

Al-Hmar (The Donkey); A Phoenician Tale

By

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EXT. MOUNTAINS - DAY

A sunny day on the side of a mountainous path. The sound of WIND can be faintly heard along with the squeaking of old WHEELS.

The wheels belong to a rickety roofed-cart which is being dragged along a rickety road by HANNO, 8, a grey, content-looking donkey.

Just behind Hanno sits a drowsy old man, ABDESHMUN, 50, sitting on a cushioned seat with his mouth open and head tilted back. In his right hand, he holds on to the donkey halter and some prayer beads.

His face is wrinkled with age but adorned by a thick moustache and a hefty beard. He wears a tall red hat and a well-worn, illustrious cloak.

Behind him, in the cart, is a small cache of wooden blocks, linens and a hatchet.

Suddenly Hanno trips on some loose rocks on the road, which brings the cart to a halt. The sudden jolt jerks Abdeshmun's head forward, waking and agitating him.

ABDESHMUN

Gods damn you Hanno! Why?! Every  
time with you.

He whips the donkey intensely, forcing Hanno to get back up and move. Abdeshmun mumbles insults while rubbing his neck as the cart moves along.

Behind the cart, in the fields by the road, two figures sit upright upon hearing the yelling.

EXTREME SLOW ZOOM IN TO TWO YOUTHS FOLLOWING ABDESHMUN'S CART WITH THEIR EYES. They are both in their early 20's, KHANMI and DANIEL, and both have a dusty hoodlum demeanor with greasy, tanned hair. Khanmi turns and spits on the ground.

Abdeshmun stretches his back and looks up at the blazing sun. He wipes the sweat off of his forehead.

Catching himself slipping back into sleep, he tugs at the halter and pulls Hanno to the side of the road and stops. He gets off the cart and takes a small sack with him.

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He squats by Hanno's fly-ridden head, and opens up the sack to reveal a small bread-bowl of eggs and potatoes. Using the bread, he grabs the food and munches away. Hanno tries to eat some of the food, but Abdeshmun successfully pushes his head away.

Hanno tries again, so Abdeshmun, annoyed, throws a few bits of his food for him. Flies begin landing on Abdeshmun's food, so he swats at them unsuccessfully.

One of the flies begins BUZZING around his ear. He tries swatting at the fly but the annoying BUZZING continues.

He follows the fly with his eyes until the fly then lands on his face. Abdeshmun slowly raises his right hand. Then, with immense speed, smacks at the dirty fly! As a result he smacks his own ear and immediately flushes red.

Trying to soothe the pain he gently rubs his ear. He looks at Hanno's head and notices all the flies around it. He takes his water container and pours some on Hanno's fly-ridden head and rubs it.

Abdeshmun watches the water pour off the donkey's head and his legs begin to writhe.

ABDESHMUN

Dammit Hanno! Now you made me need  
to piss.

He closes the container, throws it in the cart and walks off the road. He continues cursing the donkey but descends into a quite, angry mumble.

ABDESHMUN

It's always something else with  
you, you worthless ass. Of all of  
God's creatures, you must be the  
stupidest.

He relieves himself into some bushes.

ABDESHMUN

We need to be in Byblos before it  
gets too late.

He ties up his pants and turns around to walk towards his cart.

ABDESHMUN

But you keep slowing me down.  
You'll see, you lazy, idiotic, good  
for nothing ...

(CONTINUED)

He takes a few steps and is astonished to notice that his Hanno is no longer there! Instead a naked Khanmi stands with the halter strapped to his neck. Abdesmun is petrified.

Then, in a panic, Abdesmun begins to yell angrily at the man.

ABDESHMUN

AH! What are you? Where is my donkey?!

Khanmi looks towards Abdesmun, then back at himself. He examines his body almost as though in disbelief.

KHANMI

Good sir ... I am your donkey...

Abdesmun's expression turns from one of fury to one of confusion.

KHANMI

I *am* Hanno.

Abdesmun is dumbfounded.

Off in the distance, we can only just see another man running, leading a grey donkey behind him.

