaja looks at Alidy with a kindness Alidy has never seen before on the young man’s face. A kindness, and a wisdom that surprises the trader from a nobleman twenty-five years his junior. Andriamihaja says, “The lives of his daughters cannot buy back the lives of your sons. You know this?”

Alidy smiles, sad. “I know. But it may buy my wife some peace. And it is the justice of Allah.”

Andriamihaja, unfailingly tuned to the moment, senses a lifting of the mood is in order and wags his finger playfully. Half-serious, he says, “It is the justice of Queen Ranavalona.” He turns away from Alidy, towards the cooking pot. “We will not speak of this again. You will know the queen’s decision when you return to Tana.” He flirts with the women, scolding, “Where is the rice? I could have fathered two children on you while we’ve been waiting!”

The younger woman with the spindle giggles and looks at the floor. Scowling, the older woman spreads a long banana leaf on the tsihy mat in front of the men. “Eat your rice and be satisfied. I’ll carry
“no half-breed Merina child in my belly.” She gouges a ladleful of rice out of the pot and shakes it onto the banana leaf with more force than is absolutely necessary. Alidy laughs at the woman, she glowers back, and the men turn their attention to sating the hunger of a long day on the road.

Two weeks later, Andriamihaja and Alidy and the porters and the soldiers and the queen’s hangers-on all together double the population of the town of Tamatave. The French negotiator, a man named Tourette, had already been waiting for Ranavalona’s emissary for over a month. He and his retinue of fifty were well-ensconced in the town—they feasted the governor Coroller, the French traders, the Merina garrison, and the captains of the American, Portuguese, Arab, Chinese and Indian trading ships that passed through. They stayed away from the local population, whose memory of the French attack was still fresh. Fights broke out, malaria descended, village chieftains plotted the murder of the French officers, but still Tourette and his negotiating team would not be driven away.

Tourette served for a month as the interim governor of the Island of Sainte-Marie before Jean-Louis Joseph Carayon, a man with a long history on the island and who served as its governor previously, was appointed permanently. Achille Guy Marie de Penfentenio, Comte de Cheffontaines, Governor of the Island of Bourbon made the appointments as the representative of Louis-Philippe d’Orléans, the new King of the French. After relieving him of his responsibilities as interim governor, Penfentenio gave secret orders to Tourette for this negotiating mission. The priority of the new king is to protect the sugar plantations on Bourbon, and the revenue they provide to the crown. Bourbon must be able to buy rice and cattle from the Merina or those plantations will fail. Tourette will cede French claims to both Tamatave and Foulepointe in order to facilitate the reopening of trade.

Even though Tourette has been waiting in Tamatave for over a month when Andriamihaja arrives, Andriamihaja makes the Frenchman wait another two weeks before he meets with him. In those
two weeks, many things happen. Alidy sails to Bourbon to meet with Captain Delastelle on his ship the *Quiétude*. The queen’s cargo is intact, and Alidy pays a substantial bribe to the captain to convince him to sail it to Tamatave under American colors. The bribe is probably more than it would have cost him to hire another ship, but Alidy is paying for care and discretion, and the price is worth it, he thinks. Captain Delastelle, too, had done the math.

With a feeling of deep relief Alidy loads the *Quiétude* with coin, and unloads the queen’s coronets, dresses, scarves, armchairs, palanquin, tableware, microscope, and muskets into a warehouse in Tamatave, where he will repack them for the trip back to Tana. He pays his porters their silver coin, and convinces most of them to stay with him for the return trip. Twenty-one days after he arrives with Andriamihaja in Tamatave—ten days after returning from Bourbon and seven days into what will prove to be fruitless negotiations with the French—he falls ill with the fever. He is unable to travel for four weeks, and when he finally does make the return trip to Tana with an honor guard of four hundred and fifty soldiers and all of the queen’s merchandise packed in boxes and shouldered by his porters, he must be carried most of the way in his palanquin. He arrives in Tana still weak but recovering, and finds that the political landscape has indeed changed significantly.

For his part, Andriamihaja uses the two weeks to investigate Alidy’s claim that the French are negotiating with Ramanetaka to seize Ranavalona’s throne. He flirts with Tamatave’s prostitutes, drinks with the sailors, and feasts the Catholic missionaries and Islamic imams. He tries to bribe one of the members of Tourette’s team, and when that fails, allows another to rack up gambling debts with one of Coroller’s nephews. Once he starts looking for them, he finds the rumors of French collusion with Ramanetaka rampant among the seafaring traders, and wonders that news of the plan has not yet reached Tana. But as far as he knows, Ranavalona is as yet ignorant of the French designs on her throne.
Andriamihaja writes Ranavalona a letter.

To Queen Ranavalona, Blessed Mother, Beloved of the Ancestors, may you live to one hundred years, may your progeny crowd the lands of Imerina like rice tillars in your bountiful fields. May your cattle herds multiply, your cows spill a river of milk, your bulls grow fat with flesh tender and tasty in the eating. May your ricefields flourish on the love of the ancestors and your children in Imerina, so that your granaries overflow with the abundance of your reign.

Please accept this humble paper in place of my own self—I am separated from you, yet find that I must speak with you, and so I employ your own tools for speaking at a distance. But I am merely a student in a realm in which you are the master, so I beg your forgiveness if my paper words are clumsy and ill-formed. Please know that my intention is always to please you.

Today is the vody’ny Adimizana, the destiny of fertility, a good day for driving cattle into the pasture. It is a fortunate day for a man who is already rich (as you are), and we will not be trapped by its danger to the novice and the naïve. It is a day of visitors, both good and bad, and a day of uncertain future, like the western door which is constantly opened and closed. This morning the ombiasa sacrificed a speckled fowl, burned the tsimatimaty bush and threw four tsimativoniona beetles into the fire. They spat and hissed and popped as I waved my arms through the supple smoke, and I imagine the smoke’s scales first on my skin, now rubbing off onto this paper that you will hold in your hands in three days’ time. Thus I send you the offering to today’s vintana.

Our great port at Tamatave is as it has always been, the poison sea falling across the harbor reef all day and all night without cease. I wonder at these Betsimisarka who can endure the constant clamor of the water. The buildings that were destroyed by the ships of the vahaza have been rebuilt,
and the little hill now scurries with a population trebled by the French delegation and our own arrival.

The pandanus wave their palms like the unruly locks of a widow while the abrasive sand blows across the dunes—building and dismantling, building and dismantling.

Destiny is a chameleon at the top of a tree:
A child simply whistles and it changes color.
The lake did not want to create mud,
But if the water is stirred, it appears.

There are many trees,
But it is the sugar cane that is sweet.
There are many grasshoppers,
but it is the ambolo that has beautiful colors.
There are many people,
But it is in you that my spirit reposes.

Like the mud in the lake that is stirred, there are things that must be as they are. And like the color of the chameleon in the tree, there are things that may be different than they are. Some things that seem changeable perhaps are not, while some things that seem fixed perhaps may yet be changed. I write to you in warning, dear Ramovo. There is a thing that we think is fixed, that other men seek to undo.

At the time you were blessed by the ancestors and ascended the throne as our most beloved Queen, there was a man who fled your sovereignty. Of course you know of whom I speak—we have discussed him many times, he on the nearby island, his daughters hiding in the north with the Sakalava who gave them shelter. This man has become a friend of the French vahaza. Here in our town at Tamatave many ships pass through, circling and circling, pausing at the same ports in our great archipelago. These ships are worked by men with eyes and ears that see and hear and understand. Men with mouths who can speak what they understand. I have been speaking with men here in Tamatave, and men have been speaking with me.
If you imagine what they have told me about the man who fled, about his new friendship with the vahaza, about his ravenous ambition, held in check by Radama but unleashed when our beloved king turned his back on the world—imagine what the ship men have told me, and you will be right.

This paper is like the bird-that-goes-east.

Turn around: I will give you a message.
I will give you a message for She-of-the-brilliant-eyes.
Let your words be strange,
Let your speech be hesitant:
Do not say that I do not long for her,
Lest she think that I forget;
Do not say that I long for her,
Lest she think that I am like a fool.

The man has daughters in the north—we have known this, and have done nothing. Perhaps now is the time to do something about those daughters in the north. Send a message, that Queen Ranavalona is a sovereign to be feared, and such a message would certainly reach that man.

The poets say destiny is fickle. The diviners say destiny can sometimes be diverted, but sometimes not. I know that my destiny is fixed.

Who is it that comes from the south?
It is the daughter of He-who-is-rich-in-large-cattle,
Both her hands are full of oranges.
If I ask, I am ashamed;
If I do not ask, I regret it.
If one is restrained by shame, will one have a beloved?

How, then, shall I keep
My desire for you?
If I keep it in a corner of my lamba,
I fear the knot will be cut and I will lose it.
If I keep it in the palm of my hand,
I fear I will perspire and it will wash away.
I will keep it within my heart,
Even if it leads me to death.
Are you not my beloved?
My destiny is not like the chameleon in the tree: it is set and I do not complain. I do not now reflect on regrets, but merely hold in my heart she-who-shades-herself-with-silver, she-who-shades-herself-with-coral, and both her hands are full of oranges.

Andriamihaja is not concerned about the sending of the letter over such a long distance, since the people in Madagascar who can read it number less than one hundred. And so he gives no special instructions regarding discretion to the messenger he sends to Tana to deliver the letter—no instructions at all except that he should deliver it to no one except the queen. He doesn’t even bother to seal the letter with wax. At the Mongoro river crossing, the messenger drinks heavily with the village elder and his brothers and sons. In his inebriated state the messenger brags to them that he carries a letter from Andriamihaja, to be delivered directly into the queen’s own hands. The nephew of the village elder, drinking with the messenger, happens to be one of Ratiandrazana’s senior aides—he is both literate and loyal to Ratiandrazana.

When the messenger passes out, the nephew steals the letter and reads it, intending to replace it and merely report to Ratiandrazana regarding its contents. But this nephew is clever, and after he reads the contents and thinks on their import, he devises a terrible scheme. He goes to the government house in Andakana where he finds a few sheets of blank paper, then burns an oil lamp through the night writing a different letter. He leaves out the parts about Ramanetaka and the French. In the letter he writes, Andriamihaja announces his desire to marry the queen, and begs her to acknowledge the child growing in her belly as his. He describes a future in which they will reign as king and queen and Imerina will grow fat with trade between Antananarivo and the vahaza. Everything he writes in the letter is true.

The eastern horizon is sucking the black out of the sky when he finally finishes his writing, and he sneaks back into the house where the messenger snores his toaka away. He carefully places the false
letter back into the folds of the messenger’s *lamba*. He wakes his uncle, the village elder, and asks him
to delay the messenger from crossing the river for three days. The he goes with his cousin to the
riverbank where, under the fading stars, his cousin ferrys him across. Two days later the nephew is in
Tana, delivering Andriamihaja’s original letter into Ratiandrazana’s hands.
CHAPTER 27

...In which once again we see the executioner at work

Antananarivo, 1830

In the throne room of the Tranovola in the Rova in Antananarivo, a steel hawk plated in silver perches on a silver orb, its wings displayed, its shadow cloaking the queen on her throne. The hawk’s head turns to the right, its eyes reflecting the visage of the queen’s new chief counselor, Ratiandrazana. The queen sits on a throne dwarfed by a scarlet velvet canopy, ten feet high and twenty feet square, the fabric pooling on the parquet floor, the edges fringed in silver tassels like teeth, or like missiles waiting for the order to drop. The queen herself, already corpulent under her layers of French satin, drapes her body over the too-small throne—the throne made for her by French carpenters interested more in delicacy than power. The throne from a land rich enough to allow an obsession with the finer points of grace.

To the queen’s right sits her new lover Ratiandrazana, his position purchased with information about the traitor Ramanetaka. The queen was furious when she received the false letter from Andriamihaja. After reading it she said: Mitsangam-poana toa kiady. He is like the pole that guards the rice field: a powerless scarecrow who thinks he is a great protector. Then she said: Firain’ny vava fito saha, firain’ny harem-boantondro. Marked out by his mouth, seven fields; marked out by his means, a finger-breadth. He boasts of more than he can buy. Finally she said: Sasa-poana manao saha maina, fatsy ho tomon-tanàna akory. He digs in another’s rice field thinking to take possession, but when the owner arrives he finds his work was in vain.
And with those words only the queen banished Andriamihaja from court and forbade his name to be spoken in her presence. The next day Ratiandrazana informed the queen of Ramanetaka’s plot with the French to usurp the Merina throne. Now, three days later, the ferryman’s nephew has been promoted two ranks and Ratiandrazana sits to the queen’s right.

The light from fifty lamps throws the hovering shadow of the hawk across Ratiandrazana’s brow. The scar across his eye slithers, alive. He wears a scarlet lamba draped across his shoulder, but the silk rests uneasy, for it is his bare muscled chest, his roughcast arms, his necklace of alligator teeth, the small odys of charms at his throat, the bands of bones on his upper arms and wrists, the belt of stones and teeth around his waist, the spear in his right hand and the small shield of uncured bull hide in his left—these are the adornments that identify Ratiandrazana as Prime Minister and Commander and Chief of the Army. The silk lamba rests on Ratiandrazana like a blanket of wilted flowers over the mouth of a cannon.

Ani enters the throne room alone. He pads down the parquet floor between two lines of laid wooden stars that lead from the main doors to the territory directly in front of the throne. He walks in bare feet through the smells of dusty tapestries, tarnishing silver, and sour perfume. Oil from a leaking lamp drips at regular intervals, and the cotton of Ani’s loose-fitting tunic whispers as he walks. The empty hall listens, silent, waiting for the revelation of secrets. Standing next to Ratiandrazana the ferryman’s nephew holds a dirty and sweat-stained piece of paper. His hands fidget nervously, folding and unfolding the letter, and he runs his thumb along the edges of the paper, tracing the landscape of someone’s doom.

Ani makes his obeisance to the queen and her counselor. Ranavalona stands, faces the empty hall, and speaks as if her entire court were in session. She speaks over the head of her executioner, through the doors of the hall and into all of Imerina, to the north where Ramanetaka’s daughters hide,
past the shores of Madagascar to the Island of Johanna, her words reach north to France, to Paris, to Versailles where Louis-Philippe d'Orléans, new King of the French, sits on his delicate throne. Queen Ranavalona speaks:

“Our beloved Radama loved greatly his cousin Ramanetaka, so much so that he raised him up to be governor of our most important city Mahajunga. But when Radama turned his back and, I, Ranavalona, became mother to my children in Imerina, Ramanetaka plotted against my rightful and just ascension. He was condemned to death for treachery against the throne of Imerina. But like a small fish before the crocodile, he fled our justice and now lives in the chicken coop of other people’s houses. But still his traitor hands are never still.

“We have heard from many sources, and the diviners have confirmed, that he has conspired with the vahaza to usurp my throne. The recent French attack on Tamatave was the preliminary landing of an invasion force—an army whose sole purpose is to remove Ranavalona, rightful sovereign of Imerina, from her place as voice of the ancestors, protector of her people, and keeper of our customs. Ramanetaka conspired with the French to follow this invasion force to our great city Antananarivo, where he would steal Ranavalona’s throne and murder his true sovereign, her family, her councilors and her friends.

“But the righteousness of our cause prevailed, and the vahaza were justly repulsed at Tamatave, and again at Foule Pointe, and again at Tintingue. They have fled in their floating castles back to their women who will reject them for their failure and cowardice. But still Ramanetaka lusts for that which is not his. He conspires treason against his sovereign, and his life and the lives of his family are forfeit.

“Although Ramanetaka fled like a coward with his wives and his house, still two of his daughters remain on the Island of Madagascar. We have suffered them to live until now—they hide like the chameleon in the mountains of the north. For Ramanetaka’s crimes these daughters’ lives are also
forfeit. Their deaths are just desert for “Prince” Ramanetaka’s treason and the act of war by the French. It is the traitor and the invading thieves who are responsible for their deaths.

“I, Ranavalona, Queen of the Merina, do therefore sentence Ramanetaka’s daughters, Razaimanana and Razafintsara, the wife of Ratsimandresy, to be executed by the spear for the crime of high treason. Their bodies shall be left in the forest for wild animals to devour, and their names shall never again be spoken in all of Imerina. They shall die, and pass into oblivion.”

Ranavalona raps her lance-like scepter on the floor once, the blow of metal on wood echoes through the empty hall, and in the regathering silence Ranavalona reseats herself on her throne. In his long life, Ani has received many execution orders like this one—death sentences handed down by angry and insecure monarchs, condemnations settling on the heads of the innocent. These are the executions that pour through the beating heart of his life’s work, the executions that strum the tension between law and justice, between might and right. The executions that time and again prove Socrates wrong and Thrasymanus right with his claim that justice is merely the will of the strong. For a moment, a small, hopeful moment, Ani thinks that this is the execution for which he was drawn to Madagascar. But he knows better. He looks at the queen and he looks at the hawk and he feels death crouched in the echoes of this hall.

But this execution is an opportunity nonetheless. He bows deeply to the queen. “I am your majesty’s servant.” His eyes still on the floor, he feels his blood pulse in his neck under Ratiandrazana’s calculating, predator gaze. “As required by Your Majesty’s law today, I will execute these two women and leave their bodies in the forest for the animals to devour.” Ani straightens, his tall thin frame unfurling like a bird of a different species—an ancient bird reborn again and again in flames—and the lamplight flickers orange on his face and his arms and his robes but there is not yet ash beneath his feet.
Not yet. And so he is bold. “I wonder, Your Majesty, if we might discuss for a moment the topic of weaving?”

