



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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OF LETTERS THEY ARE MADE

by Jonathan Edelstein

This is the story they tell at midsummer in the city of Marakanda.

They tell it in the Black Plaza in front of the astana where all the people are gathered. The Seventeen stand on the right balcony of the astana and the Nine on the left, and between them, on the steps that descend from the Iron Door, stand the magicians. Citizen, foreigner or slave, every magician in the city is there—the Gatherers and the Sowers and those like me who are both. And they tell.

As the light fades and the stars rise, the chant rises with them, and soon the sky takes on the shape of a plain with Skandar's chariot leading his army across it. There is battle in the heavens, and from that battle rises the city: its walls and tiled houses, its markets, the lakes of the New Garden, the mansions on the hill above the astana and the goldsmiths' shops below. With so many magicians adding to the telling, the people in the Black Plaza do not merely see the city but smell the cinnamon and incense in the markets and feel the silk in the banners and tailors' shops, and if any Sower or Gatherer

falters, there are hundreds more to carry on the story word-perfect.

With the city as backdrop, the sky is now aflame with war, now alive with festivals, now enacting the revolt from which the Seventeen and Nine arose. Trains of camels enter the markets, trading ships moor at the river-gates on the golden Karadarya, and the great poet of Tianxia recites in front of the Iron Door. Until morning, there is a city above the city, and it outshines the stars.

* * *

Wei *taitai* is walking through the market. She is wearing three layers of silk in different shades of green, the patterns on the outermost layer as intricate as those on her jade comb; the way I might dress if I were from Tianxia and owned the world. She buys incense and she buys flowers; she walks through the alley of the tea merchants; she comes, as always, to me.

“I am in need of a story,” she says, bowing.

I return her bow. “For a wedding? A rite to your ancestors? To Wei *xiansheng*’s?” I have seen her buy the incense and flowers.

“No. A scholar has come from the Court of Nine Felicities as ambassador to the khagan of the Yedigurs, and he is staying with Wei *xiansheng*. We are giving an entertainment tonight to celebrate his arrival.”

I incline my head again, and the movement of my hand takes in the books hanging from my stall's framework. There are stories on colored rice-paper written in the delicate characters of Tianxia; others on parchment bear the flowing script of al-Shams or the elegant alphabet of Bharat or the angular Attiki letters. Wei *taitai* looks at all of them, and I can see that she is tempted by a poem of ibn-Hikmat; her taste goes far beyond her own country, and left to herself she might have chosen it. But the entertainment is Wei *xiansheng's*, not her own, and though her finger finishes its caress of the scroll, she doesn't take it in hand.

"It must be a story of Tianxia," she says, "and not one of these—Wei *xiansheng* has heard them all. Do you know another?"

I do. I Gather the words in my mind and begin speaking, word for word and sound for sound as the story was first told, and the scene appears before me: the Monkey King bounding through the jade mountains of Shan to the monastery where the emperor's daughter has been imprisoned...

"No," Wei *taitai* says again, though I can see she is enjoying the story. "The ambassador is a *scholar*. The story must be suitable."

"Then this one," I say, and I Gather a story I once saw in the Commentaries on the Yellow Book, that of the filial son

who seeks the wisdom to cure his father's illness. That journey, too, leads to a monastery, but what takes place there is not battle but discourse on philosophy.

The story, dry as the subject may be, is set among temples and gardens, and the telling brings the scent of mountain air and spices. The scene before Wei *taitai* is rich and beautiful, and she approves.

“That one,” she says, and we begin the bargain. We settle on forty dinars, and she gives it to me in Farsi gold and hollow-centered Tianxian silver and the paper notes of the Turani. I take in my hand a piece of rice-paper in a pale rose color and Sow the story I have Gathered; with my sorcery in the paper, the singer Wei *taitai* hires to read it will be able to project it as I have done, though she will be neither Gatherer nor Sower herself.

Wei *taitai* folds it carefully and bows again. “You must come and meet the scholar before he goes to the Turani khagan,” she says, and turns and leaves as carefully as she came. It is only then that I notice the child who, sometime during our bargain, has crept up to the stall.

“Are you Taharah the story-merchant?” he asks. He might be ten or twelve. He is ragged, dusty from a long journey; hunger is plain on his face, along with a cut several days old.

“I am,” I say. “Do you have something to sell?” I have never seen him in Marakanda before, but even the beggar-children from the caravans know that if they have nothing else to sell, they might earn a dinar from a story.

He begins, but even before I start to Gather I know his telling will be futile: the story is half-remembered and he doesn’t know its original words. No scene appears, no smell, no touch of wind or sun. His words trail off, and he looks close to tears.

“Tell me something you saw coming here,” I say. “Tell me something you have never told anyone before. In the first telling, your words will be the true words, and I can Gather them.”

He does begin to cry then, not at failure but at memory. I Gather his words and I see: Turani archers on steppe ponies shouting war cries as they attack the caravan; screams; flame-heat; the sound of maddened horses and fleeing men. The boy tells well—remarkably well, for a beggar-child—and I can see the shapes of the mountains in the distance and know where the ambush occurred.

When he has finished, I say, “I will give you two dinars.” The Nine will pay me for that story because intelligence of the Turani tribes’ whereabouts is always of value to them, though they are more concerned now with the army that the emperor

of Fars is assembling; when Fars and the Turani khagans quarrel, Marakanda is in the way.