KHANMI

(Continued)

... but my story is marvelously strange.

ABDESHMUN

Yes?!

KHANMI

It all happened one day when I returned home very drunk, as was my custom. My pious mother pleaded with me against my evil ways. But I took up my staff and beat her.

Abdesmun gasps.

ABDESHMUN

How dare you!

KHANMI

Whereupon she invoked God's vengeance and I was instantly transformed into the donkey which has faithfully served you all these

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

KHANMI (cont'd)  
years. Today the old woman must  
have taken pity on me and prayed to  
God to change me back into human  
shape.

As Khanmi speaks Abdeshmun is frozen as he attempts to  
comprehend what is told to him.

When Khanmi finishes his speech he stands still, slightly  
nervous, staring Abdeshmun straight in the eyes.

Abdeshmun, for his part, stares back in disbelief.

KHANMI  
And I...

ABDESHMUN  
(Skeptical)  
I can't believe it.

Khanmi stares at Abdeshmun, unsure. Suddenly, Abdeshmun's  
tone changes to an apologetic one.

ABDESHMUN  
My Gods... All the pain I've caused  
you.

Khanmi chuckles and places his right hand to his heart.

KHANMI  
Bare no shame my friend. You were  
unaware of what toil you have  
committed unto me.

Abdeshmun looks away, his eyes widening.

ABDESHMUN  
By Baal's grace, I beg of you!  
Pardon the treatment you have  
received at my hands and all the  
pain you have endured in my  
service.

He buries his head into Khanmi's shoulder.

ABDESHMUN  
I had no idea that ...

KHANMI  
I ask of you only one thing.

Abdeshmun steps back. His eyes dart back at Khanmi.

ABDESHMUN

Anything. Anything so that I may  
undo my foul deeds.

KHANMI

I ask only for some clothing. I do  
not want my mother to see me in  
such shame.

Abdeshmun, without a second's thought, takes a light tunic  
out from behind the cart and hands it to Khanmi.

ABDESHMUN

Here! This is my good wife's  
making.

Khanmi looks dissatisfied upon seeing the measly tunic.  
Abdeshmun notices Khanmi's face and looks back at the tunic.

ABDESHMUN

(Panicked)

How shameless of me!

Abdeshmun throws the tunic back in the cart. After a short  
moment's thought he looks down at his decorated cloak and  
quickly takes it off and hands it to Khanmi.

KHANMI

Thank you. I'll see you in good  
grace.

Khanmi takes the halter off his neck and puts the cloak on.  
He begins to walk away until Abdeshmun yells after him.

ABDESHMUN

Wait a minute!

Pause.

Khanmi turns slowly, nervous that he may have been caught.

ABDESHMUN

Please, answer me this ... am I  
exonerated?

KHANMI

What?

ABDESHMUN

Do you forgive me under the eyes of  
the masters?

Khanmi pauses for a moment.

(CONTINUED)

KHANMI

Should the Crow ask the Worm for  
his forgiveness?

He then turns around and walks off. Abdesmun watches him  
leave.

ABDESHMUN

What does that mean?

Abdesmun stands dumbstruck, watching Khanmi scurrying away.

EXT. ABDESHMUN'S HOUSE - DAY

An exhausted Abdesmun approaches a small, modest house  
still dragging the cart. The CREAKING of cart wheels stops  
as he takes a rope attached to the cart and ties it to a  
post outside.

Through the window, we see a young boy, HASDRUBAL, 8,  
sitting on a carpeted floor next to a woman, IBRIZA, 35, in  
front of a large traditional loom (carpet-maker). She's a  
rough handed, rotund woman loosely wearing a veil.

She stands up upon hearing the cart and looks to the door.  
Abdesmun slowly walks towards the door from the outside,  
opens it and stands under the threshold and stares at his  
wife.

INT. ABDESHMUN'S HOUSE - DAY

Abdesmun sits on the table with Ibriza standing above him.  
His head hangs low with his hat in his hands.

IBRIZA

There is no strength save in the  
Gods. I have an idiot for a  
husband!

