

## The Fortunate One

Olaudah Equiano wiggled, and tugged at his mother's blue robe. 'Is it time, yet?'

'Soon.' She curled an arm around his shoulder, pulling him close. Olaudah Equiano breathed in the scent of her perfume. The mixture of powdered wood and palm oil smelt rich and heavy, and some days he liked to sit beside her quietly and simply breathe it in – but not today.

'Now?' he asked, using her arm to pull himself up on the tips of his toes. The golden bangles on her wrist jangled, but before she could reply, Olaudah Equiano caught sight of his older brother. 'Here they come!' he cried, as a group of blue-clothed men came out of the plastered wattle house, his elder brother in front. Olaudah Equiano's father was with them, and Equiano released his grip on his mother's arm.

'Remember, do not interrupt,' his mother said, holding him back before he could run up to the men. 'This is a very special moment for your brother, and your father is a very special man.'

Olaudah Equiano fidgeted. I know that, he thought. His father was one of the ruling elders in his village. He was respected by all, and this meant he had a lot of power. It also meant that today Olaudah's older brother would receive a special mark on his forehead. Yet knowing wasn't the same as seeing, and so Olaudah pulled at his mother's hand. He'd never watched a marking before and wanted a good view.

Olaudah Equiano's mother allowed herself to be led forward a few steps, and then shook her arm free. 'Go on,' she said. 'One day you will fight for our people and have many children and many slaves. You do not need me, I will stay here.'

But Olaudah Equiano felt like he needed his mother very much! He watched as the bearded priests, who usually kept quite separate from the rest of the clan, joined the group of men and boys. Perhaps, Olaudah decided, the view from where his mother stood was good enough.

Then his father spotted him. 'Olaudah Equiano! Come here, and watch this great event.' As his older brother sat down on the carved wooden chair normally reserved for visitors, Olaudah Equiano edged forward until he had joined the outer ring of men. They made way for him. 'It is good,' said one of the priests quietly, 'for us to have a fortunate one here.'

A fortunate one. *They were talking about him.* Olaudah Equiano swallowed, but before he could think about the meaning of his name for long, the priest pulled out a knife and approached his brother.

Olaudah saw his brother's hands clench around the edge of the chair as the priest drew the knife across his brother's forehead. For a moment there was a long pale streak and then the priest pulled at the skin until it came down to his brother's eyebrows, and began rubbing a hand over the wound. Oludah watched carefully, but his brother's eyes were closed and his lips were pressed together. He did not make a sound. I hope I'm that brave when it's my turn, thought Oludah. Behind his brother, Oludah's father stood proudly, his own mark criss-crossing over his forehead. It had healed long ago into a distinguished web-like design.

Equiano touched his own smooth forehead and grinned. One day he would be just like his brother and father. But first, there were New Year celebrations to enjoy! As the priests and elders began to disperse, Equiano scampered over to his mother.

'Wait! Oludah Equiano!' Oludah turned back to see a bearded priest standing alone in front of the house. 'Come back.'

Olaudah trotted over to the old man, twisting his hands. Although the priests were healers, they could also perform magic to discover who had committed a crime. Oludah's mind whirred. He couldn't *remember* doing anything wrong ...

'Fortunate One.'

'Priest,' he said respectfully.

'You are called Fortunate One, but there is a way to increase your fortune.'

‘Yes, priest?’

‘I have heard that there are two snakes which come sometimes into your night-house and lay nearby as you and your mother sleep.’

‘Yes, priest,’ said Olaudah Equiano. The long grey snakes, as thick as his father’s leg, were harmless and he knew it would be very wrong to hurt them. Yet Olaudah still shivered at the sight of them coiled in the moonlight. Everyone knew the grey snakes were signs that something bad was about to happen ... and when they appeared, Olaudah was always reminded of the other meanings of his name. The meanings which were less talked about.

‘We must place them in a large pan and put them elsewhere,’ said the bearded priest, ‘but first I want you to touch them, Olaudah. When a fortunate one, like yourself, holds these snakes, bad things will not happen to you. Rather, you will become more fortunate than ever.’

‘Yes, priest.’ said Olaudah, breathing out. ‘Shall we do it now?’

‘Yes,’ nodded the old man. ‘New Year’s Day is the right time to collect good omens.’

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‘Rattle – rattle – rattle!’

As the sun set on the first day of the year, the sound of rattles filled every part of the West African village of Essaka. Olaudah shook his own rattle hard, welcoming in the new year as a gift from the great god. He shouted

and held out his hands to heaven for a blessing. All around him men, women and children, priests and elders, stretched out their hands in the mauve twilight, shouting and rattling their musical instruments.

One year was over, a new one had begun.

This would be a good year, Oludah was certain of it. Although he had shivered earlier as he had held the grey snakes, he was grateful for their good fortune, and had felt very special as he placed them in the priest's pan. Now as he watched, the elders and heads of family were beginning to bring their animals over to the priests. Burnt offerings and sacrifices were made often, at many special occasions, but particularly at the beginning of the year. His stomach rumbled and Oludah looked forward to eating the smoky meat with the rest of his family afterward, some offerings with bitter herbs, others with yams or corn. Was that his sister, at the shadowy edge of the crowd? He began to push his way towards her, but just then, a loud voice called out: 'Fetch the fortunate ones!'

It was time for the Presenting.

'Olaudah? There you are.' Hands on his shoulders, Oludah's mother guided him to an elder. The old man placed his hands on Oludah's head. 'Olaudah Equiano. Fortunate one with a loud-voice, well-spoken, who will experience favour and vicissitude,' he said, reciting the prophecy which the priests had made at Equiano's birth. Oludah's people, the Igbo, believed that every child had an inescapable destiny

which was often reflected in the names they were given at birth.