Of course he has caught them by surprise. Ratiandrazana releases a snort in Ani’s direction, menacing and amused and suspicious, while the ferryman’s nephew, holding the dirty letter, shrinks visibly in an effort to disappear into the wood-slat floor. The queen, though, remembers with the aural memory of an illiterate people. She leans back in her throne, smiling slightly, and settles the satin and lace around her.

She says to Ani, “You were a monkey once, insisting I was a great queen.” Ratiandrazana looks at her and is about to speak, but she waves him to silence. He leans forward in his chair and watches Ani with undisguised malice. Ani ignores him.

The executioner says to the queen, “I would like to ask your advice regarding the color of the cloth.” He waves his hand at the scarlet canopy, the scarlet parasol, the scarlet lamba draped over Ratiandrazana’s shoulder. He says, “Mena lamba everywhere. You must know, Madam, how the scarlet dye is made?”

She says, playing along, “It’s a stone, is it not? We get it from the Arab merchants.”

He says, “Yes, it comes from the mineral cinnabar. Cinnabar contains mercury, which I’m sure Your Majesty knows is poisonous.” She nods, although Ani thinks she probably has no idea about mercury. He continues. “Producing the scarlet dye is dangerous. Which is perhaps why it is so precious?”

The queen looks at Ani. She says, “The Noble Ratiandrazana was not present for our last conversation about weaving. Please acquaint him with what was said.”

Ani laughs to himself. She’s a sly one, and he admires again the verbal fencing skills of the Imerina. He knows what she wants, and he gives it to her, hoping that when she gets it she might give
him something he wants, too. He turns to Ratiandrazana, who is pretending now that he doesn’t care about this conversation at all.

Ani does not mention Andriamihaja’s name. He says, “About a year ago, not long after I first arrived at court, Her Majesty and I discussed the nature of her rule. ‘You are like a weaver at her loom,’ I said, ‘Just beginning to weave the cloth of your reign. Everyone around you is telling you to chose this color, work that pattern. Some people say your stitches are too tight. Others say your warp is uneven. That your thread is too fine, or too course. Powerful outsiders wonder aloud why you weave at all. Let us make this cloth for you, they say.’” Ani pauses to let his words settle on Ratiandrazana. The nobleman’s face darkens and Ani remembers a feather floating between the two of them. Ani remembers Ratiandrazana’s speed and strength, and remembers how that interaction ended. But Ani has more at stake today, and fights at a severe disadvantage. Both men know it.

The queen says, “Are you one of those men, Ramanany, who will tell me how to work the pattern? Will you tell me what colors to use, or that my stitches are too tight?”

Ani turns his attention back to the queen. He gives her a small bow, “I would not presume,” then smiles at her. “I am merely asking advice about the color of a cloth.” Again he looks around the room, decorated unvarying in scarlet and silver and shadows from the lamps. “I see scarlet here everywhere. Precious scarlet, pooling on the floor. Scarlet that is dangerous to manufacture. And I wonder if so much red isn’t a bit... tedious?” He says the word lightly, rooting it in the thought of course I am wrong but I feel I must ask anyway. He hastens on. “I wonder if the royal red wouldn’t be better appreciated if it was set off to other colors. Green, perhaps, for the wealth of your rice fields. Or blue,” and here he pauses, “for the virtue of mercy?”
The queen sits unmoving and silent on her throne and leaves the arguing to Ratiandrazana. The general says to Ani, “Red is the traditional color of Imerina. Are you one of those vahaza who think we should abandon our customs—the customs of our fathers and our forefathers?

“‘The white egret does not forsake the cattle, the sandpiper does not leave the ford, the kestrel does not abandon the trees; the valley is the abode of the mosquito, the mountain is the abode of the mist, the bay is the abode of the crocodile, the Sovereign is the abode of the law, and mankind is the abode of the intellect.’

“We will not forsake our taboos. We will not abandon our ancestors. And we will not leave our homes. You will find, Ramanany,” here Ratiandrazana’s voice twists with victory, a victory won in the bedroom, a victory that was secret and is now exposed, “that your foreign ideas are less welcome now than in the past.”

Ani addresses the queen, drawing on his growing repertoire of proverbs: “‘There is nothing like friends, so act as do the eyes and nose; they grieve as one. When you are happy, be happy with them, and when you have troubles, bear them together, for the fault that is confessed becomes justice, while dogmatic justice becomes a fault.’”

Ani is still clumsy with kabary, and despite his overture of friendship this condemnation of the queen’s justice is too heavy. The proverb falls into the throne room like a slab of beef crawling with maggots, putrid and stinking, and when Ani has finished speaking he knows his words were too strong. Ratiandrazana knows it, too, and in silent triumph waits for a reaction from the queen. The oil lamp drips, one, two, three, four times, and Ani can feel the queen’s anger gathering like a swarm of wasps, driving toward him, and he drops to the ground prostrate in order to protect himself from its sting. The queen’s words surround him, circling him, lacerating him in a thousand poisoned wounds. Her voice bitter with venom she says, “You understand our language, executioner, but you do not understand our
words. My counselor spoke the words but you did not hear the voice of our ancestors. I will explain this to you because you are a foreigner, but this is the last time I will speak to you of this. ‘The sovereign is the abode of the law.’ I repeat, because you are a foreigner and are stupid and do not understand. ‘The sovereign is the abode of the law.’

“I will not be questioned. I will not be criticized. I will not be compared to other, weaker kings who have not struggled the way I have struggled. Do you think that I am tender because I am a woman? The opposite is true. The path to this place was more difficult than any path any other king will ever climb. And the place where I stand is more dangerous than any place any other king will ever stand. If you think me soft, executioner, change your thinking now. I will not explain myself to you again.”

As the queen speaks she injects the poison of her words under Ani’s skin and into his blood so that the venom collects in his heart. And when the queen finishes speaking, Ani is angry. He is angry as a man who does not often get angry, who only once in a very long while is spurred to anger, and his anger is an old anger, an anger as deep as an ancient hate, an anger that flashes like a flint to gunpowder and now time slows as the fire spreads grain by grain in the barrel of the cannon of his rage and he has a moment, and a moment only, to contain the explosion or let fly.

Ani wants to scream at Ranavalona. He wants to howl the names of all the tyrants of the past who have not listened to criticism, who have not allowed themselves to be questioned, who have acted as if there was no greater power than that of the crown. He wants to fire at her like grapeshot the names Atilla, Caligula, Basil, Tamurlane, Ashurbanipal, Genghis, Vlad, Ivan, and Robespierre. The grains of sulfur struck by her flint are the names of the dead, uncountable, unjustly murdered by tyranny, crying out in terror and pain and loss, igniting his fury at this uncivilized queen who thinks she is above the demands of Justice.
Ani’s hands grip the wooden floor as if he could tear the planks out one by one and throw them at the throne like spears. Under the pressure of his fury, Ani’s muscles tense like a spring as he prepares to launch himself from the floor at the queen, break her neck an instant before he turns on Ratiandrazana and spares the Kingdom of Imerina from the coming blood-drenched tide. Ani’s toes curl under, he lifts the back of his head and he is there, launching himself over the edge of rage when he feels claws ripping into his back. Great white wings tear out his shoulder blades and the icy beak of Death stabs him in the heart so that the fire of his fury is suddenly quenched in the frozen reality of his own power, his own obligations, his own responsibilities to Justice.

And in the passing of the moment Ani is again simply a man prostrate on the floor, his nose an inch above the dusty wooden parquet. He closes his eyes and calms his breathing, cursing his own passion, still hot after so many years. When he has himself under control he says, “Please forgive me, Your Majesty. I did not mean to imply any fault on your part. I do understand and thank you for your teaching: the sovereign is the abode of the law.”

In the same venomous voice the queen says, “Stand up.”

He stands, but still does not raise his eyes. She says, “Bring me their heads, Ramanany. I want the heads of Ramanetaka’s daughters.”

Ani’s stomach churns, nauseated and fearful. He does not want to lose this queen to the corruption of power, but now he has no options. He has misstepped and lost this round, although he isn’t sure if he ever had a chance of winning. Perhaps the queen has walked too far already down the road of tyranny. He will not turn her now. Perhaps later, if he can salvage this disaster, but not now. He bows low again. “I am Your Majesty’s humble servant.”

Her voice is as flat and as sharp as the steel head of Ratiandrazana’s spear. “Do not forget yourself again, Ramanany. Now leave us.”
Ani turns and reverses his course along the star-bordered floor. His mind turns to practicalities—how to find the women, how to take their stories. He will worry about placating the queen when he returns.

Ani arrives in the village of Anjahankely on a Tuesday, the day that is fady to work in the rice fields. He rose before dawn in the small town of Anivorano and walked four hours through the dry forests of the north. Bigger than his hand with his fingers spread, the white flowers of the northern baobab tree close as the sun comes up, but in the dark they smell of musk and rain. Red-eyed fruit bats hang from the flat-branching crowns of the trees, stealing nectar from the flowers before they fold up for the day. The margins of the forest show signs of a recent fire—cattle herders cutting and burning for new pasture for their wealth. Ani walks through grassland that has grown up in previous years’ burns. But most of his journey is through the bottle-trunked baobabs, pachypodiums, and adenias, which store water in their trunks to survive the long dry season from April through November. The high eastern mountain range robs the western island of rain, and the plants here have adapted to xeric conditions.

Four miles outside of Anjahankely he must cross the river Irodo. He asks for a guide in the village of Amboingimamy, and two boys lead him across a tenuous bridge made of saplings tied together with treebark and resting precariously in the crotches of convenient trees. For a hundred yards Ani steps like a tight-rope walker as the saplings sway and spin beneath his feet, the water rushing barely below, sometimes over his ankles, while the boys joke maliciously about lurking crocodiles. Ani is not afraid of crocodiles, but still doesn’t want to fall into the murky brown water. On the other side, he steps off the makeshift bridge into knee-deep water and walks through invisible, submerged vegetation that bites into his feet with thorns and burrs. He pays the boys with dried fish from Antisiranana—a luxury they may or may not share with the rest of their family.
When Ani arrives in Anjahankely, the daughter of Ramanetaka, the wife of Ratsimandresy, is pounding rice with her eldest daughter under a large mango tree. Chickens peck stupidly at the piles of rice hulls on the ground, their chicks huddled and milling, leaving footprints like tiny tridents in the dust. Twenty-odd huts set on low stilts and made of tree bark and raffia palm surround a patch of swept dirt, the center of which is shaded by the huge mango tree. Four of her children play under the tree, the boys throwing rocks at a skeletal and mangy dog, one daughter playing a hand game with a younger sibling:

“Each finger has its own opinion,” the older daughter says. She tugs on the child’s pinky finger, and the girl giggles. “The little finger said, ‘I’m hungry.’” She tugs again, extracting more giggles. “The ring finger said, ‘You’re hungry, but you’re not going to steal?’ The middle finger said, ‘If you steal, won’t you be locked away?’ The pointer finger said, ‘If you’re locked away, can’t you escape?’ And the thumb said, ‘I need to get away from all of you, because I’m a good citizen.’” The older daughter spreads her own hand wide. “This is why the fingers are separate, and some are long and some are short. The little finger is short because it’s been hungry for a long time. The ring finger and the pointer finger are stunted because they wanted to do bad things. The middle finger and the thumb are long and strong, because they told the truth, and did the right thing.”

The women of Anjahankey are not long and strong. Most don’t reach five feet, their growth stunted by want, neglect, and hard lives. Ramanetaka’s daughter is easy to pick out from the villagers—she has the look of the highland Merina among these Antakarana people, the look of past wealth among the emaciated peasants. Her hair shines oiled and plaited in the style of the village women, but her features reveal refinement and sophistication, as if they were crafted by the master of the workshop rather than his apprentice. She stops pounding rice as Ani approaches, and she holds the long pestle, taller than she is, resting on the ground like a spear in front of her. In her posture Ani reads a tentative recognition: possibly relief that the waiting is over, certainly fear of what is to come.
“Mbalatsara,” he says, using the greeting of the Antakarana.

“Mbalatsaré,” she responds, automatically. “Welcome to Anjahankely.” She uses good manners to cover her fear, because she doesn’t want to believe what she knows must be true. Her hands clench the pestle with unconscious force. She asks, “Where are you coming from, tompko?” It’s a normal query posed to strangers met on the road, but now, for her, the question of his embarkation is of special importance.

“From Anivorano, today,” he replies, side-stepping her real question, and she responds automatically, “The road is very bad these days.” She leans the pestle first to the right and then to the left as she shifts her weight between her two feet. The children have stopped playing and are openly staring at the stranger with their mother. The elder daughter, the one who was helping pound the rice, puts down her pestle and moves toward the children. They huddle together and watch and listen, sensing danger, smelling fear in the uncomprehending but instinctive way of children.

Ani observes Ramanetaka’s daughter carefully. He watches her feet and the hands that hold the pestle. He watches her eyes dart from him to the huts to the fields to the hills to her children. With a small part of his mind he assesses the immediate environment: three more women pounding rice, twelve children yelling and running through the village, two men repairing an ox cart, manioc fields to the south, the road that he came from to the west, hills and forest to the north, more huts to the east. Another woman appears from the east carrying a bucket of water on her head, and Ani knows in that direction the stream runs. He watches the daughter of Ramanetaka shift her weight back and forth, and replies evenly, “The road is very bad—muddy, and an effort to walk. I found guides in Amboingimamy to help me across the river. The bridge is almost impassible right now.”

She says, “I haven’t been to the market in two weeks. Are you visiting family in Anivorano?”
Ani has a choice. Normally, a man in his position right now would escort Ramanetaka’s daughter without explanation to the home of the village elder, where he would pay his respects and call a fivoriana of the whole village. If he chooses that action, then this moment now, right now—her feet dusted with rice hulls and facing this stranger in front of her children—this moment will be the last free moment she will ever have. Ani is not a normal man in his position, and so he answers her directly. “I am here from Antananarivo. I have come for you, on the queen’s business.”

Ramanetaka’s daughter pushes off from the heavy pestle and launches into a run. At a desperate, pounding speed she flies to the east across the swept dirt of the village, shooting between the huts in the direction of the stream. The children scream, “Mama!” and as Ani takes off after her, he feels the attention of the other women, the movement of the other women, and he hears cries and slapping feet as the other village women and then the children hasten after the two runners. Ani follows her as she dashes among the huts and then skids down the small embankment that leads to the stream. The slope shines slick from the rain, and they slide and slip downward, tearing at the riparian vegetation with their feet and their hands until Ani finally catches her at the bottom of the slope and they tumble together into the shallow and muddy stream.

He lands on top of her, his chest at a diagonal across hers, and she tries with all her strength to throw him off but he is a foot and a half taller and sixty pounds heavier and she cannot manage it. She pummels him with her hands, beating him in the ribs and the neck. She punches at his nose but he dodges, she jerks her knee into his groin but he squirms away, until finally she latches onto his shoulder with her teeth and whips her head violently, tearing the skin and the muscle and his blood disappears into the mud swirling in the tiny stream. He wraps his arms around her, ignoring the pain in his shoulder, holds her tight so that her arms press against her sides and she thrashes like a fish, splashing and kicking and cursing him through clenched teeth and still he holds her like a lover, four inches of water flowing
through them, their bodies and the sluicing stream excavating a dimple, a dent, a hollow, a grave in the sand at the bottom of the riverbed.

Ani remembers when execution by drowning was the justice of the day, and as he holds her he silently coaxes her: *Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid.*

The woman and children of the village arrive in spurts. They stand in groups and watch the struggle in the stream, watch the woman they don’t really know fight for her life and lose. They watch as her thrashing turns to weeping and still Ani holds her in the cold water until her shivering stops and he is sure the fight in her has been scoured clear by the gritty water and washed away. When she lies limp and cold in his arms, he picks her up without effort and carries her to the bank of the stream.

One of the village women unwinds the kisaly wrapped around her head and hands it to Ani as he sits Ramanetaka’s daughter on a flat stone at the edge of the stream. Ani imagines the *lamba* that have been washed on this stone, the soap streaking through the brightly colored cloth as the women scrub out the sweat and mud from a day in the rice fields. Ani hands her the *kisaly* and she wraps it around her shoulders while surveying the crowd of twenty or so women and twenty or so children who all stand watching her. She composes herself, and Ani asks, “Do they know who you are?”

Ramanetaka’s daughter ignores him. She spits blood out of her mouth, cups her hands and slurps the muddy water, rinsing it through her teeth then spitting it back out again into the stream. She turns and speaks to her eldest daughter. “Go find your father, and *dadá.*” She uses the honorific for the village elder. “Tell them Queen Ranavalona has sent a messenger, and he will want to speak with the entire village.” The daughter will relay the message, and the story of the flight and the struggle in the stream, too. The girl is unhappy at being dismissed—she will miss the gossip—but her mother turns
fierce and tells her to go and not to argue. Without a word she stalks off, fighting her way back up the slippery hill and then disappears.

Two or three of the women move down the slope and sit close to Ramanetaka’s daughter. The rest of the women and children talk in low voices among themselves. One of the women says to Ramanetaka’s daughter, “Sister, who is this man, and why did you run?” Ramanetaka’s daughter jerks her head sideways at Ani, but does not deign to look at him. She spits. “Tell them who you are, and why it is I ran.” She is trembling violently and Ani doesn’t think she will run again, but he knows that terror lends people a preternatural strength and he watches her closely nonetheless.

Ani stands and bows to the women. They laugh to cover their discomfort. He says, “I am Ani, known here as Ramanany, and I am executioner to Queen Ranavalona.” A tumult breaks out among the women and children, and the two women seated next to Ramanetaka’s daughter put their hands on her shoulders to comfort her. One of them looks over at Ani and demands, “Why are you here?”