Pause. Ibriza stares at Abdesmun intensely, who in turn  
looks terrified.

IBRIZA

The wrath of Baal will surely be  
upon us now! We've used a human  
being as an animal!

ABDESHMUN

(Pleading)  
I didn't know!

He begins to snivel.

(CONTINUED)

IBRIZA  
Tell me. How did he transform?

ABDESHMUN  
Huh?

IBRIZA  
How did it happen?

Abdeshmun shrugs.

IBRIZA  
How'd it happen?!

ABDESHMUN  
I don't know, it happened!

Ibriza looks at him with arms folded.

IBRIZA  
And there was no one around?

ABDESHMUN  
No one!

IBRIZA  
No one!? Was there a sound? A  
light? Anything!?

ABDESHMUN  
I DONT KNOW!

He breaks down crying. Ibriza smacks him on the back of the head.

IBRIZA  
Stop it! Tears won't save you now.

Abdeshmun clears his tears, breathes in through his blocked nose. He sits still for a moment and breathes heavily. Ibriza puts her hands on her hips, and sighs while shaking her head.

IBRIZA  
Go to town. Speak to Sheikh  
Philosir, he'll know what to do  
with you.

He bangs his fist on the table, trying to keep his emotions intact, which in turn makes a ceramic bowl on the table shake and jiggle for a moment, breaking the somber silence.

EXT. ABDESHMUN'S HOUSE - DAY

Abdeshmun stands under the doorway as Ibriza places a simple, plain white robe on his back. He turns around and looks at his wife and child. He swallows his emotions, turns towards the road and begins to walk. Ibriza mutters to herself.

AS HE WALKS AWAY, WE SLOWLY ZOOM IN UNTIL WE CAN JUST MAKE OUT THE TWO THIEVES FAR ACROSS THE ROAD WITH HANNO. The donkey keeps laying down and the men try to pull it back up.

The two young men continue to try to pull the donkey to no avail. Danel lifts his arms, yelling at Khanmi who is unable to handle the stubborn donkey.

INT. HOLY SHRINE - DAY

Abdeshmun stands in a small room with Phoenician carvings on the walls. His face is pointing towards the ground. In front of him sits an older man, Philosir, 60.

He has a moustache thicker and greyer than Abdeshmun's, with a presence that commands respect.

PHILOSIR

My Gods...

Pause. He clears his throat.

PHILOSIR

I mean, how long did this go on for?

ABDESHMUN

(Ashamed)

About 7 years.

Philosir gasps. He mutters prayers underneath his breath, shaking his head and, standing up, begins slowly pacing the room.

PHILOSIR

This is a great sin. A great, great sin indeed.

He looks away in shame while Philosir thinks loudly.

As Philosir thinks, Abdeshmun notices a carving on the wall of Baal, who's the lone Demi-God standing in a pit of despair brandishing a whip. Abdeshmun's eyes widen. He looks closer and sees one of the tortured, human faces under Baal's heel. Abdeshmun looks horrified.

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Abdeshmun speaks desperately.

ABDESHMUN

Is there anyway ... will I ... Can  
Baal see past this transgression?

Philosir shakes his head.

ABDESHMUN

But how was I to know? He acted  
just like a donkey all this time!

PHILOSIR

Surely He must have given you  
signs.

ABDESHMUN

I received nothing from Him.  
Honestly!

PHILOSIR

This was obviously a test, and you  
obviously failed. This sinners  
punishment was not yours to enact,  
Abdeshmun.

ABDESHMUN

Please, Philosir, help me. What am  
I to do?

Philosir turns and thinks for a moment.

PHILOSIR

You must seek redemption.

ABDESHMUN

But how?

Philosir shakes his head.

PHILOSIR

You say you treated this man as you  
would a donkey for 7 whole years?

ABDESHMUN

Yes.

PHILOSIR

You say he was made to drag a cart  
to Byblos and back every single day  
whilst you sat in comfort behind  
him.

ABDESHMUN  
(Ashamed)

Yes.

Pause. He's on the verge of tears.