I start to count out coins, but suddenly I feel the child's hand on mine. "I have more," he says, and I see that his other hand is holding a sheet of vellum, ragged and charred around its edges. "No one on the caravan could read this, but they said you could."

I take the parchment from him, and my heart stops. Yes, I can read it. The characters are not those of Tianxia, nor yet those of al-Shams or Attiki or even the Yamatai islands. They are written in the lost script. *Ivri*. I read and I Gather, and yes, they are the true words—the words of a story I have dreamed of telling.

"There are others," he says. "Five sheets—I saved them from the attack. What will you give me for them?"

To me, they are beyond price. But I am merchant as well as magician, trained by my mother who was trained by her mother, and I don't say so. "Ten"—I see his face—"no, twenty"—and then I look at him again and stop counting. I remember the words in the parchment he'd handed me, the scene that flashed for an instant across my stall: "whither thou goest, I will go; where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people..."

"What is your name?" I ask.

“Muqan.”

“Muqan,” I repeat. “It is nearly twilight now, and my daughter will be making dinner. Wait here while I close the stall, and come with me.”

* * *

This is the story I tell to the booksellers who come on the caravans. They ask, sometimes, if I am from Masr or Attiki or Umbria, and I tell them I am from none of those places but that my people are from all of them. Then I tell them the words of Samuel of Gades: *my head is in the north and my foot in the east, my hands can grasp the world and my mouth sing of its hidden places, but my heart is missing; there is an empty city where it belongs.*

My words are the true ones, spoken as Samuel spoke them, so though the booksellers don't know his language, I Sow and they see. They see a web, a net of scattered people bound by ties of yearning. They feel loss—so some of them tell me afterwards—and though they cannot feel the object of loss as I would, they know why I seek it.

They bring me books scribed in Ivri when they have them; they bring me scraps of parchment when they have those. They know I will pay well, even for a few letters. But though they know this, and though I have come to Marakanda where all roads meet, they have them only seldom. The words are few

and scattered like the people are, and without the words, try as I might in the long years of my search, the stories are beyond my Gathering.

* * *

When the poet Rostam set eyes on Marakanda for the first time, he called it the garden within the garden. He was referring to the green hillsides of the Turani countryside and the streams that run down them to the Karadarya, but the houses of the city are also gathered like a garden, and each of them is a garden in its own way. The people of Marakanda take pride in their gardens, and even those gardens in the poor quarters are labors of generations.

My house is no different. Its courtyard is small, but within is a fish-pool built of mosaic tile, earthen pots of sunflowers and apricot trees, and grapevines that have grown along the wall and covered the graves of my husband and three children dead of the fever. Beyond them, a low white building of three rooms, protective words carved on the oaken door, two rows of blue tile just below the roof: the house where I live with Tamar, my surviving daughter.

It takes a month for Muqan, too, to think of it as home. He is a willing helper in the tasks of home and market, and he proves willing, as well, to share Tamar's lessons. The art of reading eludes him so I cannot teach him to Gather, but he

shows surprising promise at Sowing. At the market, I noticed his talent for description; at home, I see that he has a memory and an imagination to match. He makes up stories—little ones, tales for children—and already his talent is enough to enact them beneath the ceiling of a darkened room or limn short scenes for the neighbors' children playing in the street at twilight. He lacks the training yet to remember them word-perfect, so he can Sow only the stories he invents on the spot, but soon, soon.

I learn more of his talent at Wei *xiansheng*'s mansion on the first day of summer.

It is the tenth anniversary of the birth of Wei's eldest son, and in Tianxia, both eldest sons and tenth birthdays are treasured. Wei *taitai* has arranged an entertainment as elaborate as she had done for the scholar's arrival, with jugglers and camels and, of course, stories.

Tamar, Muqan and I set out for the Wei house two hours after dawn, through streets and markets already thronged with people. The mansion is just off the Black Plaza and, at its gate, I hear the calls of the merchants and guildsmen and rabble-rousers standing for election to the Seventeen and the shouted news that the army of Fars has marched. Beyond the gate, in the garden of water and stone and moss that might have come

from the Court of Nine Felicities, there is only the laughter of children.

I am called to entertain after the Bharati tumblers are done, and, Tamar's voice joining mine, I tell the story of the Monkey King in Shan. It may be unsuitable for scholars, but I've never met a child who didn't love it, and in minutes, the eldest son of Wei has abandoned his dignity and is prancing through the imagined scenery as an officer in the Monkey King's army.

"You have a rare talent," someone says when I am finished, and I turn to see a white-bearded ancient in the robes of a scholar.

"Thank you..."

"You may call me Zhao *xiansheng*."

"Only that?" Surely a man chosen to be an ambassador, even to a Turani khagan, would be noble.

"No scholar is noble to another scholar," he answers, and to my surprise, he inclines his head to me. "You are the one who deciphered the Masri characters, are you not? There is a copy of your treatise and translations in our imperial library. I haven't read it, but I've used the charts you made—I have a fragment of the Book of Souls that came to my grandfather on a caravan from Masr, and now I know its words at last."

“Yes,” I begin, but my attention is drawn to the lakeside pavilion where the children are gathered. The jugglers are finished and a dragon-masked clown has come to lead them to the next entertainment, but Muqan is standing on the railing and calling their attention for a story.