Ani sighs. This group of women here, this isn’t how he wanted things to go, and now his job will be more difficult. Now he will have to work hard to calm her, to give her peace, to draw from her her story so that she might live within him and thereby achieve a small measure of immortality. He needs her to remind him of his own humanity, of his own pain and fear, of the delight, the humor, the solace, the want, of living. Soothing her terror will soothe his own. And when she is at peace he will take her life, and value his own in the taking of hers.

Ani thinks hard about how he can plant a seed of trust in her, but he doesn’t know how. The women around them are like fortifications and she hides away inside, inaccessible to him. Trying to draw her out, he asks her, as gently as he can, “Why am I here?”

She turns on him in fury. “There is no reason for you to be here. I am a good wife! I have given my husband six sons and two daughters, and I have never taken another man into my bed. My children
and my husband walk on clean feet and wear good *lamba* and their bellies are full of rice. I honor my ancestor’s taboos, and I do not complain about my lot in life.” Her hands and feet churn the stream bottom, and she slaps mud through her fingers as she shouts.

“My father is Prince Ramanataka, cousin to King Radama who has turned his back on the world. When Queen Ranavalona took her throne, she tried to murder my father, but he was too clever for her. He took my mothers and my sisters to a place where I will never see them again. My father has not sent for me. He left me with my husband and my children here in Anjahankely. I have not spoken or acted against the queen, I am exiled from my family, and yet, now the queen’s executioner is here!” Mud oozes through her clenched fists, and Ani stands. He will get nothing from her here. He can do nothing for her here.

The women sitting next to her stroke her skin and mumble soothing words. One of the older women sitting on the riverbank stands up and says, “We will talk with *dadá* about this.” She turns around and starts to painfully climb the bank. Some of the other women help her, and as a group the women leave the stream and head up toward the village. Ramanetaka’s daughter moves with them in the center of the crowd, while Ani follows behind, alone. Some of the children turn around and openly stare at him while they walk. The women move like a flock of birds, swirling and roiling, cawing and warbling, they both protect and entrap Ramanetaka’s daughter within them. Ani will have no time with her now, and he is sorry for it. He will do what he can, but he thinks it won’t be much.

They arrive at the central clearing of the village and arrange themselves in the shade of the mango tree. The women settle on the south side, the men are still gathering, milling among themselves on the north side of the court. The villagers hide from the python sun, its fangs bared and ready to strike anyone who strays out of the shade. Dogs cower under the huts, panting, while emerald lizards bask vertical on the north walls, their velvet scales delicious with light. The village would normally be asleep
now, high noon, the hottest part of the day, but instead today the villagers buzz, vibrating in place, over-
energized by the heat and the stranger and the prospect of news and gossip. They do not yet feel the 
shadow of death that hangs over them like the canopy of the mango tree. They do not yet believe.

The village assembles more quickly than Ani expected, one hundred and twelve men, women 
and children, and the village elder stands to speak. He speaks at length, of the taboos they keep to honor 
the ancestors, of the importance of harmony in the village, of the place men and women each have in 
maintaining that harmony. He speaks of the queen, of her closeness to the ancestors, of her special role 
as mother and protector to her people. Eventually, after many proverbs and fables, he announces that the 
queen has sent a messenger, and it is the duty of the villagers to listen carefully and follow the queen’s 
commands.

Ani stands. He has been watching Ramanetaka’s daughter out of the corner of his eye while the 
village elder gave his kabary, but now he looks at her directly. She sits alone in the group of women, 
folded in on herself, leaning over with her shoulders hunched. Two other women sit near her, but with 
her body she refuses their company. Ani takes hold of his spear, and with an authority that draws on the 
roots of law and civilization, he calls her to him. “Razafintsara, daughter of Ramanetaka and Ravao, 
granddaughter of Andrianavalona and Rabodomanana, who was the sister of Rambolamasoandro, who 
was the wife of Andrianampoinimerina and mother of Laidama Radama. Razafintsara, wife of 
Ratsimandresy who was brother of Laidama Radama. Razafintsara. Stand up.”

While he is speaking her name she looks up at him, their eyes meet, and he sees in her fury hotter 
than the sun that day. He imagines the heat off her skin would blister anyone who tried to touch her now. 
While he is speaking she unfurls herself, and when he is finished, she stands. She stands with her jaw 
and her fists clenched tight, and she takes one step toward him, then two, and she is walking through the
group of women to face him, toe to toe, her face in his face like Medusa, writhing and ugly. Ani thinks that now she will not flee. Now she will fight.

Ani proclaims in the name of the queen. “Razafintsara, daughter of Ramanetaka and Ravao, wife of Ratsimandresy who was brother of Laidama Radama. Your father Ramanetaka lusts for that which is not his. He conspires treason against his sovereign, and his life and the lives of his family are forfeit. Although your father Ramanetaka fled like a coward with his wives and his house, still two of his daughters remain on the island of Madagascar. We have suffered them to live until now, but for Ramanetaka’s crimes these daughters’ lives are also forfeit. Their deaths are just desert for Ramanetaka’s treason and the act of war by the French. It is the traitor and the invading thieves who are responsible for their deaths.

“Therefore do we, Ranavalona, Queen of the Merina, sentence Ramanetaka’s daughters, Razaimanana and Razafintsara, the wife of Ratsimandresy, to be executed by the spear for the crime of high treason. Their bodies shall be left in the forest for wild animals to devour, and their names shall never again be spoken in all of Imerina. They shall die, and pass into oblivion.”

The village is beginning to understand what Ramanetaka’s daughter knew the moment Ani approached her while she was pounding rice. The village holds its breath, the birds in the trees keep their own counsel, and into the silence only the the cicadas scream. Ani watches her nostrils flare, wondering which way she will jump, until finally she says in a low growl, “I curse you.” Ani closes his eyes, listening to her heaving breath, listening to the blood roaring through her body, listening for the moment when her fever peaks and she becomes fearless. He opens his eyes, fingers the spear in his hands, and listens past the curse she throws at him.

“I curse you,” she spits again. “I curse you and all your progeny, that you will live hungry and diseased, that wild animals will hunt you and devour your children in front of your eyes. I curse the
usuper Ranavalona and her reign. Let the French come and take her throne—she has no more right to it than I. Let the blood she shed stealing Imerina, the blood of my father’s family, the blood of my husband’s family, let their blood rain a thousand times down on her lands and her people until they are drowning in red fear, and let them know that the cause is her own tyranny so that they look at her with only hatred.” The throbbing of the cicadas quickens and her voice rises over their pulsing screams. The breath pounding in her chest quickens and her words pour fast from her poisoned tongue. “I curse the child that grows in her belly. Let him be betrayed and killed by those he trusts. I curse you!” She throws her shoulders back and looks Ani square in the eye, challenging him to unspeak her words: “I curse the child! I curse the queen! I curse you!”

With the speed that caught the seasoned warrior Ratiandrazana off guard, the spear is a blur and then it is through her heart. She chokes once and falls, the village women scream, and a flock of blue myna birds lift from the mango tree and disappear into the venomous sky. Ani stands over her while a man he doesn’t see and children he doesn’t hear rush to her, hold her, call her by name. “Mama!” But Ani is not there. Or, he is both there and not there. He feels the cold wind flow from the doorway he has created—the cold of the diamond stars darkening the void. He tastes the ice as it consumes her, he smells the shadows swirling, and he hears the beating of Her mighty wings.

Ani fulfills his duty. He takes her head and deposits her body in the forest for the wild animals to devour. He packs her head in rice hulls to bring back to the queen. He is sorry to get dust in her oiled and braided hair. But he has another execution to perform. On his way, he thinks frequently of the curse Ramanetaka’s daughter laid on him, on the queen, and on the queen’s unborn child. This is not the first time he has been cursed by a condemned prisoner, and for himself he feels no fear. He already lives under curses both powerful and ancient. He will have no progeny to watch devoured before his eyes, and
as for hunger and disease... He thinks back to a boat full of medicines and food, and remembers a journey he took a long, long time ago.

Ani comes from a time and a place where the curse of the dying carries power. So while the words of Ramanetaka’s daughter carry no threat for him, he fears for the queen, and for her people, and for her unborn child. He thinks hard about Razafintsara’s words as he travels with her severed head to find and execute her sister.
CHAPTER 28

... In which we follow the farmer into his fields, and learn of the tricksters Ikotofetsy and Imahaka

Anjozorobe, 1830

At the hour of hitan-tsoratr’omby, when it is just barely light enough to see the cattle in the fields, Todisoa hears the two slave girls stirring in the cooking hut. His wife and his sons are still asleep, his youngest curled up in the warm hammock of his wife’s bosom. Todisoa listens for a long time to the soft sounds of their breathing, and feels that now, at this moment, there are riches enough in his life. He has produced progeny who will tend to his fields and keep his taboos, and when his time comes to turn his back on the world, he will lie quiet and content in his red silk shroud. Until that day, he provides for his wife and protects his children, and there are riches enough in his life. As the stars disappear without comment into the approaching dawn, Todisoa is at peace.

One of the girls steps out of the cooking hut and pads across the swept dirt of the village on her way down to the stream. Hollow scratching as the other girl pulls a lump of charcoal from a basket, then a small crunching as she sets the charcoal on the hearth. She dusts the hearth and blows on the coals from last night’s fire, and then silence as she waits for the fire to bloom.

Today is the beginning of the Asambola vintana. A money destiny, vava’ny Asambola is a day of entering into contracts and of making arrangements about purchases and sale. The moon is waxing and so the strength of the destiny is doubled, and the day will bring prosperity. The place for the rice mortar and the winnowing pan are at the Asambola wall, and white things are sacrificed on this day for the vintana. Today the slave girls will cook a white chicken as kabaka for the family’s rice.
Today Todisoa will travel to the capital to deliver rice to his eldest son. His son has been working in Ranavalona’s *mpanao sotro* unit since before the rice was planted, and now he makes utensils out of the horns of cattle. Todisoa visits him there once every week or so, on the nights he spends in his city mistress’s bed. And his son comes to visit his family on the days when it is *fady* for him to work with the cattle horns. But Todisoa thinks that perhaps his son will start visiting less often. Within a month of living in the capital his son met a good country girl working as a servant in a noble house. Todisoa paid two cattle as the bride price and with the blessing of both families the boy and the girl married. But they have no rice fields to support them, and so today Todisoa will hitch his oxen to his cart and carry five sacks of rice to his son and daughter-in-law. Todisoa will eat the evening meal with them in their small house slipping down the side of a muddy track in Tana. He will eat again at his mistress’s house, then return to his rice fields tomorrow morning. He hopes to carry back with him news of a grandchild on the way—news of a grandchild would please his wife.

But first, always first, he will go to visit his rice in the fields.

Todisoa’s six-year-old son followed him to the rice paddy and now splashes behind him as Todisoa walks between the rows of growing rice. Todisoa talks as he walks, partly to his son, partly to the plants, partly to himself. He pulls the few weeds sprouting among the tillars, bundling them in his *lamba* until they’re out of the muddy water. On dry ground his son will methodically dismantle the young weed shoots, destroying them utterly. Todisoa examines the thin leaves of the rice, frowning when he finds short white streaks on the blades of several plants in the southwest corner of his field. When he looks more closely he finds the blade folded in half lengthwise, characteristic silk threads tying the leaf margins together. He calls his son over, tears the silk from the edges to open up the leaf, and points out the transparent worm living inside. Todisoa plucks the worm from the leaf and crushes its
orange head between his fingers. When he’s sure it’s dead, he drops it with a silent plop into the standing water at his feet.

“Leaf folder moths,” he says to his son. “These are their caterpillars.” He points to the white and transparent streaks on the leaf. “They feed on the blades and damage the plants.” He moves to another plant, destroys the caterpillar’s home then the caterpillar itself, and moves on. After watching Todisoa kill four or five worms, his son moves a little ahead in the row and mimics his father’s movements. Todisoa watches his son’s more clumsy fingers, showing him how to pinch the caterpillar head between his thumb and forefinger then rub his fingertips together to make sure it’s dead. The young boy gets it right on his third try, and Todisoa praises him. “You’re a good rice farmer,” he says, and his son nods gravely. They work through the southwest corner of the field, examining leaves and killing caterpillars with their fingers.

When Todiasoa can’t find any more white streaks or folded-over leaves, he grunts in satisfaction and looks at his son. “The rice is still young and the worms haven’t spread. Rice is strong, but sometimes we have to help it.” Todisoa looks around at the entire rice field. He says, “We have to come out now every day to hunt for the worms. Your brothers will help.”

Todisoa’s son makes an angry face at the rice field. “No bugs will eat our rice!” he says, and Todisoa laughs. He looks up at the sun and decides he has time for a quick nap before he must head back to the village, hitch his cart and set out for the city on the hill. So he and his son splash their way out of the field to the little dirt track that leads back to his house. Just to the north of the track is an XXX tree with wide green leaves and lots of shade. Resting himself on the ground and pulling his *lamba* around him, Todisoa dozes off into a light and easy midday sleep.

Todisoa’s son doesn’t sleep. He likes this tree because he can sometimes find giraffe-necked weevils among its leaves. Today, without searching very hard at all, he sees three bright red bodies
scurrying around on a big leaf near the ground. Two of the weevils are about an inch long with thin black necks twice as long as their bodies. A tiny head and two spiked antennae cap this comical and precarious appendage. When Todisoa’s son sees them they are fighting with each other, awkwardly butting heads and pushing at each other with their red bodies and skinny black legs. The young boy watches, giggling, as the two blunder and bumble their way around and across their leaf until they almost run into the third weevil, her neck more moderately proportioned, and she scolds the two males for interrupting her construction project with their fight.

Todisoa’s son knows what will happen next. He’s watched the female weevil bite her way down the center vein of the leaf, cutting little incisions at regular intervals. After she mates with the winner of the fight, she will fold the leaf in half with her powerful legs, roll up the end slightly, and lay a single egg into the rolled end. Once she’s laid the egg she’ll continue rolling the leaf until it creates a neat, compact package, the father-to-be trying to help but mostly getting in the way. The mother will bite tiny notches along the margins of the leaf to help the roll stick together, and when she’s done she’ll sever the leaf from the stem and let it fall to the forest floor. After that, it’s chance or luck that a small boy doesn’t unroll the leaf nest to see what’s inside. Todisoa’s son has unrolled many nests, but now that he’s older he lets them be and wishes the little egg well. Now, while his father dozes, he watches amused at the silly fighting of the long-necked males.

But he doesn’t watch for long. Before the hour of vahavahana, when the sun reaches the steps of the house, Todisoa is rolling out of his light nap and making his way back to the village. His son follows silently, skipping to keep up with his father and still laughing to himself at the antics of the silly-looking weevils.
When they arrive back at the village, Todisoa’s fourth son helps his father hitch the oxen to the cart. The oxen are stubborn today, but the oxen are stubborn every day and the two men thump and smack and buffet the cattle into their heavy harnesses. They load five big sacks of rice into the creaky cart, and at the hour of *ampitotoam-bary*, when the sun has reached the place of the rice mortar in the house, Todisoa and these two of his sons set out along the muddy road to Antananarivo.

As the cart groans its way around the deep and treacherous ruts in the road, Todisoa’s sixth son tells his older brother about the fighting of the giraffe-necked weevils. Todisoa’s fourth son laughs at his brother’s reenactment of the fight, using his fingers and his fists to mimic the capers of the two fighting males. Todisoa’s fourth son says, “The weevils sound like little insects named Ikotofetsy and Imahaka!” And in response the six-year-old claps his hands and begs his brother to tell him a *fetsy* story. Ikotofetsy and Imahaka are the two tricksters of Merina legend, and Todisoa’s fourth son tells their stories best. This is the story he tells as they walk the road to Antananarivo.

Ikotofetsy and Imahaka were tricky men. After they tricked each other, they made *fatidra* swearing allegiance to one another, and once they’d done that, they decided to go into far countries and swindle people.

On the way they met an old woman harvesting rice from a rice field, and they said to her, “We come to this place to help people. As you are reaping all by yourself, we’ll help you, if you accept.”

“Gladly,” said the old woman. “May the king and the ancestors bless you!” After she said that, the old woman went back to her house to cook some rice for those nice rice-harvesters.

As soon as the old woman left, the two friends started selling the rice to people passing by: “Come! come!” they said, “Rice for sale! We need money for a circumcision ceremony coming.” And the people going by bought rice from Ikotofetsy and Imahaka. When they’d got some money that way,
they left the rice field and hid in the forest, so as not to be seen if pursuers came looking for them. At noon the old woman came back, carrying some cooked rice. She saw that her rice field was half harvested, but she didn’t find any heap of rice. She was angry, and she warned the people in the nearest villages. They ran to the rice field carrying spears, big knives, axes, and sticks, and asked the old woman what happened. She explained to them, “Two men said they’d help me harvest my rice, but while I was in the village, the crooks stole the harvest!”

The villagers followed Ikotofetsy and Imahaka’s tracks. They found them in the middle of the forest at the foot of a tree, counting the money. “What are you doing?” the villagers asked them. Ikotofetsy and Imahaka answered, “We just sold some cattle, and we’re counting our money under this tree because it’s cool here.” “Thieves! thieves!” the pursuers said, and jumped on Ikotofetsy. Imahaka got away at top speed and didn’t get caught. Ikotofetsy was taken to the old woman’s village, with people crying “Thief! Thief!”