PHILOSIR  
And you say you whipped him and  
beat him as you would a slave?

Abdeshmun's breaks down. He falls on his knees.

ABDESHMUN  
Yes! Yes!

Philosir turns back around.

PHILOSIR  
I know what you must do now.

Abdeshmun looks up at him with hopeful eyes.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Philosir and Ibriza stand on the outskirts of the village in the daylight sun. Philosir stands with the support of a cane.

IBRIZA  
Philosir, are you sure about this?

PHILOSIR  
You have nothing to worry about.  
He's in Baal's hands now.

Abdeshmun stands with the cart behind him. He takes the halter and places it over his shoulders.

PHILOSIR  
Are you ready Abdeshmun?

Abdeshmun nods. By exerting extreme effort, he manages to drag the cart behind him. In his right hand he holds a whip.

He slowly pulls the cart away from the house whilst whipping himself on the back.

Philosir follows him and yells religious lines and prayers for Abdeshmun out loud. Ibriza looks up.

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IBRIZA  
(To herself)  
Please, forgive him.

Abdeshmun drags the cart.

Townspople on the outskirts of town notice this, turning their heads towards Abeshmun.

Slowly they are drawn towards him.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

The sun is now not as bright. Abdeshmun is sweating whilst toiling to drag the cart. Philosir continues to chant incomprehensible, religious lines out loud. A crowd of curious onlookers has formed in the process, following him.

ABDESHMUN  
Dear Baal, please accept my  
penance.

He whips himself, his face cringes.

ABDESHMUN  
I now see the fault of my ways.

Another whip.

ABDESHMUN  
I'll never ignore your messages  
again.

EXT. DOWN THE ROAD - DAY

Far ahead of Abdeshmun we see Khanmi and Danel trying to pull a reluctant Hanno off the ground. Khanmi pushes while Danel pulls, to no avail. Hanno will not budge.

They pause to catch their breath when they begin to hear something. They look up the road and see a large group of people walking towards them and a strange sound accompanying them.

The two trickster watch this with confusion until it starts to become clearer. When they see what it is, they panic. They try to pull Hanno up one last time but give up. The two youths leave Hanno behind and run off.

EXT. ROAD - DAY (CONTINUED)

Abdeshmun continues to drag the cart while whipping himself. When he looks up, he notices something down the road. He can't make quite clearly make it out, so he just continues to drag the cart.

He wipes the sweat off his eyes and, as he nears the fuzzy figure, finds it to be a donkey sitting on the side of the road. It's Hanno!

As Abdeshmun notices Hanno, he throws the halter off and stumbles towards him.

PHILOSIR

Abdeshmun, what is it?

Hanno stands up, happy to see his owner. Abdeshmun looks at the donkey curiously. The crowd behind him begins to murmur.

ABDESHMUN

Hanno...? Is that you?

Hanno brays. Abdeshmun's face turns red with rage and impulsively smacks the donkey in the face.

ABDESHMUN

You incorrigible wretch! You've been beating your mother again haven't you?

The crowd falls silent. Hanno does to.

ABDESHMUN

May Baal smite you for your wicked ways.

Abdeshmun, still furious, lifts his hand to smack Hanno once more. This time, Philosir grabs his arm.

PHILOSIR

Abdeshmun what's gotten ahold of you? This is but a donkey.

ABDESHMUN

It's not just a donkey. I tell you it's the boy. The mother-beater!

Philosir turns and grimaces at the donkey. The crowd murmurs. Abdeshmun notices this and so turns and speaks confidently and angrily to the crowd.

(CONTINUED)

ABDESHMUN

In all the God's names it's true!  
Just the other day I was heading to  
Byblos when I turn around for a  
mere second, and just as I do, this  
donkey, my donkey who I've had for  
7 long years, turns into a man  
before my very eyes.

The crowd silently looks at the donkey who lets out a soft  
bray, then back at Abdeshmun.

ABDESHMUN

He tells me that God had cursed  
him, rightfully so, for being a  
mother-beating, womanizing drunk.  
It seems this sinister swine is up  
to it again! Look at his face, that  
is the face of true evil.