A chamberlain—fussy like all the race of chamberlains—raises his voice to object, and my feet turn to head off trouble. But Wei *taitai* lifts her hand, and I can see she is smiling. “Every apprentice must show his work one day,” she says, “and the apprentice of Taharah is surely a talented one. Let us hear his story.”

Muqan begins. His story is not one of Tianxia. He is a steppe child who was made a slave and then a beggar, and he has never been to Tianxia and knows only a few words of its language. But nor does he tell a story of his natal tribe. As he Sows, I see the form of Bolotobog, the swamp god of a people who live north and west of even the Yedighurs, and I see a hero seeking him in the marsh-frost and snow. It isn't one of the myths I have heard—like all of Muqan's stories, it is made up as it is told—but the forms are perfect, almost as if he has seen them before...

“How was it that you learned to read the Masri letters?” Zhao asks, and my shock at the asking makes me realize how

strongly Muqan's tale has mesmerized me. "Their secret had been lost for centuries, or so it was said."

"It was. But I found the *mafteach*."

"The key?" he asks after only slight hesitation, and I marvel that he knows even that much of Ivri.

"The story in which the other stories are told."

"Ah..." he begins, but there is a cry from the pavilion, and both Zhao and I see that Muqan's tale is reaching a climax. The hero has defied the curse of Bolotobog and stands defiantly between his chieftain's daughter and the god, and the words of his spells burst in the night sky like the fireworks of Tianxia. It takes me only a moment to recognize the letters with which the words are formed: Ivri letters, shaping themselves into patterns that were not on the parchments Muqan brought to the market and that I know he has never seen. *Ish*, the words say—man—and then they shape themselves into *aish*—fire. And a wall of fire rises before Bolotobog, allowing the man, the hero, to make his escape.

"You seek the *mafteach* for Ivri too?" Zhao asks.

"Always," I say. The children and Wei *taitai* are applauding Muqan, but my hands remain at my side; words of fire still dance before my eyes and burn around the edges of memory, and I am unable to move.

* * *

This is the story I found in the works of Kallanthe, the famous traveler of Attiki, telling of her sojourn in Masr eleven hundred years ago.

Kallanthe is in a market square listening to a native storyteller—a native Gatherer, though the art was young in those days—and as I Gather her words, she Gathers his. The language he speaks is unknown to me, but Kallanthe knows it, and through her Gathering, I can see.

The Masri storyteller knows his tale to the letter and the sound, and its image appears in front of his stall. A brown-skinned, kilted man—a scribe, a wizard of an ancient time—is sitting cross-legged and painting a spell on a sheet of reed-paper. Characters appear, images of birds, men, leaves, baskets. The scribe's brush makes the eye of a god at the top of the page, and then, his spell finished, he recites. He reads character by character, and as I see him through the eyes of Kallanthe and her storyteller, I can read the characters too.

In Kallanthe's story is the *mafteach* to the Masri writing. Somewhere, surely, if His world has any purpose, God has left the keys to all the others.

* * *

I am teaching Tamar and Muqan their part in the midsummer story; this will be the first year that Tamar joins the telling, and Muqan also hopes to be ready. "In moonlight

Skandar beheld the gold river, in armor of gold he stood on its bank,” I recite, and my children—I have come to think of Muqan as my child—repeat it word for word and sound for sound.

“His chariot shone in the water’s reflection...” I continue, but I see Muqan yawn, and an instant later I see that the first star has emerged through the twilight.

“That’s enough for today,” I say, and I pick two apricots from the tree and give one to each of them as a reward. I press a kiss to the top of Tamar’s head and another on Muqan’s, and I go inside to take a lamb stew off the hearth.

We share the meal in the courtyard in companionable silence, and afterward, the children take the pots to the river-gate to wash. It is full night when they return, and I have spread three blankets beside the grape arbor.

“I’m not tired,” Muqan says, forgetting how tired he had been an hour before. I remember that it was the same way with me when I was twelve. “Can we work on the Ivri parchments for a while?”

I start to answer “no,” but realize that I am also no longer tired; maybe the breeze has restored my vigor. “Go inside and light a lamp,” I say.

When I go inside a moment later, he has laid out the parchments on the hearth-room floor. His fingers move

knowingly over their edges and empty spaces; he has taken a proprietary interest in the documents he brought to the market as well as the others that have come to me on the caravan-roads.

We look at one of the gaps in the Book of Amram; I read aloud what there is of the passage and he suggests a word that might fill the part that is missing. I've taught him that writing has styles, and that if one knows the poetic conventions of the day or the habits of a book's author, it is sometimes possible to fill in the missing places even without a *mafteach*. And though Muqan still can't read, he is adept at recognizing patterns.

I try one of the words he suggests and nothing comes of my Gathering, but the next one flows smoothly into the story and its image appears through the lamplight. Muqan claps his hands; one more passage of Amram's story has been reclaimed.

"Will we find the *mafteach* in this story?" he asks.

"I don't know." I look down at the parchment, now just letters reflected in flame. "If we can find more of it, maybe it will tell us. Kallanthe's story told me—I knew it would be the key to the Masri characters the moment I started reading. But it will be much harder to know that in an Ivri tale."

"Why?"