After the villagers roughed him up, they put him in a big bag and placed it by the river, to throw him in the water later. At mealtime, when the people went back home to eat, there was a woman looking for a lost goat. She passed by the riverbank calling, “Bengy, bengy, eh!” “Bah, bahl!” said Ikotofetsy inside the bag. “Aaah, what bad people they have in this village,” the woman said. “They’ve put my goat in a bag to kill it.” She untied the bag; Ikotofetsy got out, tied her up, and put her in the bag instead. He tied the bag back up and ran off. After eating, the villagers went back to where they left Ikotofetsy. The woman cried out, “Don’t throw me in the water! The man you put in this bag tricked me!” “No, no, you devil, the crow doesn’t get fooled twice,” the villagers said. They took the bag and threw it into the water.
Ikotofetsy went to where Imahaka was hiding. They met and said to each other, “Aren’t we the kings of devils?”

Continuing their journey, they heard a big noise in one village, crying and songs together. They asked a man passing by, “Who’s dead in the village?” He answered, “A rich man there died, leaving a big herd of cattle, rice fields, fields of manioc, jewels, and money. The burial is done already.”

Ikotofetsy hid under the trees growing around the tomb. Imahaka ran to the village weeping, “O, Abba, O, Abba! Why didn’t you wait for me before dying forever? “What, what?” the people said to each other. “Did this dead man have other children than the ones we know?” After weeping according to custom, Imahaka responded to the greetings of the people around the tomb by saying, “I am a son of the dead man. I learned of Papa’s death. I come to weep for him and see how you have buried him!” Then he asked that the property left by the dead man be divided.

There was a big meeting. The elders decided that the unknown son had no right to inherit, because his name had not been uttered by the dying father. At that, the unknown son asked that they get the word of the dead man himself, and the elders agreed.

When an ox had been sacrificed at the gate of the tomb, the ombiasa, surrounded by clan chiefs and wearing his red hat, asked the opinion of the dead man thus: “O dead man, listen. Here is a man, he says he is your son and asks for his share of your wealth. Answer if it is all right.”

Hardly had the ombiasa finished when a nasal voice was heard from the direction of the tomb. “He is my son. Give him his share of the wealth.”

Hearing this voice, Imahaka sobbed, groaned, stiffened, shook his feet and hands, and cried, “That is my father’s voice!” There was suddenly a great silence. The crowd was amazed. When
Imahaka had calmed down, he spoke to his father in the tomb: “Oh papa! Speak now. Shall I not be given my share of the wealth?”

And the voice answered, “Yes, yes, my son! Get your share of the wealth, and take it wherever you like!” The excitement of the crowd was at its peak. They went back to the village. The elders divided the dead man’s goods among his children, including Imahaka. Then he said to his fellow heirs, “I am taking only the cattle. The rice fields and jewels I leave to you.” He led away more than half the herd.

Ikotofetsy left his hiding-place when Imahaka was well away from the dead man’s village, leading his cattle. They passed near the village where Ikotofetsy almost got thrown in the water. The people in that village were surprised to see him again, and asked each other, “Isn’t that the man we threw in the river over there, leading those cattle?” “Yes,” said some; “no,” said others. To settle the matter, they put it to Ikotofetsy himself. He answered, “You are too clumsy even to lead cattle. Don’t you know that the Water Princess gives a herd of cattle to whoever goes down to her home at the bottom of the river? It was Water Princess who gave me these cattle!”

Having heard Ikotofetsy with wonder, all the villagers had their wives put them into sacks. The wives threw them in the water, and Ikotofetsy and Imahaka addressed them: “Be patient, you wives of future rich cattlemen!” They left. The men thrown in the water did not come back.

Todisoa was only half listening to his son as he told his story—he was focusing on navigating the cart down the rainy-season road, and thinking about the leaf folder moths in his rice field. But now at the end of the story he hits his son half-playfully on the ear, saying, “Don’t repeat that in front of your mother—you’ll give her ideas.”
Todisoa’s younger son looks up at his father and says, “Would mother sew you into a sack and throw you in the river, father?”

Todisoa replies, “I think sometimes she’d like to. But she’ll have to catch me first!” And at that, Todisoa’s fourth son takes his cue from his father and starts chasing the young boy down the road. Todisoa turns his attention back to the cart. The red road is slimy now in the middle of the rainy season, furrowed with ruts large enough to swallow both him and his cart. The five gunny sacks of rice press down on the back of the cart, and the wheels protest with every turn through the mud. Todisoa hopes he makes it all the way to the capital. He remembers a night at the end of the last rainy season when he slept in his cart on the road because he got stuck in rut. That was the day he met the executioner, Ramanany. Ramanany has not been to visit Todisoa in many weeks—Todisoa thinks that he must still be up north on the queen’s business. Last year, Todisoa found men with shovels to help him dig out his cart, but it took him all of the next day to get up to the capital. Todisoa hopes he makes it all the way to the city today.

His sons disappeared around a bend in the road, but now his younger comes running back yelling, “Father! Father!” His older son follows behind walking quickly toward the cart. When he arrives, he informs his father that there is a great crowd of people up ahead, and they will not be able to pass. A merchant train clogs the road with an honor guard of four hundred and fifty soldiers and the queen’s treasures packed in boxes and shouldered by porters. The merchant himself is being carried in a palanquin at the head of the train, and they travel very slowly. Todisoa sighs. He looks for a patch of pasture for the oxen and a level spot off the road for the cart. He gives a message to his fourth son and sends him ahead to the city: today will not be the day he delivers the rice after all.
CHAPTER 29

... In which the queen's lover returns to the capital

Antananarivo, 1830

Andriamihaja approaches the Rova, the palace compound, from the north, the direction of *adalo* and *alohotsy*, of beginnings and endings. North is the direction of strength, and Andriamihaja will need all his strength today. He mounts the long staircase that leads to the gray stone gateway with the thick pillars and heavy lintel. He faces the square looking-glass and does not recognize his own reflection. He knows what is waiting for him at the gate: Refusal. Defeat. Shame. Mockery. Betrayal.

Still, he mounts the staircase. Fat drops of rain begin to fall from the sky; the afternoon’s thunderstorm has arrived. For a moment dark spots polka-dot the stones beneath his feet, but the sky is gentle only for a moment, and three steps later his road is shiny with water and he is wet from the feet up, raindrops glistening in his short-cropped hair like a net of cold diamonds. He sees himself in the mirror and he looks kingly—not as Radama was kingly, lightly and ambitiously—but as the old kings, the kings of the *vazimba*, the original inhabitants of the island who were driven out by the Merina nobility. Andriamihaja is alone, road-weary but still proud, and the looking glass shows him the ancestral spirit Ramboabesofy, *tompon-tany*, master of the land, returning home now to his queen. Andriamihaja does not recognize his own newly-ancient face, and now his queen is captured or bewitched by the Merina nobles, and he is driven out. Ahead of him lies a gate, and he must find a way through.
He knows there is no way through.

Still, he mounts the staircase. Thunder cracks and rivulets cascade down the stairs, washing his bare feet. In the week since he returned to Antananarivo he has been told by his court friends, by the missionaries, by the artisans and the traders, that he has been banned from court. That Ratiandrazana now lives in his house in the Rova, now sleeps in his bed with the queen, now strokes the belly in which his child grows. He has been warned. He has been threatened. Do not come to court. He heard the proclamation from the queen that exiled him from her presence, but it was recited by a messenger and the voice was Ratiandrazana’s.

Andriamihaja has not heard Ranavalona’s voice in months, and the sound of it is fading from his memory. Now, he can recall only the extremes: how she spoke from inside her throat, low and husky, when she was amorous, or angry. He cannot remember if in everyday speech her voice is sonorous or tinny, hard or muted, monotonous or mincing or melodious. He wants very much to hear her voice again, even if it’s only to curse him. Because if she speaks to him, he has a chance. He knows that if only she would see him, that he could convince her.

But she will not speak to him again.

Andriamihaja mounts the steps to the gray northern gate. Lightening flashes behind him and for a moment in the mirror he is only a shadow, a silhouette in the warm rain. To make himself tangible again he draws his dripping scarlet lamba around him—he has left off the fashionable western clothes today, and he doesn’t know if he will don them again. He is almost to the gate, and he doesn’t know what he will do when he arrives. He comes as a supplicant, a jilted lover, a father, a nobleman, a trickster and flirt, as a wise man, and as a fool. He comes desperate, and prideful, and resigned. He comes to humble himself, to beg her to take him back. Or to cry for justice, to discover what happened with his letter. Or to flee his own doom.
But he knows he can no longer distract destiny. He planted the seeds of his own fate on July 27, 1828, and now the tree has grown and he must swallow its bitter fruit.

Andriamihaja arrives at the gray northern gate. Two guards holding spears have been sheltering under the heavy lintel, but when he arrives they step out to meet him. They recognize him immediately, and he them. He smiles and greets them by name, extracts dried fish from within his *lamba* and offers it to them. He breaks off a piece himself and sits down on the top step; they sit down next to him and the three men chew silently together. He asks them about the rice crop; they tell him the rains have been good this year. He asks about their sons, and about their wives and their mistresses. They ask him for news from Tamatave, and he tells them he sent the damned French packing. He tells them the story of the Arab trader who is afraid of crocodiles, and who was almost trampled by a herd of oxen. He pantomimes a French nose in a glass of wine, and the men laugh together in the rain, glad they are Merina and not *vahaza*.

Andriamihaja feels eyes watching him from the other side of the gate. The Tranovola is lit brightly throughout, he hears laughter from inside the building, and the silver bells chime in the rain.

When the fish is gone, Andriamihaja stands as if it was the most natural thing to do, and says to the guards he should probably hasten to see the queen. *She is waiting for me, and you know how angry she can be when she is made to wait.* The two guards stand uncomfortably, grasp their spears self-consciously, maneuver awkwardly around him so they are between him and the gate. All three men still smile at each other, but their smiles no longer reach their eyes.

*I’m so sorry*, one says. *She has asked not to be disturbed.*

The other brightens. *You should come back tomorrow. I’m sure she will see you tomorrow.*

Andriamihaja tries again. *If I’m late to see her, she will be very angry,* he says, still joking.
The second guard nudges him, in on the joke. *Better she is angry with you than with us*, he says. But his joke falls flat, and Andriamihaja cannot maintain his smile. The first guard says, *I'm so sorry, tompko*. Andriamihaja sees that he means it—he is sorry, for everything.

The second guard tells him again, *Come back tomorrow, tompko.*

Andriamihaja says, *I will.* He turns his back on the gate, on the guards, on his own reflection, and walks back to his house dripping scarlet dye in the rain.

Andriamihaja returns the next day. This time he brings fresh mangoes from the tree near his house and shares the sticky fruit with the guards. Again they chat about inconsequential things. Again he asks to see the queen, and again the response is, *Come back tomorrow, tompko.* He comes back the next day, and the next, and the next. Thirty-four days he visits the north gate of the Rova, and thirty-four times he is refused entrance. He always brings something for the guards, and the guards occasionally argue over who will be allowed on watch when they know Andriamihaja is likely to visit. He is generous, and companionable, and their work passes more easily in his company. On his twelfth visit Andriamihaja hints at a bribe, but the guard’s response tells him it would mean the man’s life to let Andriamihaja through. Three times Andriamihaja asks particular guards to inform the queen that he visits. All three times the guards say, *We are only of the 4th rank (or the 3rd rank, or the 2nd rank), and cannot speak directly with the queen. We will tell our officers, though.* Ratiandrazana is the commander-in-chief of the army, and Andriamihaja knows that his message will never be delivered.

He knows too that people watch him from inside the gate. He doesn’t know exactly who, but he can guess: middle-ranking soldiers seeking favor with the new court favorite. He assumes all his conversations are reported verbatim to Ratiandrazana. He wonders sometimes if Ratiandrazana himself doesn’t sit on the other side of the gate, listening in on his talks with the guards. He imagines the two of
them, he and Ratiandrazana, sitting back to back, separated by foot-thick ebony. Sometimes, even though he is talking to the guards, he is really talking to Ratiandrazana. Sometimes he is talking to the queen.

The thirty-fifth day of Andriamihaja’s visits is a Thursday, cloudy and hot, and he spends all afternoon playing fanorona with the guards. As they play, Andriamihaja tells the guards the story of the origin of fanorona:

In the beginning heaven and earth were one. The Great Creator Andriamanitra lived with man and the other animals. At that time, all could converse familiarly with Andriamanitra about the conditions of their living, and they could ask him to make needed improvements.

But one day Andriamanitra said to the gathered animals, “Do you want me to stay on among you, or would you rather be free to do what you like without me around?” They all told him he could leave; they were capable of getting out of difficulties without him, if they had everything they needed to live.

Andriamanitra agreed to what they wanted and separated sky from earth. Immediately the sky rose up, carrying Andriamanitra.

When he had reached a certain height, Andriamanitra told the animals who remained on earth to group themselves on an immense plain. They obeyed. He then ordered them to dig many holes at equal distances from each other, in two parallel lines. In each of the holes of the first row, he had them put foods: fodder, seeds, meat, fish, fruits, leaves, tubers—everything to live on. In the holes of the second row he had them put everything needed for covering and clothes: hides in one, feathers in another, wool in the third, lambas in the fourth, and so forth. Then he ordered each animal to choose
its own food and clothing. The animals lined up: the ox chose fodder and hide, the bird, seed and feathers, the sheep grass and wool, the tortoise cactus, each following its own taste and needs.

When it was man’s turn, only grains and fish were left. He was content to accept what fell to him as food, but instantly asked for the lamba as clothing. God granted him this favor.

When each of the animals was in possession of what it had to have for life and shelter, Andriamanitra spoke to them: “Now that you have got all you wanted, I shall leave you, and go away for ever. You will not see me again, and you will not be able to speak to me about things you need or ask me for changes in your kind of life. Once you have each chosen, I can change nothing.

“Here is what I have decided about you: You will always remain as you are today. Your descendants will look like you. They will have food and clothing just like yours. As to man, since he is more intelligent and strong than the other animals, he will be your master, and will be able to speak. All animals will be under him, and he can do with them as he likes. I even give him the right to kill any one that tries to disobey him. Moreover, to distinguish him from you, he will not wear clothes all the same, like the other animals. He will use his skill to make varied clothes in different colors and to improve his diet. I have spoken.”

With those words, Sky rose very high into the air, and Andriamanitra disappeared from their sight. Each one went its own way to try to earn its living according to its wants and nature.

Since then, Andriamanitra never paid any attention to what men or animals said or did, and no one has seen him again.

Animals ought not to complain of the hard conditions of their living, since they freely chose their sort of life. Even man has not anything to say about that, having received the title of king of the animals and the gift of speech.
The guards enjoy listening to Andriamihaja, but they like even better that he lets them win at the game of *fanorona*. When the game is over and he has bid them farewell, *See you tomorrow, tompko*, just as he turns to leave the gate opens from the inside. Andriamihaja’s eyes pounce like a *fosa* on its prey, but it is only a girl, perhaps seventeen, passing through the gate on her way into town. Andriamihaja catches a small glimpse of the courtyard as she slips through the door, and the yearning that blossoms in his chest like a flower from the *tangena* tree poisons him long after the gate is closed again. The courtyard is empty of people, but the tombs, the shimmering palace, the *aviavy* trees and the garden are all there, and he feels like a starving man chained and manacled, set down just out of reach of a mountain of rice. What he wants, so close, and the longing for it will kill him.

Andriamihaja turns his face away from the guards and composes himself. He bids them farewell again, and walks with as much dignity as he can muster down the long stairs. The girl walks with him, and once he can see again he recognizes her. She was one of Radama’s favorite concubines—from a low-class family but beautiful and full of grace. He would talk with her occasionally when Radama was still alive, when he was visiting Ranavalona, who was then only Ramavo, the king’s senior wife. He tries to recall the girl’s name, she has children, he knows, and the eldest is... Ratsiadala. He remembers. He greets her as they walk together, Mama ny’Ratsiadala, and they talk. She is on her way to visit an *ombiasy*, a maker of charms. Her road passes by his house. She is still beautiful, and he is still charming, and on the thirty-sixth day, Andriamihaja does not visit the north gate of the Rova.

These things happen: The queen enters the seventh month, then the eighth month of her pregnancy. Ani returns with the heads of Ramanetaka’s daughters, which pleases both the queen and
Ratiandrazana. Ratiandrazana continues to spy on Andriamihaja, and learns that the nobleman has taken one of Radama’s concubines as a regular lover.

As with all information about Andriamihaja, Ratiandrazana does not share this news with the queen. He hoards it, waiting for the moment when its power will be full. He waits, and he plans, and he watches the queen’s belly grow.

Near the beginning of the ninth month of her pregnancy, Queen Ranavalona cannot move without assistance. She spends her days lounging on her couch, drinking in the company of Ratiandrazana and his faction of religious conservatives. More and more frequently she consults the sikidy before she makes decisions. This day, at the hour of vahvahana when the sun arrives at the threshold at the end of the morning, she is already drunk. The rains are petering out, the rice is almost ready to harvest, and the heat of summer on the high plateau is beginning to ease. She has thrown open the windows of the Tranovola and the clear fall air ruffles the tapestries on the walls of the throne room. Today she drinks with Ratiandrazana, Andriamamba, and Ratiandrazana’s two brothers Rainiharo and Rainimaharo. She is attended by three of her women: two lesser wives and a concubine of Radama’s.

