Broak at the Oracle of Providence

In the hills of Ambergine, which were rocky and covered in scraggly olive trees, the Oracle of Providence lived in a round house of marble. Numerous attendants cared for the oracle and its temple. Wagons carried supplies up harrowing mountain paths. The attendants of this oracle dressed in fine robes of white linen. They wore bracelets, necklaces, and amulets of gold. In the spring and summer, they wore crowns of honeysuckle.

One fine spring day, Broak climbed the narrow path and ascended the hill. The air felt clear and cool upon his skin. He wore brown hempen robes. A stormcloud drifted in the distance, sprinkling light rain and shadow upon hills and valleys. Broak had begin his ascent early, so he neared the crest of the hill before the sun reached its apex. He passed some other travellers descending, and they greeted him kindly. Two attendants sat on the porch of the temple, in the shade, drinking wine.

Outside the oracle’s temple, travellers sat on wooden benches and cooked food on their campfires. Broak sat with them. He drank some water from his canteen, then ate a carrot and a piece of jerky. One traveller gave him a piece of roasted olive-bread. Each traveller had their own story. Nearly all of them had come to the oracle to learn the solution to some problem that plagued them. Some few had come merely to accompany their friends.

When Broak had rested, he rose. He still felt tired, thirsty, hungry, and flushed from the sun, but his supplies were low and he had no money. If he ate and drank to full, he would not have enough to go back down the hill. When he reached Peldrod Village, in the valley, he knew that he would have to work for a few days chopping wood or fishing. He walked to the door of the temple and greeted the attendants, who stood and bowed in greeting. Broak stepped into the shadow, and cool relief swept over him.

One attendant came forward. He had a smooth face and long, brown hair. He wore a crown of honeysuckle. Broak smiled to look upon his raiment, and he bowed also in greeting. A second attendant, a beautiful blonde woman, filled a silver cup with wine and handed it to Broak. He sipped it, smiling again at the taste. “Come inside,” said the brown-haired attendant. He opened a wooden door.

Inside the temple, Broak saw the oracle immediately. It wore a porcelain mask and sat on a wooden throne, wearing the same white linen robes and golden jewelry as its attendants. The attendants ushered Broak further inside. As he approached the oracle, he fixated on its mask. This mask depicted a serene expression, with slim lips and large, black eyes. These eyes seemed opaque and matte, like fissures. Broak presumed they were made from tinted glass or dyed cloth, but he could not tell for sure.

The oracle held a silver cup in its hand, and raised it in greeting. Broak raised his own cup. The oracle said, “Welcome,” then seemed to take a sip. Broak sipped his wine also. Since the shade had cooled his head, he drank a little more eagerly. The brown-haired attendant topped off his cup. Broak drank again, smiling grandly. The oracle said, “Come, sit.” It motioned to an empty bench. Eight benches faced the oracle. A few attendants sat on them. Two of these attendants, sitting in the back of the room, quietly chatted and flirted with each other, laughing occasionally. Their conversation resembled the tinkling of a clear brook. Broak sat upon the empty bench which the oracle had indicated, and sipped his wine again.

“So,” said the oracle. “Why have you come here?” Its voice was distant and sonorous, as if it echoed through a long tunnel. Yet it also sounded strangely mundane, clearly the voice of a human behind a mask.

Broak wanted to say something like, “Shouldn’t you know?” but instead he hesitated, then began to tell his story. “I was a monk of the Gray Haven. A few weeks ago, our monastery was destroyed by golems. I don’t know if anyone else survived. I lived because I left the order. They declared me a heretic because I was not willing to die with them. Now, I don’t know what to do with myself. I am nearly an old man. I was a diplomat, once. I know a little magic. I studied all sorts of history and philosophy, as a young man. But now I don’t know what to do with myself. What is my destiny?”

The oracle remained still and silent as it watched him. It considered its answer, then spoke slowly. “Consider a shard of glass upon a windowsill. Can it be said to be empty or full? No. It is not a vessel. It is transparent, translucent. It cannot hold anything. It only allows light to pass through its body. Your life is like this. You are empty.”

“What about the golems?” asked Broak. “Aren’t they dangerous? Won’t they consume the world, if they’re left alone?”

“If the world is left alone,” replied the oracle, “It will consume itself.” Its voice had the tone of a smile.

“Yet still I feel,” insisted Broak, “That I am powerful! I feel that I have some destiny, some purpose! At least, there must be something useful I can do! Isn’t there some way I can help people?”

“No place is empty which has feeling inside it. No heart is vacant if it has love. Yet we should not shy away from emptiness. Those who grasp something cannot hold it. Those who give away everything cannot help but receive everything in return. The vacancy of the universe is the same as its fullness. Do you not understand this?”

“I understand it,” said Broak. “I was a monk for a few years. I meditated upon these things.”

“You do not understand it,” declared the oracle harshly. “It cannot be understood. Nothing can every be understood. You, monk, are an idiot.”

“Yes,” admitted Broak. “I know this.”

“No, you do not,” replied the oracle. “I will tell you many more things, which you need to know. You must listen. Then you will forget what I said. Thus, I will have done my work. Now, let me begin:

“Firstly, there are seven kinds of substance: subterfuge, subtlety, forgetting, abandon, absence, knowledge, and truth. Abandon is the central kind of substance. It is the root of all things. Everything emerges from it. There is nothing like ‘matter’ or ‘energy.’ These things do not exist. Only abandon.

“After forgetting everything, you will be able to remember everything. You will know everything that has ever been learned. There are seven kinds of substance and three kinds of memory. The three kinds of memory are: forgetting, knowledge, and abstraction. If you understand these things, as they are related to the seven kinds of substance, you will know all that you need to know. Forget this statement.

“You asked a question about knowledge and industry. You intended to strive for something. This is a common fault, among men. You must strive; you will strive. It is inevitable. So why do you care about your striving? You know already that your striving is born from the desire, the urge, the need to strive. So why do you care about the form of your striving? You will strive nevertheless. It is your inborn desire. You can fight it or embrace it or do something else entirely. It is irrelevant. You will still have the desire, the yearning.

“There is one last thing I must tell you: this porcelain mask is not a mask. It is my face. Those brown robes you wear, they are your skin. The grass is the flesh of the earth, the trees are its hairs. Do you understand?”

“No,” admitted Broak.

“Then you are learning. Go in peace.”

The two attendants, sitting at the back of the room, continued whispering and giggling, like trickling water.

Broak stepped out of the shadowed porch, into the light of midday. “Well,” he grumbled under his breath, “That was not helpful.”