I rise and make three steps to the shelves where I keep my manuscripts and take down an ancient Masri document. "Look

at the Masri words,” I say. “Each letter is a picture, an idea—they carry some memory of the story they belong to. The Tianxia characters are like that too. But the Ivri letters are like the Attiki writing or the alphabet of al-Shams—they are only lines. They don’t remember who wrote them or the story that was written.”

“Only lines,” Muqan repeats. “Only patterns.”

“Yes. Patterns.” For some reason, I feel that there is an enormous difference between the two, but neither I nor Muqan—nor Tamar, who has crept in to listen—can put our finger on it.

“If the Tianxia characters remember,” Muqan says, “then is the *mafteach* there? Zhao *xiansheng* told me that some Ivrim live in Tianxia—that their ancestors came in Skandar’s time. Maybe a scholar copied their stories. Maybe they’re in the Emperor’s library waiting for someone to read them...”

I hear myself draw breath. How could I have never seen what a child of twelve has just imagined? “I can ask Scholar Zhou if he’s heard of such a thing,” I say, and Tamar adds, “we can ask the caravan-masters.”

“Why don’t you go there?” Muqan presses. “If there are Ivrim in Tianxia, you can live among them as you do here. Zhao *xiansheng* says that there are Ivrim in Bharat too.”

“Because all roads meet here,” I say. “Because the caravan-masters from the west come here, but not to Bharat or Tianxia.” But there is more than that, and for a moment I cannot say what it is. Images flash before me, a Gathering in my mind: festival banners, the smell of the spice-markets, the taste of apricots that have fallen on my husband’s grave, the homely anonymity of a city where Ivrim are just one of a hundred foreign peoples and where a child like Muqan might come to me in the market.

I start to shape the words, but Tamar says them before me. “Because Marakanda is the garden in a garden.”

* * *

These stories are the ones I hear in the ancient houses of Marakanda and in the ruins on the Karadarya’s other shore.

They are old, older than Skandar. There are many tales of what they are and of the peoples who built them, and some are surely true. But I will never know which.

Sometimes I stand among ruined walls or forgotten cellars where subsidence has made the ground precarious and recite the stories. Sometimes a faint hint of a Gathering comes to me as I speak the name of a hero or god; no doubt those mighty names have come down to my generation in the way they were first spoken. But the rest of the tales haven’t; the language has

changed, the words have been reshaped, and without writing, the storytellers could not preserve them.

Sometimes I imagine those storytellers, watching in despair as their ancestors' stories slipped away. I wonder if that would be better or worse than losing them all at once, as *my* ancestors did.

* * *

At Midsummer's Day, Tamar and Muqan take their place in the storytelling for the first time. The next day, I catch Tamar kissing Muqan under the apricot tree, and the day after that, the army of Fars invests the city wall.

In the weeks that follow, I spend my nights on the wall. The debates in the astana rage on, and the members of the Seventeen and Nine who favor Fars argue endlessly with those who would fight to the death, but day by day, arrows and catapult stones render the argument moot. Everyone who can defend is needed, men and women alike; these are the days when I learn war, and I learn willingly, because from the wall I can see all in Marakanda that is sweet to me.

My days I spend in the market. People want stories now more than ever; they are an escape from the siege, and the one thing the besiegers can't keep out. My customers—young men seeking stories of bravery, women who want to distract their children, even one of the Nine in search of a tale of a city that

survived another siege - bring me scraps of parchment and even cloth or wood on which to Sow, and they leave with treasure.

I am at the market when Zhao *xiansheng* comes to me.

“I may have learned something,” he says.

“From the library in Tianxia?”

“No,” he says with a trace of a smile, and I remember that the siege has kept out any news from Tianxia just as it has interrupted Scholar Zhao’s journey to the Yedigurs. “Closer. Here.”

“In Marakanda?” Now Muqan and Tamar are listening too.

“The world meets in Marakanda,” he says, quoting Rostam, “and Ivrim have lived here a long time. In the archives at the astana, there is a record of some who came from Nahrain in the hundred and fortieth year after Skandar. There are records of the houses they bought. One of them still stands.”

I look at the parchment he is holding and see the name of the street and the recital of metes and bounds. I know that house. It is one of the ancient ones to which I go sometimes hoping that stories will remember themselves.

“I’ve been there,” I say. “There’s nothing in that house anymore.”

“Maybe there is a cellar.”

After that, Muqan won't let me keep the stall open. At the house an hour later, he leads the search, moving aside rubble and scraps of furniture that have lain untouched for generations. And Zhao *xiansheng* is right: there is a steel-shod trap door in the floor.

I try to lift it and it doesn't move; Zhao can't budge it either, and I wonder if it has been so warped by generations of weather that it will never come free. But I hear a cry from Tamar, who has pulled up a floorboard and found a hidden catch. Muqan adds his weight to hers, and they push the door up slowly from underneath. And when at last we are able to see what lies beneath, Tamar's candle reveals a store of records.

Another surprise awaits me when we bring them up into the light. The first one I touch—I touch it as I might a butterfly, lest it crumble in my hand—is written in an archaic form of the Ivri alphabet. I can tell what the letters stand for, but they are different from those I know. And the next document is written in letters older still, some of which look utterly unfamiliar.

I lay them out side by side, hoping that comparing one to the other will reveal their secrets. And they do, but Muqan divines them before me. “See how this letter looks like this one,” he says, and then a light comes into his eyes: “And this one—the older one—looks like the Masri character, the bird.”

He cannot read, but he knows the patterns.