As Olaudah and the other 'lucky' children were presented and handed around the crowd, he couldn't help but wonder about the last part of his name. Everyone who touched him hoped to gain some of his good fortune, and Olaudah was sure that good fortune would follow him just as the priests had prophesied. Yet what about 'vicissitude'? Vicissitude meant unwelcome changes might also come ...

When the time for the feast arrived, Olaudah was set down on his feet. The partying crowd had begun to retreat to their individual houses, stomachs rumbling, mouths thirsty for palm wine. Olaudah looked around for his mother. *Was that her on the road?* He made his way towards the track, yawning as his feet made contact with the beaten dirt. Where was she?

Then, all of a sudden, part of the road moved! Olaudah froze, throat tightening. *Is it an evil spirit?* He looked down, and saw it wasn't the road which was moving, it was a dust-coloured snake! Olaudah held his breath, squinting in the near darkness. He hoped it was one of the harmless, grey ones he'd helped remove earlier, but with a squirm in his chest, he noticed it was much thinner and darker. It was a different snake, a poisonous one.

Held tight by fear, Olaudah could do nothing but watch as the snake wove its way between his ankles, bringing death closer and closer with every arc-like

movement. His heart knocked against his chest. *Will it bite me now? Or now? Or now?*

To Olaudah's surprise, the snake's shifting body passed through his legs without stopping, writhing across the road and into the night. The moment it disappeared, he fell to the ground, knees giving way. *I'm safe, I'm safe —*

'Olaudah Equiano!' The priest stood by the side of the track, staring at him with wide eyes. 'It didn't bite you!' The man hurried over and helped him up, wiping the dust from his body and shaking his head in disbelief. 'You truly are fortunate! This is a remarkable omen!'

Olaudah, his fear retreating, gave a wobbly smile. Deep in his heart he felt a gush of peace. Surely this meant that the second part of his destiny was wrong. Only fortune would come to him. There would be no unwelcome changes, no unhappiness.

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As the battle raged below, Olaudah Equiano leaned back against the cool trunk of the ube tree and closed his eyes. At first it had all been very exciting. For days his village had been preparing for an attack, placing sharpened sticks dipped in poison at their doors each morning as they went out to work. Olaudah had followed the adults, trailing out to the vegetable fields with a thrilling sense of expectation, dreaming of the moment when the men and women would exchange their hoes for weapons.

Yet when the neighbouring chief arrived with an army, his mother had turned to him, sword in hand. 'Run! Hide!'

It was difficult to see who was who through the branches of the tree Olaudah Equiano had chosen, and Olaudah was bored. The shouts and clanging from the battlefield melded into background noise, which was in turn drowned out by the leaves rustling in the wind.

One day I'm going to fight in a battle like that, he thought, eyes still shut. I'm going to defend our village, just like my mother. One day I'm going to have an estate all of my own.

I'll have a sleeping house like father, for me and my male children. And another one for my wives, and another for my guests, and many for my slaves, and still more for the slaves of my slaves, he planned. All the buildings will be plastered with the cow-dung mixture used to keep away insects, and we will sleep soundly. Each day we'll all go out to work in the fields, and when we're not working I'll sit with my friends in my day-house and smoke pipes and eat stewed meat and plantains. My houses will be surrounded with a red-earth wall and a moat and we will be safe from kidnappers and dangerous animals.

Olaudah smiled. *It will be a fortunate life.*

'Olaudah! Olaudah!'

At the sound of his mother's voice, Olaudah almost fell out of the tree. *Did I fall asleep?* He rubbed his eyes

and scrambled to the ground, landing at his mother's feet. 'Mother? We won?'

'We won.' Oludah's mother smiled and wiped the sweat off her forehead. 'It is time to purify ourselves now, come along.'

As they completed the ceremonial washing which was required after battle, before eating, and at other special times, Oludah craned his neck to try and spot the new faces. 'Did we capture many people, mother?'

'Many.'

'Do you think they'll all be redeemed? Will Father keep the ones who aren't?'

'Maybe,' his mother replied, splashing water up to her forearms. 'Although if we're to have any more slaves, we'll need to build more houses!'

Olaudah laughed, and having already washed, moved away. I will get my javelin, he thought, and the war-medals Mother made me, and then go find the other children. We can play battles all afternoon.

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'Mother? Are you going out to see grandmother?'

'Yes,' said Oludah's mother, cradling a bowl against her body. Behind her, Oludah's father and his six siblings sat eating the evening meal. A short distance away their slaves sat in family groups, eating the same food. 'Wait here.'

'Please, I want to come with you!'

She sighed. 'Alright then. But you must not interrupt.'

‘I won’t!’ Olaudah followed her out of the walled property and down the road. The sun was setting, streaking gold across the tops of the trees. There was a rustling and squawking as a flock of birds erupted into the now inky sky. Olaudah and his mother walked down a little rutted path, keeping an eye out for snakes and other creatures, until they reached a small thatched hut.

*Grandmother’s tomb.* Olaudah swallowed. ‘Mother?’  
‘Yes?’

‘How do I know what the priests say about me will come true?’ Olaudah asked.

Olaudah’s mother moved past him and knelt down in front of the tomb. She placed the bowl of animal’s blood, which she’d brought as an offering, in front of her.

‘The priests speak the words of god, Olaudah. The creator of all, who lives in the sun, and neither eats nor drinks. He has planned out your days, my son, and knows when you will live or die. You are favoured and fortunate.’

And when the sun disappeared and the air around him became thick with insects and the sounds of his mother’s wailing and the cries of night-time animals, Olaudah held onto those words. All through the night, while his mother grieved and cried out to the dead, Olaudah wrapped his trembling arms around his knees and repeated to himself: *You are favoured and fortunate. You are favoured and fortunate.*

He hoped it was enough to keep him safe.