Ani is also there, drinking but not drunk. Since he returned from the north, he has taken steps to repair his relationship with the queen and Ratiandrazana. He and the general continue to spar, but verbally rather than physically, and Ani is learning where he can push and where he would be wisest to give way. Ani does not enjoy the time he spends with the queen, but he uses the time, and learns, and thinks about how he can influence her in the direction of humanity rather than brutality. The loss of Andriamihaja diminished significantly the voices of compassion and mercy at court. Now Ratiandrazana’s brutal strength runs unchecked, and it is only the quality of the queen’s character that will keep her from sliding into cruelty.
Ani has seen, too many times, how easy it is for a sovereign to lose her way in the thick forest of competing interests, competing counselors all pushing her like tree branches in different directions. Everyone at court investing everything they have to influence her. Ani searches for something or someone to provide balance to Ratiandrazana’s clout; he still hopes that Andriamihaja might once again win her favor. He hopes that once the child is born she will soften, and take him back. But she has prohibited his name from being spoken at court, and for now Ani must wait. So he waits, and watches, and learns.

This morning the court valiha player presents a new song to the queen.

Greetings Rabodo, daughter of Andrianampoinimerina!
To the south lies Ambatoanfandrana,
To the north, Ambohimitsimbina,
To the west, Ambohimiandrana
To the east, Ambohijahary.
Salutations Queen Rabodo,
And all the royal family,
Innumerable!

You build your house on a foundation of silver,
Muskets support your house like pillars,
And though you are rich, you are not arrogant,
You are guarded by spears, and the men who carry them,
Greetings Rabodo, daughter of Andrianampoinimerina!

You are as a single tree in a lake,
No one can ask, “How many rule?”
For there is our sovereign!
You are the new moon possessing the west,
You are the full moon rising from the east.
The trees at Ambohimanga arch to the ground
Watching the child who is to reign;
There governs Rabodo!

The small people have what they have,
The great people have what they have,
The kingdom is a ladder,
Which does not cause to stumble
Or fatigue those who climb it.
Greetings Rabodo, daughter of Andrianampoinimerina!
Holding no hatred,  
The orphans are plump  
And the sons with living fathers are fat.

Of course the queen is pleased—her ego today seems as swollen as her belly. She hears the song three times, goading Ratiandrazana every time the singer insists that she is like a single tree in a lake, for there can be only one ruler. Ratiandrazana, who is getting better at hiding his reactions, gives her a thin-lipped smile. But to Ani he seems neither pleased nor upset—he seems distracted. Ratiandrazana plies the queen with alcohol this morning, while he and the other men are careful about how much they themselves drink. The queen pays the singer five silver *piastres*, and tells him to go sing his song at Andohalo, at Ambohipotsy, and at other gathering places in the city. The Merina will take up the song and Ani will hear it everyday for the next several months, at the fountains, at the market, at cattle pens where men with blood on their hands will sing of the queen’s house supported by pillars made of muskets.

As the singer leaves, one of Ratiandrazana’s aides-de-camp bows to the queen and informs her that David Griffiths, the British missionary, begs an audience with her. He has a gift, he says, to present to her majesty. By now the queen is drunk and happy, and she waves her hand at the lower-rank officer and tells him not to keep the *vahaza* waiting. They have not yet developed the virtue of patience, she says, tittering unkindly, directing a knowing look at Ratiandrazana. Ratiandrazana nods his acknowledgment, uninterested, and Ani thinks that the queen must be very drunk indeed to miss the general’s careful vigilance today. Drunk, and self-absorbed. The other men—Andraimamba, Rainiharo and Rainimaharo—avoid each other’s eyes. They watch the queen, and they watch Ani, and now they watch the missionary.

David Griffiths enters the Tranovola dressed in missionary gray and carrying a parcel wrapped in white silk embroidered with gold. He holds the parcel reverently, pressing it to his chest when he makes
his deep bow to the queen. His clothes are clean and neatly pressed, and shining through them is a deep satisfaction, a full measure of joy. He comes like a man who has succeeded at some great effort, and now wants to celebrate his achievement and share his good fortune. Griffiths smiles broadly at Ani, delight dancing in his eyes, and even Ratiandrazana’s scowl cannot dampen the minister’s easy enthusiasm.

“Queen Ranavalona,” he says, “May you live to be a hundred years old, may you watch your children and your grandchildren and your multitudes of great grandchildren grow fat and strong. May your rice fields yield abundance, and may you reign in blessed peace.”

The queen acknowledges his words with a nod of her head, but her greedy eyes are on the silk-wrapped parcel. The minister continues. “For the past nine years, it has been my great honor to work among the Merina. I came to Antananarivo like a child, stupid in the ways of civilized people. King Radama was patient with me, you have been patient with me, and I have studied, however imperfectly, the great arts of your culture. The Merina skill at mikabaray is unsurpassed among the people I have known. You strive for harmony with all people, and at your best, your regard for others’ welfare reflects a kindness that we Christians could better emulate. We are not so different, you Merina and we vahaza.” At this, Ratiandrazana cannot help himself but snort, but he turns it into a cough to cover his poor manners.

“We are not so different,” Griffiths insists. “We are all children of God. Our bodies all need food, our hearts all need love, and we all strive to be remembered with respect. How will you be remembered, Queen Ranavalona?” He says it like encouragement.

In that moment, Ani understands why he built his friendship with the missionaries—David Griffiths is fundamentally a decent man. Many aspects of his work here rest on assumptions Ani finds abhorrent, but living in this culture, so different from his own, the missionary has learned to set aside the
superficial measures of a man’s character—his mode of dress, his manner of speaking, the size of his fields. David Griffiths has learned to judge a man based on the breadth of his vision, and the cast of his hand. Ani turns to the couch where the Queen of the Merina lounges. How will you be remembered, Queen Ranavalona?

The queen is laughing at the missionary. “Why do you care how I will be remembered, vahaza?” This is not the response Griffiths expected or wanted, and a furrowed brow displaces some of the joy in his expression. The queen waves an imperious hand. “Never mind. I don’t care how you remember me. My people will remember me as strong like Rasoabemanana, who fought the Rock of a Thousand Corners, who bound up her loins like a man to catch the locust, and who carried Iboina in her womb for ten years. My people will remember me as a good mother who honors the fady of our ancestors, who rewards her children when they act well, and punishes them to teach them when they act wrongly.” She drinks deeply from her glass goblet—a toast to her own reign—and immediately Ratiandrazana is by her side refilling her cup.

David Griffiths bows again, taking a moment to sort through his confusion, and Ani sympathizes with the man. The queen speaks as if the entire world were made for her pleasure, and woe to the man who crosses her. Drunk on power as much as alcohol, today the fickle queen is capricious, the unsettled queen is volatile, and Ani sees clearly the potential for tyranny in her reign. But to Griffith’s great credit, when he straightens from his bow kindness has returned to his face and his voice is soft again. “Queen Ranavalona, I remember when you used to come to my house, before Radama turned his back on the world. We would talk, and drink, and eat. You helped me start my work here—do you remember?”

Ratiandrazana shoots a look of warning at Griffiths. “Do not presume intimacy with Her Majesty, vahaza.” The queen drinks again, and again her cup is refilled. She says, “I remember your house. But I am not Ramovo anymore, lonely and abandoned by my husband.” She reaches up, grasps
her crown and waves it at Griffiths. “This is who I am now. Queen.” She plants the crown back on her brow, lopsided so that her head looks crooked on her shoulders. She points at the parcel Griffiths carries. “What have you brought for me, vahaza?”

The callousness of the address—she used to call him “friend”—combined with the queen’s drunkenness and fiery mood finally breaks Griffiths’ gentle joy. Ani watches the minister hide strong emotion: certainly pain and probably some fear. But Griffiths draws one last measure of peace from within, and bows to the queen for a third time. Kindness once again touches his face, although this time with effort, and he says to her, “I see that I have come at an inopportune time. I should not have disturbed Your Majesty so close to your confinement. My deepest apologies. I will return when Your Majesty is feeling better able to receive me.”

But Ranavalona will have none of it. “I received you, didn’t I? Now show me what you have brought me.”

Griffiths stands in front of the throne, conflicted. He looks over at Ani, Help me out of this, but Ani took the measure of the room before Griffiths arrived, and knows that today is not the day to push. Today is a day when they would be wisest to give way. Ani nods to the parcel, indicating that Griffiths should present it to the queen.

The missionary does the best he can to manage his disappointment, to rearrange his expectations. “I have brought you a gift, to thank you for your friendship, and the help you have given me and our mission over the years.” He starts to unwrap the parcel, gently laying aside the corners of the white silk. He takes a deep breath. “This is my life’s work. It is the culmination of eight years of happy and fruitful collaboration between your subjects and our missionaries.” In his hands, Griffiths holds a thick book, bound in leather with gold tooling. He lowers himself to one knee and holds the book out to the queen.
“My I present to Your Majesty: an edition of our Bible, translated into your native language. These are the first pages from off our printing press.”

In the Tranovola the tapestries flutter in the breeze, but the people sit as still as stones. Griffiths continues to hold the book out to the queen, but she does not move to take it. She lounges on her couch, swirling the toaka in her glass. Griffiths waits, and the moment grows awkward. Ani is almost ready to reach forward, to rescue them all from this unpleasant tableau, but finally Griffiths stands. Moving like an arthritic man he opens the book and turns to a particular passage. His voice stumbles into the silence. “If Your Majesty will permit, I would like to read a passage, so that you may appreciate the quality of the translation, and the skill of the students who refined it.”

Still no one moves. Griffiths looks around to the men at court and, except for Ani, sees only hostility, loathing, and rancor. The women stand at the back of the room, effectively invisible. Ani gives Griffiths sympathetic eyes in a carefully neutral face, searching for a way to help the man without angering the queen. Griffiths’ breathing becomes very loud in the room. He clears his throat, and in the absence of a direct prohibition from the queen, begins to read.

“From the Gospel according to John: ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do as I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.’” Griffiths closes the book reverently and says, “I am Your Majesty’s servant, and I do as you command. But I look forward to the day when you will once again call me ‘friend.’”
The queen stares into her goblet, her attention absorbed by the play of colors through the clear *toaka* and the glass. She seems to have forgotten that Griffiths is even there. But the minister has Ratiandrazana’s full attention, and it is the general who responds to Griffiths’ reading.

“We must congratulate you, Minister Griffiths. I have heard that you recently married in the European fashion two of the queen’s subjects.” The general’s tone is friendly enough, but his words fill the room like the smell of sulfur from a match before it lights a fuse.

Griffiths replies carefully. “Before we conducted the ceremony, we sought and received Her Majesty’s permission. ‘Your mistress, the Queen, grants complete liberty to all who so wish to become baptized, participate in the Lord’s Supper, or to marry in the European fashion. I neither compel nor prohibit, neither command nor forbid anyone to do these things; no one will receive blame for doing them. Says Ranavalomanjaka.’ The marriage was lawfully conducted, General Ratiandrazana.”

Griffiths almost says something about assigning blame against the direct edict of the queen, but decides that antagonizing Ratiandrazana could be as dangerous as antagonizing the queen.

Ratiandrazana looks at Ani and says, “You attended the wedding, did you not?”

Ani, composed, gives the general a shallow bow and says, “Yes, I was there.”

Ratiandrazana says to Ani, “Tell us, Ramanany, was the wedding well attended? I’ve never been to the minister’s church, but I understand that it holds about fifty people. Was the room full?”

Still the sulfur in Ani’s nose. “The wedding was well-attended, general. It was a joyful feast.”

Ratiandrazana presses his question. “Was the room full? How many people were there to celebrate the bride and groom’s good fortune?”

Ani can’t dodge again. “The room was full, Noble Ratiandrazana. About two hundred people attended, both inside and outside the church.”
The queen looks up sharply, first at Ani, then at Griffiths. Two hundred people at a wedding is unheard of, even for noble families. She addresses Griffiths. “Is this true? Two hundred people at the wedding?”

Griffiths tries to soothe her. “I’m sure that many people came out of curiosity only. We killed three bullocks for the feast.” He means, _They came for the food as well_, but the effect is the opposite of what he intended.

The queen is shocked at the expense. “Three bullocks! For the marriage of a housemaid and a peasant!”

Griffiths tries to backpedal, but Ratiandrazana interrupts him. “You are also performing baptisms, and celebrating ‘The Lord’s Supper,’ are you not?”

Griffiths voice takes an edge when he responds. “Both of which are expressly allowed by Her Majesty’s edict.”

Ratiandrazana’s doesn’t alter his mild tone. “Of course. You will have to forgive me, Minister. You know I haven’t studied in your schools. Explain to me, please, what is baptism?”

Griffiths, too, smells the sulfur. He knows he is in danger, but doesn’t know from what direction the attack will come. He answers carefully, “Baptism is our rite of admission into the Christian Church. Those who have been baptized are cleansed of the guilt of original sin, initiated into our covenant with God, admitted into the church, made an heir of the divine kingdom, and spiritually born anew.”

Griffiths addresses Ratiandrazana, but the queen watches the minister closely while he speaks. She holds her goblet in her thick right hand and sips occasionally at its contents.

Ratiandrazana asks, “And ‘The Lord’s Supper?’ What is that, exactly?”

Griffiths knows better than to try and explain the mystery of transubstantiation. Many years ago he discussed it with Ramovo, one evening when she was visiting him at his house. She didn’t understand
it then, and even now the turning of bread into flesh, of wine into blood—to the Merina it reeks of witchcraft. And the punishment for witchcraft is death. Griffiths answers Ratiandrazana, “We celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion during The Lord’s Supper. Holy Communion nourishes Christians in our faith.”

Ratiandrazana says, “And can non-Christians feast at The Lord’s Supper? Can I come to your church and celebrate Holy Communion with you?”

Griffiths says, “We would welcome your to our church, General Ratiandrazana. But just as you follow your traditions and taboos, we follow ours. We believe that only someone who has been baptized can celebrate Holy Communion.”

Ratiandrazana says, “And baptism is the rite of admission into your ‘society of Christians.’”

Griffiths says, “Yes, tompko.”

Ratiandrazana says, “So you have created a separate society here in Imerina, a society whose members participate in rituals that no other Merina are allowed to share?”

Griffiths says, “We welcome anyone who sincerely wants to learn and embrace the teachings of Christ.”

Ratiandrazana says, “And who is the leader of your group?”

Ani understands now where Ratiandrazana’s objection lies, and sees that Griffiths does, too. It’s an old objection, an ancient problem of authority.

Griffiths feels on firmer ground now that he understands, and he answers Ratiandrazana more directly. “The head of our Church here on earth is the Archbishop of Canterbury.”

Ratiandrazana says, “A British man.”

Griffiths says, “Yes, the Archbishop is vahaza.” Griffiths turns his attention to the queen. “Your Majesty, if you will allow me to tell you a story from our book. I think it may help to assuage some of
General Ratiandrazana’s worries.” The queen gestures for more *toaka*, then closes her eyes and settles in on her couch. Ani can’t tell if she’s actually listening. Griffiths opens the Bible he still holds and again begins to read, this time from the Gospel of Matthew:

> Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle Christ in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

> “Your Majesty,” Griffiths says, “Your Christian subjects render unto you the filial loyalty due to you as their Mother and their Sovereign. There is no conflict between what they owe to you, and what they owe to God.”

The Queen’s eyes snap open and she says to Griffiths, “My subjects owe me everything, Minister Griffiths. I am Ranavalon’Andriamanitra, Hita Maso, the visible god. It is my subjects’ duty to give me everything I demand: their love, their rice, their children, their lives. Tell me, Minister, what it is that your God would ask of them that does not already belong to me?”

The words are almost out of Griffiths’ mouth—their souls—but Rainimaharo, the thoughtful brother who spent time in Griffiths’ school, interjects. To the minister of the London Missionary Society he quotes the Sermon on the Mount: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other.’ Your baptized Christians are promised to two masters: the queen as their sovereign, and your Archbishop of Canterbury, a *vahaza*. Which master would you have them hate, and which would you have them love?”

Into the space this question creates steps Ratiandrazana, with the words he has been reserving for exactly this moment. He asks his question simply, directly, and inescapably. “How many of Her
Majesty’s subjects have you initiated into your society, Minister Griffiths? How many baptisms have you performed?”

Griffiths face turns gray, matching the color of his clothes. To buy himself time to answer, he begins to fold the white silk with the gold embroidery back around the thick Bible he carries. But the queen now sits up on her couch, and she repeats Ratiandrazana’s question. “How many, Minister?”

Griffiths must answer her. He places his right hand on the Bible and says, “About a hundred, Your Majesty.”

The queen says, “A hundred. In how many months?”

Griffiths says, “Three months, Your Majesty.”

“And these hundred, are they everyone who wants to be baptized, or are there more?”

“There are more.” Griffiths hesitates. “Many more.”

“How many more?”

Griffiths hesitates again. He looks down at his Bible, now wrapped up again. He says, “At least five times that number have said they want to be baptized.”

The queen’s and Ratiandrazana’s eyes meet. From the look they exchange, it seems that even their most dire predictions fell short of the number Griffiths just quoted them. The queen nods to Ratiandrazana, summoning him to her.

While the general moves to Ranavalona’s side, Griffiths speaks, desperate to stave off what he knows is coming. “Your Majesty, please. There is no conflict---”

The queen stops him. “Be quiet.” She hands her empty goblet to Ratiandrazana, who hands it back to his brother, who fills it. Mama ny’Ratsiadala, Radama’s concubine who waits on the queen this day, takes hold of the queen’s left arm, and together with Ratiandrazana the two of them haul her bulk
off the couch so that she stands. The queen reaches out her left hand, and Mama ny’Ratsiadala gives her the spear that that is symbol of her office. She reaches out her right hand, and Ratiandrazana gives her a glass full of toaka. Griffiths has closed his eyes, his hands cradling the Bible, and Ani knows he is praying to his god. Silence in the hall as the queen prepares to speak.