The crowd looks at Hanno.

ABDESHMUN

He represents a plague in our  
society that must be cleansed!

A momentary, uncertain silence captures the crowd. One crowd  
member speaks with a moderate, calm voice.

CROWD MAN #1

Are you sure you saw..

PHILOSIR

(Interrupting)

It's true. This kind of  
transformation is not unheard of.

Pause.

CROWD MAN #2

By the Gods! Punish the sinner!

CROWD MAN #3

He must be stopped!

Hanno faces a growing mob of angry people.

CROWD MAN #1

Now now, surely you all cannot  
believe...

But his voice is drowned out by the sound of the mob.

(CONTINUED)

CROWD MAN #2  
The man's sick!

CROWD MAN #3  
Lynch him!!

The contingent quickly explodes into a rabble, surrounding and isolating the terrified donkey. They yell insults and some throw mud and kick rubble at it.

Philosir stands with his hands on his cane switching his focus between Hanno and the crowd, whilst Ibriza stands behind everyone with a worried look. Hanno's scared shitless.

Abdeshmun stands in the center of the crowd, beads of sweat rolling past his wide-open eyes, unsure of what to do as he realizes how chaotic the crowd has become.

A man in the crowd looks at the back of the cart and notices the hatchet. In the midst of the chaos he grabs it and pushes his way to the center.

When he gets there he shoves the hatchet into Abdeshmun's hands, who holds it and stares intently at Hanno. The crowd's cheers are louder than ever.

CROWD MAN #3  
Do it, Abdeshmun!

Abdeshmun looks around and all he sees are angry eyes, affirming what he must do.

Abdeshmun grabs the rusty garden tool with both hands and, lifting it far above his head, brings it down crashing, with might and self-righteousness. The crowd is cheering with euphoria.

But the blade doesn't penetrate the whole neck. The blade gets stuck. Hanno brays in agony and pain which sends shivers into the crowd, slowing the cheer down to a quiet horror.

Abdeshmun uses immense strength to pull the tool out. When it gets unstuck, it is followed by a torrent of blood covering Abdeshmun's new white tunic. Abdeshmun raises the blade again and hacks at the poor donkey's neck.

Hanno still isn't dead, his cries are painful and cause some children to weep into their parents' sides. Abdeshmun pulls the blade out once more, lifts it again and finally beheads Hanno.

Abdeshmun pants in exhaustion. The crowd remains awkwardly silent, except for the cries of some children. Most of them look on in horror and disgust at the decapitated donkey and his blood-covered killer.

Philosir smacks his cane onto the ground.

PHILOSIR

The sin has been cleansed.

Abdeshmun stands in the center of the crowd, covered in blood and lifting the bloodied blade. His face is one of accomplishment.

As he notices the crowd petering off, he slowly loosens the smile. As people begin to walk away, they begin to expose the road leading down the mountain. Abdeshmun notices two figures off in the distance.

His face slowly changes to one of confusion, then from confusion to horror.

EXTREME ZOOM IN DOWN THE ROAD TO SEE KHANMI, THE YOUNG MAN FROM EARLIER, WHO IS RUNNING DOWN THE ROAD WITH HIS BROTHER, WHO HAS TURNED BACK TOWARDS ABDESHMUN AND THE CROWD.

Abdeshmun looks at Khanmi still dressed in his wife's robe, then at the dead donkey, then at Khanmi, then at the bloody blade, then back at Khanmi. Abdeshmun is mortified.

He looks down at the mutilated corpse of his Hanno.

He stands still as Philosir mutters a religious line.

Abdeshmun continues to stare intensely at Hanno's corpse blankly. Gazing.

Ibriza and Hasdrubal come up to Abdeshmun's side, and stand by him.

IBRIZA

Lets go home.

After a long-held moment, Ibriza tugs on Abdeshmun's arm. He's compliant as she leads him back. His head locked ahead as though in a trance.

Everyone walks towards the village in the distance with the sun setting, as Hanno's corpse lays in the middle of road.