I kneel and stare at both documents, scarcely noticing Scholar Zhou kneeling beside me, and I realize Muqan is right. The Masri character evolved into the oldest of the Ivri letters, and the old alphabet slowly became the new. I can see the outlines of other Masri characters in the ancient document, and I wonder how I could have missed them before.

“The Masri letters remember,” Tamar breathes.

“What is that, dear one?” I ask. I am still abstracted.

“The Masri characters keep some memory of their stories. If we remind these letters of their ancestors when we Gather them, will they remember too? Will they tell us which story is the *mafteach*?”

I say nothing, but the ancient writings swim before my eyes again, and as I accompany my children and Zhao *xiansheng* back to the settled city, I burn with desire to fill their empty places and learn.

That evening, and many evenings to come, we lay the parchments under the apricot tree. Their poetic styles are as archaic as their letters, but many of them are by the same author and we learn their patterns. Slowly, the three of us working together, we piece together the gaps. One is a full copy of the Book of Amram, the next a story of Vered the Judge, but the third...

It is a poem—I can tell from the way the characters are arranged on the parchment—and its first line is about a teacher telling stories to the little ones. Muqan stares at it with eyes bright—something in the pattern has excited him—and when I Gather the Ivri letters and remind them of the Masri characters they once were, the letters seem to remember.

The story takes shape in the twilight and the teacher's form appears, with the white robes and long beard of nine hundred years ago. He starts singing to the children sitting cross-legged in front of him, and as the words take shape, I hear the name of a hero from one of the lost stories. I know only the name—it alone survived—but now I hear his story, letter for letter and sound for sound.

Behind me, I hear Tamar writing furiously. The teacher is speaking faster than she can write, but that doesn't matter; I can Gather the poem again. I can Gather it until all the stories are told, and we can Sow them on so many sheets of rice-paper that they will never be lost again. In Marakanda, we can rescue them from the fire, if there is only time.

* * *

This is the story my grandmother told me.

It begins with a city: that is the first thing to appear with the telling. It had a name—so my grandmother was told by *her* grandmother—but no one remembers it now, though the light

suggests the land of al-Shams and the Great Green Sea is at the edge of vision. It hardly matters, because the same scene is being enacted in every city in the west.

The buildings of the city are blurred, but the people in the plaza, when they appear, are sharp and clear. There are thousands of them, men, women and children, dressed in mourning. In the center of the square is a ring of soldiers, their faces implacable behind iron helmets, and in the middle of *them* is a pyre.

There are books stacked atop the wood, and there are black-robed priests holding tapers, and as one, they thrust the tapers into the pile. The people give a wordless cry as the flames go up, and a moment later, the words cry out, and their cry is just as wordless.

Letters can be seen in the flames, Ivri letters, flashing for an instant before they turn to ash. The stories vanish with them. The people look into the flames, trying to fix the books in memory, but their eyes are too tear-blinded and the words flicker out too fast.

There are those who knew the stories by heart and who might have preserved them, but they were given to the fire too.

* * *

At midnight three days later, the second watch of the militia arrives and I go down from the wall to join my sleeping children. It is still dark when I wake to the sound of screaming.

I run outside, locate a foothold on the garden wall, and raise myself until I can see above it. I see little; the sound is coming from some distance away. But there is shouting and the clash of arms, and the glow of flame is on the horizon.

Soon there are people running down the street shouting that the city is taken. They are fleeing to the river-gate where the boats are moored; there, the Karadarya is wide enough that they might escape under the bows of the soldiers on the other shore.

More people run toward the gate—merchants, laborers and craftsmen all together, holding frightened children's hands—and the noise of battle draws closer. And, in a palanquin, Wei *taitai* passes, dressed in a servant's clothing and with flecks of ash in her hair.

“Wei *xiansheng*...” I say—he is not with her.

“He is coming. But you have to leave. The Farsi army is in the city.”

“How? There was no breach in the wall.”

“A member of the Nine, they say—one of the emperor's faction. He told them about the sewers, and...”

I don't need her to say more. There was a Gatherer among the invaders, no doubt, and the traitor's story has given them the exact route into the city. As long as he had seen it, his story would give them the map even if he didn't precisely remember it himself.

"They are in the city, Taharah. You must leave."

"Why? Will the emperor of Fars be worse than the Seventeen and the Nine? We have lived under many invaders."

"They are burning, Taharah. They are killing. Maybe they will rebuild the city—maybe they will build it greater than before—but they will destroy it first."

The wind carries flame-heat, and when I look to the north, the fires are marching as fast as soldiers. And Tamar is at the garden gate with a sack of scrolls over her shoulder and a trail of spare clothing behind. "We have to go."

There is a sound of clashing swords—very close—and Tamar runs inside. I cast my eyes over the shadow of the grape arbor and the graves beneath, and I follow her into the house.

The things that make a home are strewn across the floor, and I see that Tamar has dug the purse of coins out from under the hearth. Muqan has a sheaf of parchment and rice-paper under his arm. There are far too many documents to carry, and maybe that is part of the reason he is near tears, but I know that the sounds and the smell of fire carry memories of the

attack on his caravan. That is one story he knows word for word and sound for sound, but I know he would rather forget.

“The back door,” I say. “Hurry.”

The door opens onto an alley between two walls. The wind is hot now and the screams are close. We turn left—a left, a right, a left and two blocks will take us to the river.