“Your mistress, the Queen, revokes the liberty of her subjects to become baptized, participate in the Lord’s Supper, or to marry in the European fashion. You and your fellow ministers may still teach my subjects useful things, and they may still attend your church, but I prohibit my subjects to participate in your rites of initiation. Anyone who takes part in these ceremonies, their freedom and lands will be forfeit, and they will be sold into slavery.” Her spear hits the wooden floor and the report echoes through the hall. “Says Ranavalomanjaka.”

Griffiths bows deeply, pressing the Bible into his chest. From the strength it lends him, he manages only, “I am your servant to command.” He straightens while Ratiandrazana and Mama ny’Ratsiadala help the queen back down onto her couch. Griffiths sees that he has been dismissed. He says, “May Your Majesty reign in blessed peace.” Before he turns to go, he looks at Ani. Ani turns to the queen and says, “With Your Majesty’s permission...” She waves at him as she collapses into the couch, and Ani follows Griffiths out of the hall.

In the courtyard, in the noontime sun, their conversation is brief. Ani says, “I’m sorry, minister.” Griffiths struggles to maintain his composure. He holds out to Ani the Bible he still carries, and says, “Would you keep this for me? In case she asks for it?”

Ani says, “Of course.” He takes the book from Griffiths and says, “I will keep it safe.” He hesitates. “You know how changeable she is. She will reverse herself, I’m sure.” Ani is sure of no such thing, but the minister is in need of comfort.
Griffiths has been in Antananarivo much longer than Ani, and knows the way of things. He says, “I will pray that you are right.” The ruddy Welshman looks at Ani weakly, “I must get home, and decide how to break this news to my flock.”

Ani says again, “I’m sorry.” As the minister walks across the courtyard and passes through the north gate of the Rova, Ani thinks that it’s true that he is sorry, but it’s also true that he is not sorry. Griffiths is a good man, but the European conquests have brought misery and death to millions. If he could, Ani would spare the island of Madagascar from the ravages of European imperialism. And whether he realizes it or not, Griffiths is a cog in the wheel of the colonial juggernaut.

Ani wants to return home himself. The Bible he holds feels impossibly heavy in his hands, as if it was bound in melancholy and inked with despair. But Ani remembers the alcohol—the queen drinking too much, her ministers drinking too little. Ani remembers the eyes and where they did not look. And the executioner, the part of him that only emerges in the presence of death, it thrums. A corner of his soul vibrates, pulsing, and the waves of the past, the present, and the future are almost in sync. He feels what some would call intuition, and he knows that the day’s work is not yet done. Drums tattoo his heart and the beat heralds death. He returns to the Tranovola.

The air in the hall has turned stifling—nothing moves, nothing breathes, and the shrieking laughter of the women reminds Ani of Dante: Here the repellant Harpies make their nests... The servants—some of them Ani’s, some of them the court’s—stand with infinite patience against the western wall. Ani hands the Bible to one of his own servants with instructions to return it safely to his house.
The ministers and the queen’s three women lounge on the mats in front of her couch. As Ani enters, they are joking with each other. Rasendrasoa, one of Radama’s lesser wives and a close confidante of the queen, tells a bawdy joke at the expense of the men in the room. She suggests that vahaza men are interested in more than a five-minute encounter, and threatens, jokingly, to discover the truth of the rumors she’s heard. Ratiandrazana wonders aloud why more than five minutes would be necessary—it’s certainly enough to please the man and impregnate the woman, and what more is there to be interested in? Rasendrasoa says that she’s heard that vahaza men can go for an hour, at which point the women in the room shudder and cross their legs, imagining such a prolonged discomfort.

As the laughter dies, a look passes between Ratiandrazana and Rasendrasoa, neither of whom are as drunk as they’re pretending to be. In his peripheral vision Ratiandrazana takes Ani’s measure, then nods his head almost imperceptibly at Rasendrasoa. At Ratiandrazana’s signal, Rasendrasoa says in voice as light as she can possibly make it, “Mama ny’Ratsiadala, tell us about your new lover!”

Mama ny’Ratsiadala pales and quickly looks up at the queen and then away again. Rasendrasoa presses on, joking still, intentionally misreading the woman’s reaction. “Oh, no—you can’t hide from us! We knows these things! Who is he, and does he keep you underneath him for an hour?” Laughter again through the hall. The queen sniggers with the rest of them, wobbling on her couch, her arms swaying unsteadily from side to side.

Mama ny’Ratsiadala, agitated, tries to change the subject. “But Rasendrasoa, I want to hear more about vahaza men! How do you know that they go so long? Have you been with one?” She says it suggestively, inviting Rasendrasoa to brag or lie or both.

But Rasendrasoa doesn’t take the bait. She says, “Oh, no, I have never been with a vahaza. I’ve heard their manhood is... oftentimes inadequate.” More laughter. “But you tell us! I’ve heard that your new lover is a vahaza!”
Rabodomirahalahy, the queen’s other attendant, elbows Mama ny’Ratsiadala playfully. “A vahaza!” She rolls her eyes. “Ooooo. How is he?”

Rattled and confused, Mama ny’Ratsiadala answers before she has time to think. “Oh, no, he’s not a vahaza!”

Mama ny’Ratsiadala is neither savvy nor clever. Her response is intended as a strike at the two other women, but even she understands that she has made a tactical error. Rasendrasoa responds as if she had won a great victory, which perhaps she has. “Ah ha! Well, then, if he is not a vahaza—who is he?”

Rabodomirahalahy chimes in, “Yes, lady, tell us who he is!”

Rasendrasoa reaches over and pours more toaka into the queen’s glass. “Dear Ramovo, don’t you want to know who Mama ny’Ratsiadala’s new lover is?”

Her eyes swimming in alcohol, the queen leans over to Rasendrasoa and almost drops her glass. She says, “Mama ny’Ratsiadala has a new lover?”

Rasendrasoa says, “She does, Your Majesty. But she doesn’t want to tell us who he is.”

The queen raises her glass and shouts, “It’s Ratiandrazana!” She means it as a great joke—Ratiandrazana is ugly, with a reputation for coldness with women. He and the beauty Mama ny’Ratsiadala together make an awkward picture. The hall erupts with laughter, too loud, and the queen speaks into the mirth, “No, it can’t be Ratiandrazana. He has trouble keeping me satisfied. And he only does it for the power.” Her voice is as light as Rasendrasoa’s, her meaning as loaded. Ratiandrazana’s face darkens.

But Ani is watching Mama ny’Ratsiadala. He has seen that expression too many times in his life. She was hunted, and now she’s cornered, and soon they will move in for the kill. She begs Rasendrasoa with her eyes. “Please, Rasendrasoa. Now is not the time...”
“Why not?” Rasendrasoa leans on the edge of the couch, intimate with the queen. “Dear Ramovo, you must command Mama ny’Ratsiadala to tell us who her new lover is!” Rasendrasoa smiles at Mama ny’Ratsiadala, *We are all friends here, having fun.*

The queen shouts again, “Why not! What’s the point of being queen if I can’t give commands!” She leans over and Rasendrasoa supports her as the queen points an unsteady finger at Mama ny’Ratsiadala and says, “I command you, concubine of Radama, to tell us: Who is your new lover?” The queen leans back in her couch and says, “There. Now she must tell us.”

Mama ny’Ratsiadala cannot speak. Rabodomirahalahy goads her again with her elbow. “You heard Her Majesty. You must tell us now!”

The queen lays on her back staring up at the gilt ceiling. She says, “Be quiet woman, and let the girl speak. Mama ny’Ratsiadala, who is he?”

Ani tries to save her. He says, “Perhaps, Your Majesty, there is a reason why she can’t say. Should we not respect their secret?”

The queen answers him. “Oh, be quiet, Ramanany. This is women’s business. Whoever he is, I will forgive you. Now tell us your secret, girl.”

Mama ny’Ratsiadala grasps desperately at the queen’s words. “You promise you will forgive me, Your Majesty?”

Rasendrasoa sparks at the girl, breaking her pretense of levity. “She has already said she would. Now tell us!”

Mama ny’Ratsiadala hesitates, then gets on her knees in front of the queen and bows her head to the ground. Ani feels the warm wooden floor against the soles of his bare feet. Droplets of sweat form around the edges of Mama ny’Ratsiadala’s hairline. She says, “It is the noble Andriamihaja, Your Majesty.”
Ani feels lines of his own sweat drip down his temples and the back of his neck. Everyone in the room steps imperceptibly away from the kneeling woman, gathering around the queen’s couch. Ani separates himself from the rest of the court, isolates himself against a pillar near the north wall. Mama ny’Ratsiadala speaks quickly, to the floor. “It is a very recent thing, Your Majesty. After you banished him from court, he had no friends. Andramihaja is---”

The queen interrupts, her voice a full octave lower than just moments ago. She speaks from inside her throat: “I forbade that man’s name to be spoken in my presence.”

Mama ny’Ratsiadala starts to weep, her fat tears splattering the wooden floor. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty.” Her sobs overtake her, and she shakes with terror and shame. The queen continues to stare up at the ceiling, unmoving. Through her sobs, the girl tries to explain. “I am Zaza-Hova, Your Majesty. My father was a criminal and my mother was a slave. I was given to Radama when I was twelve. I have no family, and since Radama turned his back, no one at the palace will speak to me. All the women here hate me because I’m pretty.” A smile of satisfaction touches Rasendrasoa’s face while the girl continues her weeping. “But Andria--- but he was kind to me. I didn’t think it would displease Your Majesty.”

Into the silence left after the girl’s speech, Ranavalona drops her goblet full of toaka. The glass shatters against the wooden floor and a dark stain forms where the alcohol spills into the parquet. Queen Ranavalona summons her executioner, “Ramanany.”

The girl wails, “You promised! You promised you would forgive us!”

As if he were donning a suit of armor Ani wraps himself in his office and walks to the queen. He steps around the kneeling girl, and when the queen holds out her arm he helps her sit upright on the couch. The queen looks down and speaks to the girl, her voice so full acid it could strip Madagascar of its forests. “Does he tell you that he loves you? When he lays on top of you, thrusting, does he say to you, _tiako anao_?”
The girl can barely answer through her sobs. “He says he wants to marry me.”

The queen says, “He is lying to you.” She pauses. “All men lie.” The queen just sits for a moment, her distended belly between her knees, watching the girl’s heaving sobs. Her voice is flat when she speaks again. “I said I would forgive you. I did not say what I would do with him.” She turns to the executioner standing next to her. “Ramanany, two of your servants will take this girl to the house of Andriamihaja. Your servants, do you understand me?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You will instruct your servants to give the following message to Andriamihaja: ‘The queen desires that you give up your attachment to this woman. She is of the Zaza-Hova caste, and though she was a concubine to a king, marriage between nobles and slaves is forbidden. The queen therefore commands you to denounce this woman now, and swear a sacred oath that you will not see her again.’ Do you understand, Ramanany?”

“I do, Your Majesty.”

“And are your servants familiar with the form of the fatidra, our oath ceremony?”

“They are, Your Majesty.”

“Then go. Take her to your servants, relay my command, and then return here to me. Do not speak with any other person. No one leaves this hall until your servants return with Andriamihaja’s answer.”

Ani bows to the queen. He helps the girl to her feet and supports her as they walk out of the hall. Ani obeys the queen’s command. He speaks to his servants in the courtyard, they take charge of Mama ny’Ratsiadala, and Ani returns to the hall.
They wait. The cool morning breeze blows itself out, and the afternoon heat oozes into the Rova like honey. The queen orders the windows closed to block the sun’s pitiless gaze, and after an hour Ani can barely breathe in the thrice-exhaled air. The alcohol continues to flow. After two hours the city outside the throne room dissolves, and Ani is trapped in a world twenty feet square with only enemies and drunks for company. The metallic wallpaper shimmers madly. Ani doesn’t drink but still he is infected by the Spiritus of this cramped Mundi, and the room begins to spin. Turning and turning, the queen and her small court waver in the heat like a mirage. Ani half-hallucinates desert sands blowing over the parquet floor, and the perched hawk circling in the widening gyre like the reeling shadow of an indignant desert bird.

In the third hour Ani, dizzy and exhausted, leans against the south wall, and behind his eyes the blood-dimmed tide washes over the rice fields of Imerina, drowning the ceremonies of innocence. Andriamihaja, Griffiths, Alidy, Ani himself—these men now lack all conviction, while Ratiandrazana and Rasendrasoa are full of passionate intensity. From the darkness a great beast lumbers toward Antananarivo, and though it smells of tyranny, in fact its name is Anarchy, where the strong rule by the terror they let loose upon the world. The beast exudes the constant danger of violent death, and turns the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. All through the fourth hour and into the fifth, behind Ani’s eyes the beast moves its slow thighs, approaching, approaching. In the fifth hour of waiting, Ani hears footstep approaching the door of the Tranovola.

And things fall apart.

When Ani’s servants beg leave to enter the throne room, Rainimaharo is performing a cruel impersonation of Andriamihaja. In the hours that passed, the court gave vent to its pent-up vitriol toward the queen’s former favorite. When Ranavalona could not stand to hear Andriamihaja’s name, the court
had no outlet for its mean gloating. Now they savor their victory, no less sweet for the months that have passed, and they swagger and bluster and mock and deride until a parody of Andriamihaja practically materializes in the room. Rainimaharo has borrowed all the clothes the others were willing to spare and draped them incongruously over his shoulders, arms, and torso. He stands to the left of the queen in a posture half-Napoleonic but still unmistakably Andriamihaja. He plucks the crown off of Ranavalona’s swaying head and with a great flourish and to raucous laughter, proclaims himself king.

At that moment, Ani servants bow their way into the room. As they pass through the door, Ani sees the sun hanging over the horizon, red light reflecting off the flooded rice fields to the west. The air from the door clears Ani’s head, and he moves to open the windows of throne room. The queen and the rest of her court are so drunk they don’t even notice—they see Ani’s servants enter and laughter breaks out again, for no good reason except that the servants’ appearance is something new in this closed world, and they laugh at everything now.

The evening air revives Ani, but the queen and her court lean soggy with drink, too far gone, and it will take more than the clean heavens to effect their redemption.

Ani’s servants start with their obeisances, but the queen stops them impatiently. “What did he say?” Rasendrasoa bounces on her toes next to the royal couch. “What did the Great Emperor Andriamihaja say when I commanded him to give up that whore?”

Ani’s more senior servant bows low to the queen and replies evenly, “He refused, Madam.”

The court practically breaks out in cheers. Laughter and shouts and whoops of victory spill out of the windows of the Tranovola. The queen herself throws her head back and howls at the ceiling, then turns again to Ani’s servants, tears in her eyes. “Tell me the details!” she commands them.

Ani’s servant glances quickly at Ani, and Ani nods for him to speak, but furrows his brow so that he will speak carefully. No one else notices. The servant says, “We brought the woman to Andriamihaja
as you commanded, Your Majesty. He received us cordially, and we ate and drank as his guests. He entertained us through the afternoon, not allowing us speak of business for some time. He was very affectionate with the girl, Your Majesty.” The queen scowls, Ani frowns, and the servant continues, more carefully. “Finally, when we were at our leisure, we delivered Your Majesty’s message.”

“And?”

The servant speaks slowly, enunciating each word. “The noble Andriamihaja says, ‘The woman that I love, I do not give her up voluntarily. I beg Your Majesty to receive me, and to allow me to speak.’” The servant pauses, then continues. “Andriamihaja says ‘Aza manao toy ny lolo amoron-drano: mivelatra, hianao ihany, mikombonkombona, hianao ihany. I am not like the butterfly by the waterside, stretching out my wings for myself only, closing them again for myself only. Your Majesty promised me, that I should not be put to death no matter what offense I commit. I think that this order must not have come from Your Majesty, and I demand to know, according to the customs of our people, who my accusers are.’”

Laughter again through the court, but the queen remains quiet, staring up at the ceiling. The red light from the foundering sun moves up the east wall, and the silver wallpaper, like a distorted mirror, reflects scarlet into the room. The queen’s advisers and her women eventually notice her silence, and the laughter dies out slowly. Ratiandrazana steps up to the royal couch and bows a small bow. He says, “Your Majesty. Andriamihaja is a traitor who claims privileges that no subject of Imerina can possess. He has ambitions beyond his station. He frequently calls himself ‘President,’ or ‘Emperor,’ and he desires nothing more than to sit on your throne. He does not love you; he merely loves your wealth and your power. He is under the spell of the vahaza, and if he is allowed to live, he will destroy Imerina.”
The queen ignores Ratiandrazana, and still staring at the ceiling says to Ani’s servant, “Is that all?”

The servant bows. “That is his message to you, Your Majesty.”

Ratiandrazana barely waits for the man to finish speaking. “Queen Ranavalona, aza manao hendry anatiny toa samoina, ka raha mivoaka afatotry ny sasany. Do not be like a like the moth of the silkworm, wise within the chrysalis, but foolish once you have emerged, when you are captured by others. Adriamihiaja is a traitor who has refused to follow your command. Will you undermine your strength by refusing to mete out justice for his treason?”

While Ratiandrazana makes this last argument Ani’s servant backs his way to the west wall, disappearing into the shadows. The queen holds out her arms, and once again Ratiandrazana and Rasendrasoa help her sit up on the couch. The queen looks at Rasendrasoa with ruddy eyes and a flushed face. Rasendrasoa says to her, “He is only a man, Ramovo. Rabodoandrianampoinimerina, Ranavalomanjaka, blessed by the ancestors and Queen of the Merina. Will you allow this man to master you?”

Ani knows this moment—it is the moment in which everything hangs in the balance, the moment that marks the boundary between the things that came before and the things that will come after. Ani feels the past and the future converging, like a musician feels the approach of consonance or dissonance in a song. Ani hears the alcohol in the room. He smells the discord, tastes the chaos like snake bile on his tongue. And beneath his feet, the floor trembles with the lumbering of the beast. Twice now he has tried to intervene with the queen, and twice he has been ignored. Reproached. But Ani cannot stand passive in this moment. He must step forward. He must try.

“Your Majesty, I beg you.” Ani’s bow is low, and his voice soothes the roiling mood of the room. “Please don’t do anything you will later regret.” Ani tries to look the queen in the eye, but she can only focus for a moment and then her expression blurs. He says, “You will wake up tomorrow
morning and you will hate yourself. You will curse, and tear your hair, and offer to your gods half your
kingdom if they will undo tonight’s catastrophe. You will go to your diviners and command them to turn
back time.” Ani speaks from experience; he has seen monarchs like this before. “I beg you, Your
Majesty, think of your people. Do not rain terror on their heads. Rice that is watered with the blood of
the innocent makes an unpalatable meal.”

The queen’s answer is soft and slurred. “He is not innocent.” The sun spills its last rays and
floods the room with crimson, then dies in the shadows of the onset of night. The queen looks up at Ani
and says again, more forcefully, “Andriamihaja is not innocent!” And Ani knows that she is lost. The
queen turns to Ratiandrazana and all but shouts at him, “He is guilty, and a traitor!” And the look of
triumph on Ratiandrazana’s face sucks the last light from the room. The queen waves for her staff of
office. Rasendrasoa hands it too her, but Ranavalona is too drunk to stand. So she makes her
proclamation sitting on her couch, the baby in her belly bearing uncomprehending witness to the
destruction of his own father.

“The noble Andriamihaja has refused my command and is guilty of treason. The punishment for
treason is death.” Once again, Ani stands before the queen and dons his mask of office. The queen looks
at him with still-watery eyes. “Before dawn tomorrow.”

Ani cannot help himself. He manages, barely, to cloak his words with respect before they pass
through his lips. “Do you want his head, Your Majesty?”

The queen looks at him carefully for a moment, but now her drunkenness saves him because she
cannot focus long enough to see the contempt he struggles to hide. But she doesn’t see it, and answers
him plainly. “No. Give him a decent burial.”

And Ani thinks, Maybe she is not lost, after all.
The executioner Ramanany bows to the queen. He takes three steps backwards, then turns sharply and strides from the hall as if he were retreating from a lost battle with hell.
CHAPTER 30

… In which the past, present, and future come together, and we say goodbye to a good friend

Antananarivo, 1830

Ani walks with a measured tread through the alleys of Antananarivo. The evening creatures course through their crepuscular lives. A bat sounds its way past Ani’s shoulder, squeaking, its leather wings not quite brushing Ani’s cheek. He stops to watch the emergence of a moon moth from its cocoon in a myrtle tree. It fights its way out of its silk coffer and spreads its still-wet wings, eight inches across and bright yellow. It will be vulnerable for hours, until its wings dry, and if it survives it will live only four days. Ani resists the urge to stand and protect it until it can fly. Death is sometimes the way of things.

A streaked tenrec, striped blue and yellow, scurries over Ani’s feet, pricking his skin with its tiny claws and quills. A cat launches itself in silent pursuit. Fireflies blink on and off, on and off, floating like fairy lights from another world, another time. As he walks Ani remembers the people he’s killed. He knows their names; he knows their stories; he knows what brought them to him, and why. He knows the exact count—not one more, not one less—and the number is higher than any soldier in any war, any hangman, any architect of history’s massacres. He will add Andriamihaja’s name to the company. He will collect Andriamihaja’s story.

Above Ani, the stars. Without looking up he knows they’re all still there, each one a name, each one a story. They speak to him now, saying, “We will still be here. No matter what calamity, no matter what miracle—at the end of time, we will still be here.” Ani reaches up to play them like an instrument,
strumming, plucking, breathing across them to make them sing, each star a different note. And when he plays them it is the symphony that chants to itself: *I am alive, I am alive, I am alive.*

Into the gloaming a barn owl hoots. Ani’s hand shoots down and seizes a small white mouse scampering across the alley. He holds the mouse by its tail, its body curling into a crescent then collapsing as it wriggles to escape. The owl swoops down soundlessly, settling itself on Ani’s tree-like shoulder, crunching the mouse bones in Ani’s ear. This is not Ani’s bird, but they are companionable, and for tonight, it will do.

Ani does not hesitate at Andriamihaja’s threshold. He shoos the bird off his shoulder, and with a silent beat of its wings it perches on the crossbeam above the door. Ani calls for entry, and the answer, *Mandroso,* comes immediately. He steps across the threshold into the main room brightly lit with oil lamps and beeswax candles. Mama ny’Ratsiadala sits weaving a *tsihy* mat, but her attention is on the door when Ani enters, and she cries in alarm when she sees who it is. Andriamihaja sits with another man Ani has seen at court once or twice, but he can’t remember the man’s name or his office. Andriamihaja snaps at Mama ny’Ratsiadala, “Be quiet woman. That is no way to greet a guest.” To Ani he says, “Please be welcome,” and gestures for Ani to sit against the south wall. Mama ny’Ratsiadala begins to cry quietly in the northwest corner of the house.

Andriamihaja is brave. He ignores the woman and introduces Ani to the other man in the room: Raombana, the court secretary. Ani remembers now. Raombana was one of two twins sent to England by Radama in 1821. They were educated in Manchester until just a year or so ago, when they returned to serve in Ranavalona’s court. On the floor in front of Ramobana a sheaf of papers lies covered in black writing. Ani greets the court secretary formally, then turns to Andriamihaja.

Ani is direct. “Do you know why I am here?”
Andriamihaja laughs a dry but mirthful laugh. He says, “Sarotra. Difficult and complicated.” He looks at Mama ny’Ratsiadala, but continues to speak to Ani. “You are a servant of the stars, here to fulfill my vintana, my destiny.” He smiles quietly at the girl, addressing her gently. “I told you a dream I had once, do you remember?”

Mama ny’Ratsiadala answers him from behind the lamba she holds to her face to hide her tears. She says, “The stars shone like the bright eyes of the ancestors, and you felt your father and your father’s father watching you. Radama watched you with the eyes of the forsaken. Rakotobe watched you with eyes full of horror. The stars loomed over you, immobile, fixing your fate. I remember. But it was just a dream, tomoko.”

Andriamihaja says, “Look now at who has come to my house, and tell me it was just a dream.” The girl begins to cry again. Andriamihaja turns to Ani. “You are the conclusion.” He waves his hand at the sheaf of papers. “This is the cause.” Raombana gathers the papers, straightening and ordering them. Andriamihaja says to Ani, “I remember you told me once that you collect the stories of your victims. You have come in time—the noble Raombana and I have just finished writing my story. You will find that I have a smaller part in it than you might think. Small, but crucial.” Andriamihaja looks at the spear Ani has propped by the door. “Why are you here? The answer to that question is in these pages.”

Ani looks down at the sheaf of papers. The histories he collects are usually oral, spoken in the last hours of his victims’ lives. He appreciates the irony of reading a written history in a mostly-illiterate culture. Ani smiles; Andriamihaja is always good for a surprise, and Ani will miss him. Andriamihaja says, “Please, read. And while you read, you will excuse me to make my goodbyes.”

There is no place to retreat to in the small house, but the Merina language contains no word for privacy. Ani bends his head to read the papers, and that is all the solitude Andriamihaja will get for his farewells.
Ani reads.

“This is how Queen Ranavalona came to her throne....

King Radama was sick in the Tranovola at the palace, and his oldest wife Ranavalona went to mamangy, to visit him while he was sick. After observing him and speaking with him for some time, she understood that he was mortally ill, and this woman who presented herself as mild and agreeable secretly conceived of the idea of taking the throne when he died....”

Andriamihaja watches Ani for a moment as he begins to read. He watches the executioner’s eyes slide back and forth across the page, as a woman working a loom slides the shuttle back and forth across the warp. *Yes, executioner, read this story that I have woven for you. It is a true story, but not a good story. Read carefully, executioner. Read slowly.* Andriamihaja watches for only a moment because he cannot ignore the soft weeping of the woman. She hides her face behind a *lamba* that trembles with her grief, and Andriamihaja cannot stand it, he’s not dead yet, and he won’t have his last moments of life stained with the weeping of women. So he stands from his place and walks to where Mama ny’Ratsiadala sits leaning against the northwest corner of the house. He wraps his arms around her shoulders, leans his face close to hers and whispers in her ear.

Andriamihaja lies to her. “Don’t worry Mama ny’Ratsiadala! I have a plan.” He cups her chin in his palm and gently turns her head so that their faces are almost touching. Andriamihaja smiles a bright smile that reaches up to his eyes. Even now, Andriamihaja can summon laughter at will. “Tell me love,” he says, “Could I look at you like this if I thought I was going to die?”

Mama ny’Ratsiadala searches his face for a moment, then her pleading and watery eyes meet his as the corners of her mouth turn up tentatively. Andriamihaja says, “That’s right. Dry your tears.” He wipes her cheeks with the edge of her damp *lamba*. “All of that before, that was just for show. Do you
think I haven’t been preparing for this day? Do you think I don’t have a plan to save my own life?”

Andriamihaja strokes her cheek with his thumb, and hope peaks tentatively from her eyes. Andriamihaja does not hesitate. He says in his conspiratorial whisper, “Tomorrow morning you will hear the news that I have been killed. Don’t believe it.” He nods his head imperceptibly in the direction of the silent historian. “Raombana and I have a plan that will make the queen think that I have been killed. But secretly I will have sailed off to the Comoros to serve the great Ramanetaka.” She makes to interrupt him, to question him, but he says, “I can’t tell you now. Do you want him,” he scowls at Ani, “to hear?” She shakes her head. He says, “You must go, otherwise the plan will fail.”

Mama ny’Ratsiadala lets out a great sob, but it is the sob of a temporary rather than a permanent goodbye. Andriamihaja squeezes her in his arms and she clings to him until he stands, dragging her up with him, and he supports her as they shuffle to the door of the hut. He pushes aside the curtain and resists the urge to shove her out into the street, he can be patient, he is patient because she doesn’t want to let go and so he whispers to her again, “You must go now or the plan will fail.” And so she embraces him one last time, then turns and almost falls as she stumbles out onto the swept-dirt street.

Andriamihaja leans inside the door frame and watches her go. She turns twice before she disappears into the black and Andriamihaja’s shoulders relax with relief. Andriamihaja’s house stands at the top of a cliff, and beyond the narrow alley in front of his door hangs empty air, black air powdered with silver stars. Many times the nobleman has leaned thus in his doorway, five hundred feet above the rice fields that stretch below him on the great plain of Betsimitatatra. Andriamihaja closes his eyes and holds in his mind the image of those rice fields, the earth filled to bursting with green: a wet green, a melodious green, a green both deep and shallow, rough and smooth, moving and still. A green that is more than his eyes can see. More than his mind can think.
But now the green is gone and when he opens his eyes he sees only the black, silver-powdered air. The stars shine like the bright eyes of his ancestors. Radama looks down at him with an expression pierced by betrayal. Radama... His friend, his brother, his confidant, his king. Radama, with his curly, shorn locks that so angered the women of Antananarivo, and he didn’t care. Lustful, drunken, cruel Radama. Radama who was the cause, and Ani in his house the consequence. Andriamihaja remembers the first time he met Radama, in a military camp before a raid against the Betsimisaraka. In a scarlet tent, tsihy mats covering the ground, light from the oil lamps reflecting back blue from the barrels of the guns. Andriamihaja had just been promoted and was serving as Ramanetaka’s secretary, and the king had marched his soldiers from Tana to reinforce his cousin’s army. Andriamihaja remembers clearly his own first impression of the king: buoyant, restless, and gossipy. He was there not because he thought Ramanetaka needed reinforcements, but because he was bored in Tana and wanted to fight. He had brought Brady and Hastie with him, of course. It was the first time Andriamihaja had spoken with a vahaza, and his normally nimble tongue moved slow and thick when he tried to repeat the words they taught him for fun.

The five men sat through the night drinking together, each taking a turn with one of Ramanetaka’s slaves while the others gambled over dice. The bone dice, heavy, the coins hard and smooth in Andriamihaja’s hand. Radama was profligate with his wealth and Andriamihaja had to work hard to lose to him. The others didn’t mind taking the king’s money. The woman smelled of cow dung and charcoal, and she was slick with other men by the time it was Andriamihaja’s turn. Laughter like wood on a river flood, and toaka so strong Andriamihaja could smell it with the hairs on his arms.

The next day on the battlefield Andriamihaja may or may not have saved the king’s life—who can know for sure where the spear might have landed?—but Radama feasted him and gave him in thanks a horse, powerful and rare. Andriamihaja protested that he did not know how to ride a horse, that
the gift was too much, but Radama just laughed and took Andriamihaja on campaign with him and spent
the next month teaching the young man how to ride. Andriamihaja remembers the king’s laugh mingled
with the clomping of hooves, how Radama howled when Andriamihaja fell from its back again and
again, and how Radama loved him when he lay on the ground laughing at himself more heartily than the
king. He remembers burying his nose in its mane after a long ride, the feel of its thick lips on his hands
full of rice. Radama, generous.

Radama loved Andriamihaja because they were Ikotofetsy and Imahaka, the trickster pair of
Malagasy folk tales. One cold afternoon the two of them sneaked to the market, incognito, and Radama
dared Andriamihaja to steal a pair of manacles. Andriamihaja did, then challenged the king to steal a
chicken, and the king protested that a squawking chicken was much harder to steal than a pair of
manacles but Andriamihaja insisted. The king said he’d only do it if Andriamihaja created a diversion,
so the charismatic nobleman flirted outrageously with the chicken-seller and under cover the king stole
the chicken and ran, feathers flying out behind him, and that night it was the sweetest chicken either of
them had ever eaten.

Andriamihaja smiles again now, remembering. The cold stars do not smile back.

The silver stars. Andriamihaja wishes they weren’t so silent. Like disapproving parents. He
wishes the stars tinkled like the little silver bells on the Tranovola. There was always music in the
background when the queen made her proclamations from the veranda—a celestial accompaniment, as
befits a living god. Andriamihaja remembers the first night he met the queen. It was at the annual New
Year’s Festival, the ceremony of the Royal Bath, and because she was his chief wife Radama had to
suffer Ranavalona at his side. Ranavalona flirted with Andriamihaja all night, her scarlet satin skirts
swishing, the heat of the Tranovola teeming with bodies, and late in the night with slurred speech
Radama had begged Andriamihaja to take her to bed, to relieve him of his duty to lay with her. She’s
ugly, he said, and demands more than any woman has any right to demand from a man. Andriamihaja had raised his eyebrows. Beware, the king said, you cannot make her happy. Andriamihaja laughed and told the king he accepted the challenge, and now, after almost four years, Andriamihaja still doesn’t know if he succeeded or not.

Andriamihaja remembers the day she came to his house to tell him that the king was dying. That Radama would be dead, perhaps a week. And that she would make herself queen. Andriamihaja knows now that she did not so much want to be queen as she wanted to remake Imerina and all of Madagascar in her image.

The day she visited him in his house what Andriamihaja should have said to her was: Dear Ramavo, all of Imerina knows that Radama has named his daughter and his nephew to succeed him. To act against the wishes of the king is to invite the wrath of the ancestors. It is to offend the great King Andrianampoinimerina, your father. Ramavo, you are just a woman, he should have said. Put away this foolish idea. *Volon-katsaka misakan-tadio, ka manohana ny tsy eran’ ny ainy.* Do not be like the cornflower in the tempest, and attempt what is beyond your strength.

This is what Andriamihaja should have said. But he didn’t say this. When Ramavo told him she would be queen he looked at her broad shoulders and her frowning mouth and her set jaw and her eyes like knives at his throat. He thought of the demands she made of him in bed—demands he always obeyed—and he thought, why should this woman not make the same demands of the entire kingdom? Why should she not have her way?

And so instead of invoking the name of Andrianampoinimerina, he said the name Andriamamba. Andriamihaja told the nascent queen that if she promised to support the conservative faction’s agenda, Andriamamba would back her claim to the throne. Andriamihaja remembers listening to himself say
these words, and he remembers a feeling of expansion, as if he had grown much bigger on the inside and he was now filled with soft, quiet air.

Andriamihaja leans against the door frame of his house, ignores the narrow path and stares into the void beyond. The rice fields are invisible and in a moment of fancy he imagines them vanished, the earth below departed to some other place. What if he were to leap? Would he fall forever? And how would that be different from flying?

Andriamihaja remembers the words of the king, spoken to a throng of officers when he was promoted to the ninth rank: “That young fellow will figure greatly in a short time, for he is shrewd and cunning, and will far surpass all you great dull men.” The king’s voice, medium-pitched and beginning to fray around the edges. Andriamihaja remembers the times when the king called him “brother,” all those times, compressed now into one great memory like pages stacked together in a book. He remembers the last time, when the king was sick, when he was dying, and he croaked in pain to Andriamihaja, “My brother. Swear you will take care of my family.” Andriamihaja had sworn. He had sworn that he would protect the king’s daughter, that he would safeguard the young prince.

(Andriamihaja squeezes his eyes shut at the memory of Rakotobe’s voice, broken by a rotten cord, pleading, pleading…) Andriamihaja had promised Radama, had promised Radama’s ancestors, had promised Radama’s scion that the dynasty of Andrianampoinimerina would sit safe on the Merina throne.