We are nearly at the corner when the wind gusts. The records fly from under Muqan’s arm—the Masri parchments, the rice-paper on which we have Sown the lost Ivri stories, and, carried on the breeze, the *mafteach*. He cries out, as wordlessly as the Ivrim in the long-ago city square, and runs up the alley after them.

“No!” I call. “They aren’t worth your life!” But he follows the papers, ducking to pick up each one; Tamar runs after him, and I run after her.

The *mafteach* swirls in the wind beside the back door. In a single movement, Muqan snatches another of the fallen stories from the street and reaches upward to catch the *mafteach*. His hand touches the it, and that is when a Farsi arrow catches him in the chest. He falls, and a spark in the wind ignites the *mafteach*; the air carries it away as fine, ancient ash.

I kneel beside Muqan, heedless of the danger. He raises his hand, not to take mine but to offer me the stories he had

rescued. I take them, wondering why I am not crying, and I lay my other hand on his forehead. An instant later he is dead.

Ish—the man. *Aish*—the fire.

Another arrow hisses overhead, through a place where I would have been if I were standing. I remember where I am; I urge Tamar into running and follow her myself a moment after. A right, a left and two blocks to the river gate: the boats are there, taking us to exile with the flames mirrored in the waters.

* * *

This is the story I will tell at midsummer next year and the year after, and that my daughter will tell when I am dead. I will tell it in Tianxia or in Bharat, in Fars or in Nahrain, wherever I sell stories in the market and wherever my search may take me.

I will not tell them of Skandar or his chariot, nor will I tell of the Nine or the Seventeen or the battles or the visits of great philosophers. But I will tell them that there was a city called Marakanda built on the ghosts of other cities; that there was a city of tiles and gardens on the golden Karadarya, and that for a while it was the meeting-place of the world. I will show them that city, because I know it word for word, brick for brick, person for person: Wei *taitai*, the scholar Zhao, Tamar, and Muqan.

In markets and ruins and dusty libraries, other scraps of Ivri await me. I will look for them and fill their missing spaces

one by one, and someday I will find the *mafteach* again. When I do, I will have rice-paper, enough to Sow every story so they will never be lost.

But this story I know already, and I know it by heart.

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A LATE QUINTESSENCE

by Justin Howe

From the Records of Dierponte Hast, former Agent-Censor of the Magisters Subtle, the 7th day of the Month of Mists, year of His Reign 572

Last night as I walked home from my retirement party at Malgo's Behight along the cryptomeria-shrouded lane that meanders uphill away from the ferry landing, I heard a child speaking an impossibility: the closing lines to Bernhard Velasco Horn's last play *The Ashen Quintessence*. The child was a thin reedy thing, more bones than flesh. A knowing-eyed chit, like one of those waifs you encounter on certain humid festival nights in the village square, reading cards and performing some puppet mummery while wearing a sailor's jacket over her aged and dingy farm-girl drab.

"Destruction perfects that which is good—"

She broke off her recitation at the sight of me and made no reply when I called to her, nor did she stay to receive the coin I sought to gift her in exchange for answering the questions I hoped to ask, but too quick she slipped into a nearby alley that runs there off the lane beside the wig-maker's place. I will say

her words gave me a fright that sublimated the fumes straight from my lungs and sobered me quick.

For years now Horn's words have been silent. Unheard since the summer he died and the Magisters Subtle burnt all his works. But Horn was never easy prey, and now as night stretches out beyond my walls towards the gray dawn, I sit in my manse's closed study, vigilant and alone amid my slumbering parkland neighborhood, remembering those words the Lady Meringosa said to me the day of Horn's death. I remember her words and check the powder in my pistol, for I fear this night I may require it.

As was customary in such cases of sedition and treason among the literary classes, every loose end required investigation, and Horn's case was no different. Lady Meringosa had been Horn's instructor briefly during those two years he spent in his hither-mithering career studying at the city's Symposia Alchemystica.

Alchemists make for bad neighbors, and by the time of our acquaintance she had retired from her course work at the Symposia to a townhouse villa in the secluded cliff-side precincts above Hexmouth Bay. A lonely and remote place, from where the city's towers dwindled down to distant silhouettes. Her specialty had been crafting homunculi for the Magisters Polisomancy, but at the time we met she had passed

on the reins to one of her protégés. She claimed to have finished with “stewing the vats” for good and sought nothing more than to devote her remaining days to gardening.

She was there in her garden mulching her flowerbeds with broken crab shells and kitchen scraps when my assistant Bouillion and I arrived that late winter day. Refreshments were laid before us, and the Lady set down her trowel and spade to join us on a raised floor-heated porch overlooking the garden and providing a splendid view of the bay. Lady Meringosa’s good eye narrowed as she nodded her greeting at us; the other eye she’d lost in some workshop mishap and long since replaced with a glazed disc of smoked obsidian. Paling mud and dried plant matter streaked her dark housecoat (I was later to learn it was the prized epitoga of the Alchemist’s Inner Council) being put to double-duty as a gardener’s frock. In her hands she carried a homunculus—a monstrous mewling porcelain-masked thing that wept ink and smelled of fermented tealeaves. (That house was a veritable sanctuary for the wretched vat-spawn, and they appeared to have free run of the place, trundling and slithering about with impunity.)

Bouillion and I exchanged pleasantries with the Lady. Blessedly, these were brief, as Lady Meringosa had little desire to waste her day in conversation with members of the

Magisters Subtle. Pleasantries finished, she cut off the speech I was warming to and went straight to the chase.

“It’s Horn, isn’t it? I read about his crimes in the broadsheets. He’s been captured at last?”

“Yes,” I said. “Two days ago. We in the Magisters Subtle have begun to reshape his oeuvre and would like to learn more about his final works, in particular anything to do with *The Ashen Quintessence*.”

Lady Mermingosa shook her head, an act that made the smoky gray of her obsidian eye swirl a bit. “I know but little about it. What I assume everyone else does, what the broadsheets proclaimed. That the *majestic* Bernhard Velasco Horn had finished a new play and was set to debut it to the public this season.” She sneered when she said ‘majestic’ with a disapproving school marm’s tone. “The broadsheets loved him too well. They overdid it, I say.”

“That matter has been rectified,” I said with a curt nod that Bouillion reciprocated with a menacing grunt.

Lady Mermingosa seemed to take the point. “I desire only to help you in any way I can.”

I set aside my teacup and crossed my legs, resting my hands upon my knee and toying with the blue stone set in my Magisters ring.

“I believe he studied with you,” I said.

She might as well have been struck. The homunculus twitched and mewled in her lap. The Lady Meringosa shook her head and let out a breath, her brows rising in alarm.

“Hold now. My loyalty cannot be questioned. Besides, that was long ago, before Horn embarked on his career as a playwright. Our acquaintance lasted but two years at most, would be my guess.”

Fear arises in many delightful vintages, and the Magisters Subtle make it a point to be connoisseurs of all its varieties. The hint of it that rose now from Lady Meringosa nearly made the edges of my mouth curl in the approximation of a smile. “This is just a formality,” I said. “We’re just tying off all avenues of inquiry. Making sure no spark threatens to remain and ignite the rest. Do not be alarmed, please.”

“What do you want to know?”

“How was Horn as a student?”

“Barely present.” Again the obsidian swirled. “No. That’s not right. What I mean is he was there and attentive, but elsewhere too. Peculiar. As if he already knew the material and believed it but a tangent to his true work and labor. He appeared to sift every word I said, eager to find the missing puzzle pieces to some other work projected in his head.”

“Were there any words he showed a particular interest in?”

Lady Meringosa let out her breath. “I don’t dare to say.”

“It’d do well for you to remember,” Bouillion said, with that unsettling head-tilted glare he had.

To Lady Mermingosa’s credit, she matched it with an obsidian glare of her own. “Alchemy, sirs, is a jargon-laden craft, ripe with abstruse words for even the simplest copper pan. I can’t know which one might have caught Horn’s interest.”

I made the fluttering motion of my hand, the signal to Bouillion to ease off a bit. “What of quintessence?” I said. “I believe that’s an alchemical concept. It must have caught his interest, for he named a work of several months after it.”

“Quintessence is nothing but the purest expression of a thing. That quality which exists but can’t be measured. It is the ineffable spark that gives life to homunculi and fuels all of an alchemist’s various endeavors.” She spoke as if reciting from a text, then made a barking laugh. “A lot of rubbish if you ask me. Quintessence is many things, but simply put it’s what an idea is made of before you’ve thought it in your head.”

A clock sounded from deep in the house. A sound echoed by a series of musical trills, whoops, and bassy laughs, from what I shuddered to assume was a roomful of clockwatching homunculi. Suddenly a stream of them tumbled from the nearby doorway, and the mewling construct on the Lady’s lap hopped down to join in the boisterous parade. Lady

Mermingosa hardly noticed my discomfort, and I could barely manage to speak for the tension my revulsion had generated within me.

I composed myself with an effort I hoped did not show. “You said all his study seemed but a search to complete some project already there gestating within his head. What then do you believe Horn considered his true labor?”

“The destruction of matter,” she replied, in simple and direct fashion.

Bouillion gave me a knowing nod as if to say, *what did you expect?* I ignored him for now.

“Could you elaborate?”

The Lady Mermingosa nodded but shook her fingers at us. “Not simply mere physical destruction. It was not so easy as that. Horn sought rebirth too. He claimed that destruction released quintessence, and from it he might follow a path to immortality.”

“Now that sounds more like alchemical business,” Bouillion said.

“It may,” Lady Mermingosa conceded, “but Horn claimed not to want immortality for himself. He sought immortality for ideas. For the conjuring of thoughts and from them the creation of nonphysical homunculi.”

I peered about at the withered brambles in the garden where the mismatched vat-spawn cavorted and japed. “Nonphysical homunculi? Such things are impossible. Aren’t they?” The thought made me pale.

A wry smile skirted the Lady’s lips for an instant, as her broad shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. “Maybe. Possibly. At least that’s the common belief.”

“And what’s the uncommon belief?” I managed to ask.

She had turned her head to watch a particularly noxious homunculus perform cartwheels across the brown turf. At my question she returned her attention to Bouillion and I, peering from one of us to the other.

“Not so complicated really, at least theoretically. We all suffer from phantasms, vulgar thoughts that creep about unbidden within our heads. Horn was fascinated with the creation of phantasms. He believed these to be nonphysical homunculi spontaneously manifesting quintessence and that it was possible to control them—that there was no difference between these nonphysical homunculi and a phantasm. But he claimed that to achieve their proper creation, some supreme sacrifice or act of destruction was required.”