In the end, he had not loved Radama as Radama had loved him. Andriamihaja is sorry for it; he wishes that he could have loved the king more. (Who was it that he loved more than the king? Was it the queen, or himself?) He wishes he could have kept his promises, because if he had he would not now be standing in his doorway waiting for his executioner to finish reading. Andriamihaja searches in
imself for regret and finds it. Regret is the view from the top of a cliff of the lands he has chosen not to occupy. There was a moment, and he chose a path, and the path led him here instead of there.

Andriamihaja looks out into the void beyond the narrow path. He could chose again. He could rob the queen of this final satisfaction, of this last happiness of hers, dictating his fate. Ruling his end. The executioner is fast, but he is not so fast that he could catch Andriamihaja before he launches himself into four long strides and one great leap. He knows the executioner has been watching with half of an eye while he, Andriamihaja, stares into the void, while he, the executioner, reads. But Andriamihaja does not think that even this executioner is so fast he could catch him before he jumps. Andriamihaja pretends, for the sake of argument, that his executioner is not that fast.

Andriamihaja stands leaning against the doorway to his house. He turns away from the bright, cold stars and looks at the man sitting against the south wall reading, his eyes sliding back and forth across the page like the shuttle of a loom. Each word he reads, each line, each page, that much less time. Andriamihaja’s life now measured in letters, in shadows on a page. How many pages left? How many shadows? The stack in Ani’s hand is too thin, the stack on the floor too thick. Andriamihaja does not want to die. He is overcome with an urge to scream at Ani, to command him to read more slowly, to tear the pages from his hands, throw them across the floor, mix them up so that the executioner will have to order them again, will have to find his place, reread a bit, buy Andriamihaja more time. But the soldier sucks in his belly, clamps down on his bladder and tightens his thighs so he does not wet himself, he does not collapse at the knees. He turns his head and confronts the night sky: the powdery stripe of stars, the hanging cross, the dipper upside-down just above the horizon, pouring stardust onto the day side of the world.

Andriamihaja will not jump. He will give this last thing to her, this last satisfaction, for it is she, not Radama, who has been the instrument of vintana. She has always been the master of his fate, and he
will not pretend, not about this. There is the cause, and the effect. There is life, and there is death. And so he makes a rude gesture at the star-speckled sky, tells Radama that he’s sorry for the betrayal but he can go fuck himself, then pushes himself away from the door frame of his house and turns and steps inside. Even now, Andriamihaja can summon laughter at will.

When Ani turns over the last page, Raombana sits invisible in the southeast corner of the house. The historian will bear witness, but otherwise Ani and Andriamihaja are alone. The night has reached the stage of stillness when, released from the unquiet tides of the yellow sun, the earth expands into the silent black heavens and mates with the stars. Andriamihaja says, “I wish that he had not loved me.”

Ani remains as silent as his office. Andriamihaja walks through the house, pinching out candles. “Soanjo roots, but not arranged in rows.” A candle goes out. “Rice, but not to pay our debts.” Another candle extinguished. “A waterfall, but it could not wash clean.” The house is more shadow than light now. “A man, but he could not be absolved from shame.”

Andriamihaja pauses at the picture of Napoleon still hanging on his wall, then blows out two more lamps and says, “Don’t hate her. This is justice.”

Ani says, “I don’t hate her. I fear for her. And for her people. But noble Andriamihaja, this is not justice. It is merely the law.”

Andriamihaja says, “She is both the cause and the instrument—do you think she knows how she is controlled by fate?”

Ani decides an expansive interpretation of “fate” is appropriate—a meaning that includes all the currents and eddies, the trajectories, tendencies, the vectors and spirals of the people, politics, customs, and resources of her court, of Imerina, of Madagascar, and of the wide, wide world. Does Ranavalona
know how she is directed by these forces? “I think she knows, although she could not say. But I think it is the thing that terrifies her. It drives her, her own powerlessness.”

Andriamihaja says, “She is not powerless, although she may feel herself so. ‘She is the coveted fruit, the ankondro much desired.’ Tell her this—this is the last message I will pass to her: ‘If a butterfly touches her in passing, it will not leave her. The man who dies for what he desires is a baby crocodile swallowed by its mother: consumed by the belly in which it lived.’”

Andriamihaja has finished his tour of his house, and he leaves one lamp burning against the western wall. He walks over to the place where Ani has propped his spear by the door. Ani stands but makes no move to stop him. Andriamihaja takes the spear in both hands and hefts it to feel its weight. He turns the tip and brushes his finger across the sharp edge of the spearhead and says, “Yes, this will do.”

Andriamihaja hands the spear to Ani. He kneels in the middle of the floor of his house. He removes his scarlet lamba and points to where his heart beats fast in his chest.

He says, “Here.”

He says, “Now.”

Outside, the earth brushes against the frozen stars. Andriamihaja is right, his fate was set, and Ani hopes—he does not know, but he hopes—that the nobleman’s death will free the fixed heavens so that the spheres might once again sing to Madagascar. Ani hopes, and with one smooth movement drives the spear through Andriamihaja’s heart.

Ice across his skin. He left her in the hot sun by the riverbank she is the stone she is the trees she is the crying black drongo, he dove naked into the frigid water and the shock of it... cold like death as he
kicks with his legs and the cold is a mouth with teeth like a crocodile and it tears at his arms and his legs and face and chest, there is a hole in his chest where the cold has eaten through. If he breathes he’ll suck the cold inside him and he can see her there by the riverbank shimmering in the sun on the other side of the water. She is the forest through which the river runs. He swore that he would not leave her and this promise he will keep and though she sent him away so that she could bask in the sun while he fought through the devouring cold, still he will not leave her. This time she cannot banish him she cannot lock him out for he is in a place beyond banishment, a place without locks. He will stay with her until her leaves fall and her roots rot and the life that crawls inside her curls up legs up waving. Goodbye… No. He will glide through this cold for as long as he must until she too falls into the toothy water and together

they will
drown.

The flame from the single lamp wavers and shrinks, and shadows slither and stretch across the ceiling and walls. The body with the spear through its heart slumps to floor. And Ani feels. Outside, the stars sing, *I am alive, I am alive, I am alive*, and Ani remembers what it is to live.

In a small hut in a middle-sized city on the Island of Madagascar, a man convulses as his body gives itself up to Death. The small flame from the lamp dies, and Ani sits in the dark, feeling. Finally, finally, he hears the beating of Her mighty wings.
Ranavalona granted permission to inter the corpse of Andriamihaja—an unusual favor in the case of criminals—so he was buried in the family tomb at Namehana. The queen gave three red silk lamba to wrap the body in. But the memory of her former lover haunted the queen, and she was frightened by the visions that came to her at night. The Hova believe that if a corpse is flogged with the wood of the ambiaty and a dog is killed over the corpse, the ghost of the person will be dead, or extinguished. So the queen ordered that the body of Andriamihaja should be exhumed. The body was flogged several times with ambiaty, its head was cut off and placed at its feet and the head of a black dog was placed at the neck of the mangled corpse. Thus defiled, the body was reinterred in Andriamihaja’s ancestral tomb.

But even after the body of Andriamihaja was subjected to the queen’s demands, still her fearful dreams continued. So Ranavalona ordered again that his body be exhumed, this time to be burnt and the ashes scattered to the winds. But even yet the midnight visions returned, and so his house was pulled down and burnt with everything inside—the mirror, the bed, the picture of Napoleon, the blood-stained floor. The earth upon which the house stood was thrown over the rock at Ampahamarinana, and the foundation sprinkled with water ensorcelled by the ombiasa to guard it against future malevolence.

Andriamihaja’s lover Mama ny’Ratsiadala, his sister, and one of his servants were subjected to the tangena ordeal to determine if they had taken any criminal part in his supposed designs on the kingdom. All three were convicted at the trial by ordeal, and at Ani’s hand they were first strangled and then burnt to ash. Thus the spell of Andriamihaja is said to have been dissolved, and Ranavalona’s dreams vanished. But to David Griffiths and the Christian community, the stain of cruel murder remains.
Ratiandrazana began to understand that the death of Andriamihaja could not deliver to him the power he craved—the queen held her sovereignty tightly in her fist. For weeks after Andriamihaja’s execution, Ranavalona refused to see Ratiandrazana and his brother. When it came time for her to endure her labor, it was in the company of her women only that she gave birth to her son and heir. Ranavalona will take Ratiandrazana back, but for the Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the army it is already too late. The woman has hatched into a queen, and will not be put back in the egg, and Ratiandrazana’s expectation of sole male sovereignty will never be realized.

Ani will stay in Antananarivo. He has much work to do.
In a work of historical fiction, readers tend to want to know what’s historical and what’s fiction. Many of the characters in my book are based on historical figures: Ranavalona, Andriamihaja, David Griffiths, Raombana, Ramanetaka, Radama, Andrianampoinimerina, James Hastie, James Brady, the governors of Mauritius and Bourbon, Commodor Gourbeyre. Ratiandrazana is a combination of two historical figures: Rainijohary and Rainimaharo. I would have liked to have stuck with one or the other, but for narrative purposes found I needed to combine them. (Rainijohary was instrumental in the coup that put Ranavalona on the throne, while Rainimaharo became important once she was crowned. I hope this doesn’t come back to bite me in later volumes.) Alidy and Todisoa are not based on any particular historical person, but people like them certainly existed. As for Ani, the executioner—well, he’s also my own invention with a backstory that has nothing to do with nineteenth century Madagascar. Ani is a set of books in his own right.

For the characters based on historical figures, I tried to keep the broad brushstrokes as well as most of the details consistent with what we know from history. The major events in the book are also historical, although I’ve compressed or expanded time and occasionally changed characters as needed for the story. (The attack on Tamatave, for example, was a year-long affair that only really ended after a significant percentage of the French force succumbed to malaria.) In general, I have tried to stick as close to the actual history as I could, but did take narrative liberties when I needed to. Where I deviated from history, I had a good reason, and tried to keep within the bounds of what could have happened, even if it’s not what actually happened.
We are fortunate to have a wealth of sources about Madagascar in the nineteenth century. Most of the primary sources I used are from English missionaries working with the London Missionary Society, but we are in the unusually lucky position of having an actual Malagasy primary source (written in broken English) from Ranavalona’s reign. Much of the secondary scholarship on Ranavalona is in French because Madagascar was a French colony, but I found enough in English to inform my work, and struggled through some of the more important French sources with my very bad reading French. My sources fall generally into three categories: sources I used almost or completely word-for-word, primary sources I used for historical context and events, and secondary sources that further informed the work. I describe the major components of each below.

First and most important, I must acknowledge the material in the book that is taken word-for-word or only very lightly edited from my sources. First is the histories. Raombana is an historical figure who was indeed sent to England as a boy, studied with the London Missionary Society, and returned to the Merina court shortly before Radama died. He served as court secretary to Ranavalona, and kept a private history written in English so no one else could read it. His sympathies, understandably, were with the missionaries, and much of the text in his history is highly critical of Ranavalona and her court (see below). The missionaries themselves praised Radama unsparingly, but fortunately for us Raombana’s assessment is more balanced. Simon Ayache has stared on an edited version of Raombana’s writings, currently in two volumes titled Histoires, with English and French facing pages and an introduction, notes and annotations in French. The four history sections of the book written by the character Raombana are edited text from the actual Raombana’s historical Histoires.

Second is the epic poem of Iboniamasiboniamanoro, “He of the clear and captivating glance,” conveniently shortened to “Ibonia.” Lee Haring, an American folklorist, served as a visiting professor at the University of Antananarivo in the mid-1970’s. He discovered this work among a huge collection of
almost forgotten folk tale manuscripts collected in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He compiled, edited, and published it, then republished it in 2013 in both print and electronic forms under the title *How to Read a Folktale: The Ibonia Epic from Madagascar*. I first encountered the story when I was working my way through the Malagasy collection of folk tales *Anganon’ ny ntaolo* (Dahle and Sims 1992) as a language exercise while I was living in Madagascar—Haring’s translation made my job much easier and is close to the version I read in Malagasy. Haring suggests Western audiences read the poem, “as if [the sections] were the scripts of plays—as if [we] could hear them being performed by a living voice” (p. 3). This is how they are performed in Madagascar, and this is how I have presented them in the book. The two sections of the poem presented in my book are very lightly edited versions of Haring’s translations.

Other folk tales presented in the book are either my own translations from *Anganon’ ny ntaolo*, or, more often, from another collection of folktales by Lee Haring titled *Stars and Keys: Folktales and Creolization in the Indian Ocean*. This book is a collection of tales from Madagascar, Mauritius, Reunion, the Seychelles, and the Comoros Islands. I have included in my book some of the stories I heard while I was in Madagascar, then used either my own translations or Haring’s versions in the text.

The fourth and final element of my book that was taken word-for-word from my sources are the shorter poems and proverbs. The poems came from a book titled *Hainteny: The Traditional Poetry of Madagascar*, translated with an introduction by Leonard Fox. This is a very nice edition with Malagasy and English facing pages—for the most part I used Fox’s translations, but occasionally changed a word or two when I thought it would be appropriate given the context. The proverbs are from *Ohabolana or Malagasy Proverbs, Illustrating the Wit and Wisdom of the Hova of Madagascar* (Houlder 1915). This collection of proverbs was translated into French and English by two missionaries living in Antananarivo at the turn of the twentieth century, then edited by James Sibree, whom we will meet more
fully below. It was published in 1915 by the missionary press, and contains the original Malagasy proverbs with French and English translations and occasional, inconsistent, annotations. Educated Malagasy sprinkle proverbs throughout their speech, especially when giving a formal *kabary*, and this volume was invaluable as I tried to capture that particular aspect of their culture.

I used as many primary sources as I could get my hands on, but other than Raombana’s own history, by far the most useful book was Gwyn Campbell’s *David Griffiths and the Missionary <History of Madagascar>*. David Griffiths is another historical figure who appears as a character in my book. Griffiths’ 1843 *History of Madagascar* (originally *Hanes Madagascar* in Welsh) takes up not much more than a hundred pages of this thousand-page tome, and Campbell’s top-notch research comprises the rest with a lengthy and thorough introduction and an annotations and notes section that makes up the bulk of the book. Gwyn Campbell did a lot of my primary-source research for me, and I was able to follow his references to sources that significantly enriched this book. I cannot overstate how indebted I am to his masterful scholarship.

William Ellis’ two-volume *History of Madagascar*, published in 1838, was the standard reference through most of the nineteenth century. The first volume is an ethnography while the second volume is the history proper. As Campbell points out, Ellis’ *History of Madagascar* is problematic in many ways, not least of which is that it was written before Ellis ever set foot on the island (he arrived in 1853 and spent very little time there during Ranavalona’s reign). Politics internal to the London Missionary Society and a personal rivalry between the two men shaped both Ellis’ and Griffiths’ texts, but Ellis’ is by far the more comprehensive, and if in some respects it’s not entirely factual, it does contain a treasure-trove of period detail that I often mined for my book. My description of the iron works, for example, was taken almost entirely from Ellis’ first volume, supplemented by my own research into period ironworking.
James Sibree arrived in Antananarivo from the London Missionary Society in 1863, two years after Ranavalona died, when the island was in the midst of political upheaval. A member of the Royal Geographical Society, he published a wealth of material on the culture, flora, fauna, politics, and history of Madagascar. Although his works are slightly past the period in which I’m writing, they were still very helpful to my own research. Ida Pfeiffer, another extraordinary woman of the period, survived two trips around the world including an encounter with cannibals in Borneo, but it was Ranavalona who proved her undoing. She died in 1858 shortly after completing the manuscript for what would eventually be published as *The Last Travels of Ida Pfeiffer, Inclusive of a Trip to Madagascar*. Pfeiffer’s encounter with Ranavalona is the planned subject of the third book in my Ranavalona trilogy, but *Last Travels* also proved a useful source for this first text.

The major primary sources I used, therefore, were Raombana, Griffiths (à la Campbell), Ellis, Sibree, and Pfeiffer. All of these sources except Raombana were written from a Western perspective, and even Raombana’s history has a Western slant as a result of his training in England. They tend to present a one-dimensional picture of Ranavalona as a bloodthirsty tyrant—a picture that still endures (Keith Laidler’s 2005 biography is subtitled “Ranavalona: the Mad Queen of Madagascar”)—and this is the great drawback of relying too heavily on primary sources. Recently some modern scholars have successfully complicated that picture (e.g., Berg 1995, Kamhi 2002, Sharp 2002), especially Campbell, whose research into the wider Indian Ocean economy of the nineteenth century incorporates a huge range of contemporary sources, and thus sets Ranavalona’s reign within a much broader global context.

And so my book is also indebted to the secondary literature. The attached bibliography includes most of the major secondary sources I used, but does not include the more superficial research I did on things like how to fire a cannon (great YouTube videos), pests that infest rice crops, the history of malaria cures, different methods of crucifixion, France’s Three Glorious Days, the geography of Ikongo,
different portraits of Napoleon, etc. One of the joys of writing historical fiction is the collection of random facts you amass—I couldn’t reconstruct that if I tried. Suffice to say that the great majority of specific details included in the book are based on some source I found somewhere and deemed to be reliable, or based on my own observations while I was living in Madagascar. For readers interested in further study, the enclosed bibliography includes most of the major research relevant to the topic at hand.

Mazotoa mamaky!
SELECTED REFERENCES

Books whose text appears in Servants of the Rice


Major primary sources


Other sources

Books


*Journal Articles*


*Other media*


Bibliographies