Lady Meringosa smiled and shook her head, a wistful expression on her sagged cheeks. “But such things are impossible. I told him his theories were too delicate and

abstract, impossible to perform—at least with any notion approaching the controlled certainty required of an alchemist. The house of the mind is as prone to collapse as any house of brick and mortar. To toy with such forces simply flirted with disaster. I fear he left my classes dissatisfied, and I was not surprised later on to learn he left the Symposia.”

A low growl escaped from the back of Bouillion’s throat. “Yet his seditious nature and treasonous opinions found root in your seminars.” He sneered with that disagreeable expression on his face that seemed to illuminate every scar of the pox he must have suffered as a youth.

Lady Mermingosa shot to her feet. The homunculi quit their irksome gamboling and scattered, disappearing throughout the garden.

“Lady,” I said, “please return to your seat. My assistant is a gifted mnemotechnician, but he is too rash by far. He shall suffer to remain quiet for the rest of the interview, I promise.”

Bouillion wouldn’t meet my stare but nodded his ponderous head.

Somewhat mollified, Lady Mermingosa sat down, although the homunculi remained in their hidden places.

Somewhat more pleased, I continued on. “While it’s true Horn turned to sedition and treason against our immortal

Mayor, everyone on the tribunal knows this occurred well after your connection to him.”

“I should say so. I have not seen the man’s face since it glowered at me from behind the desks in my lecture hall well over two decades ago.”

“Nor shall you or anyone else ever more,” I said peering at the sun reflected on the bay beyond. “Bernhard Velasco Horn died this morning before the third cock’s crow, by Mayoral decree. His body shall be dispersed without burial and nothing shall remain. Nor shall anything remain of his works, for as we sit here now other agents are collecting every folio and book and scrap touched by Horn’s pen. They shall all be burnt.” I gave her a true smile here, displaying the points of my teeth. “For all our subtlety, the Magisters office does get cold of nights.”

We then did bid her good day, Bouillion offering the simple advice in his less-than-estimable fashion that she should stick to gardening from that point on.

She must have, for never again did I hear of the Lady Mermingosa until I read of her death seven or eight years later. Nor did I think much about our interview.

Until last night that is, when I heard Horn’s words from that bootless song-girl’s lips.

Moreso, this day I have been startled by a look I have glimpsed in flashes among the market square's passing throng. It was on a lone construction worker's face as he went away from the site of his labors, and it was there later on a dour Magnamungian mother tugging her squalling child up the lane. Each bore that keen spark behind the eye that betokens a kindling idea. The same look I saw on Bouillion's face when we left the Lady Meringosa's villa.

This very night while I sat in Malgo's Behight savoring my memories among the cryptomeria's pungent shade, a livery-jill found me. She'd been charged with delivering a sealed file from the office of the Magisters Subtle to my hands for private appraisal. I have done so, reading the file's account of three recent murders. Adler Sendovogus killed by a drunkard in a midday brawl in the Curio Market Square. Maria-Trace Oxenstierna, her savaged body found by indigenes in the marsh two nights last. And Tangermunde Vere dead in her closed carriage, her personal plum brandy bottle poisoned by unknown hands. I am certain Seonjo Bouillion's name would have been there too, if he had not hanged himself under suspicion of plotting against our Immortal Mayor during the Winter of the Funeral-Wrights Revolt.

Poor abrasive Bouillion. Mnemotechnics are the arts of memory, and Bouillion was an adept at their craft, needing but

a moment's glance at a page to be able to recite it with his eyes closed. He had sat beside me when Horn gave a private showing of *The Ashen Quintessence* to our Immortal Mayor—the very day the Mayor granted the office of the Magisters Subtle extreme authority in cultivating the realm's continued healthy countenance free from derangement and dreriment.

(Every act was for the greater good, no matter what the public may now believe on account of the recreant scribes and their foul broadsheets.)

But these three murders. Each and every one of them a former member of the Magisters Subtle. In fact together we composed the entire tribunal that presided over Horn's case.

And of that esteemed panel only I remain.

The night is long and stretches away into darkness towards dawn. Not but three hours ago, beyond my study's shuttered window I heard the song-girl recite those closing words from Horn's *Ashen Quintessence*. "Destruction perfects that which is good." She sang them for a paltry crowd seated beneath the bowers in the park opposite my villa—at least until I sent my servant Caligo out to disperse them.

Yet so, I sit here to meet my fate, pistol primed, wearing the thin chain habergeon beneath my tunic and coat, the same armor I once wore in my service to the Mayor. But what difference can they make? Bernhard Velasco Horn's vile

quintessence brandishes no weapon and needs none. It finds fertile ground among all those that listen, where it may root itself and sprout its malignance.

Those selfsame words bespeaking destruction and perfection I heard uttered just this very moment outside my study's door.

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COVER ART

“Monument,” by Jeff Brown



Jeff Brown is a professional freelance artist from Saskatoon, SK, Canada, living in Cuernavaca, Mexico. In the world of book cover design and illustration, he has worked with over ninety book authors on more than two-hundred fifty covers. In the world of games, he has worked for companies such as Fantasy Flight Games, Pelgrane Press, and Logic Artists as a concept artist & illustrator. He currently does freelance work and long term projects. To see more of his work, visit jeffbrowngraphics.com.

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