

Starborne

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As I passed the outskirts of the town today I witnessed a stoning. I made a few enquiries. A young girl was accused of pre-marital infidelity. She failed to show signs of menstruation to the satisfaction of her betrothed. He complained to her parents. They failed to produce any evidence. My understanding of these things is that the parents usually manufacture a few bloodstained sheets, but for some reason the girl's parents did not provide these tokens of support. Who knows why not? I don't understand these people. Then the young man's mother complained to the rabbi.

A colleague of mine, who takes an interest in matters of women, once told me their monthly cycle can be disrupted for many reasons other than pregnancy. Poor nutrition, illness, the waxing and waning of the humors and passions. In some females the cycle never becomes regular, for reasons he hoped one day to understand by correlating women's birth dates and the phases of the moon. He needed an accurate lunar record for the last few decades and another colleague recommended me. I provided tables dating from the commencement of the Julian calendar.

They had lashed her to a stake. There was a rare snowfall last night, several fingers depth, and her white shift and the snow around her were stained with blood, urine and excrement. We are fragile membranes filled with liquid. She was shivering violently. They were shouting for her to raise her head, presumably so they could aim at her face, but she wouldn't or couldn't. There don't appear to be any particular rules, although they form a rough semicircle, the diameter of which appears to be governed by nothing other than fear of being hit by a stray rock. A lad was injured, scrambling close to recover stones when supplies ran low. There was a roar of excitement when a powerful throw struck her skull hard enough to crack it. I thought I saw a clear fluid. The shivering stopped.

Some of my brethren find endless fascination in the study of variations in culture and belief. I don't have the stomach for it. There is adequate evidence of the brutality, ignorance and willful stupidity of the human race without seeking it out.

The streets are in chaos. Herod is making a show of undertaking a census on the Roman model. Presumably he is trying to demonstrate to the Romans that he is worthy of remaining their puppet. I can't imagine that they're very impressed. It's as disorganized as any administrative exercise I've ever seen in this part of the world. The troops and

officials enforcing it don't seem to be in communication with each other. The queues are endless. No one knows what to do or where to go. There's no planning for the volume of registrants or their accommodation. People are sleeping in the streets, a serious hygiene risk at the best of times and now simply open sewers.

Why they don't send census takers to the people, instead of forcing the people to come into these overcrowded towns, I have no idea. Possibly a lack of scribes. Or tribal politics. Apparently people are required to report to cities according to tribe. Unfathomable. And what Herod intends to do with the information is beyond telling. If he ever had any notion of fair taxation, he's shown no sign of it. As far as one can guess at his methods, his thugs have a quota and extort it by whatever means occur to them. They don't need a register of heads to bash. They couldn't read it if they had one.

The sooner the Romans drop their pretense of supporting independent rule the better. For the inhabitants, certainly. Wily old Augustus is proceeding with his usual caution. It's a lot to take on for a few leagues of coastline. This area has little wealth and endless problems. Brigands everywhere, terrorizing the countryside, and those in power indistinguishable from the brigands. He'd commit a few troops and end up committing more, until the place became a major cost and a liability to his reputation at home and abroad. Xerxes and the Greeks all over again.

The innkeeper gives me his usual obsequious grimace as I tie up my beast. I throw him a coin which I hope will ensure the animal a little food and water. I attract less attention on a mule, wearing robes in the local fashion. I'd be far more comfortable properly dressed atop my camel, but beggars follow you everywhere and spies report your every movement. I suppose they're doing that anyway. No doubt the innkeeper is on Herod's payroll.

C. opens the door to my knock, his face grave. B. is doing his best to maintain his bland bedside manner. He studied the art in Alexandria, in one of the many new faculties created since Euclid's tenure, but however many centuries of Egyptian expertise he was able to absorb, it won't help him here. The figure on the bed is limp. I think Akakan has resigned himself.

These towns are plague pits. Even those strong enough to survive infancy in these places are likely to succumb at an early age. Death is everywhere. Hence, I suppose, the extraordinary level of superstition. And there is little hope that the Romans will do anything about education, even when ultimately they do take over. Their gaze does not take in

the heavens. For them the only science is engineering. Their great sprawling state is a machine, and like all machines will one day outgrow the foresight of its designers and grind itself to dust.

“Pray tell.”

B. leans down toward him.

“Yes, Akakan?”

It's remarkable that his strange physiognomy can produce understandable sounds, but no more remarkable than his presence here. His sharp, spicy smell is not unpleasant, but duller than yesterday. Is there less color in that sleek, reptilian hide? B. places a hand on his body, to gauge its temperature.

“You will cut me? For wisdom?”

“You are not going to die, Akakan,” says B.

“It is well, Akakan,” I say. “I have brought back from your vessel what you asked. You will heal yourself and return to your people.”

“I cannot return.”

Of course what he says is true. His vessel is beyond my understanding, but in the creations of intelligence there is a symmetry and order entirely missing from that wreckage. Never again will it burn in the sky.

How he survived its fall is something B., C., and I have discussed at length. We can only suppose that the pod in which he was sealed somehow absorbed the tremendous shock. The pod alone seemed largely undamaged. When at last it opened, there was a rush of escaping vapor and a strange, crisp tang in the air. Then it began to glow, and we feared to approach it. We set up camp at a little distance and watched in shifts. I was glad of the chance to take some star sightings and catch up on my journal. The viewing conditions were perfect, the sky dazzling. Every time I saw a shooting star I wondered if it were another vessel descending from the heavens. That night I saw no one venture near. No shepherd, nor even a sheep. The hills outside Bethlehem are bleak and cold at this time of year. By the next morning the glow had subsided.

The pod was filled inside with a trembling translucent gel, and when C., always reckless in his curiosity, plunged in his hands we found beneath what appeared to be a pale, dead creature, like nothing any of us had encountered in travels ranging from the source of the Nile to the mouth of the Ganges. C. said it somewhat resembled a dragon that he had seen among the specimens of a sage in Anuradhapur, but that dragon had not been furred in iridescent wings. I argued that we should gather what information we could from the site and disturb nothing further.

B., the anatomist, was not content with that. He insisted that we take the body and dissect it. We scooped it out of the gel and carried it to our camp. We left it by the fire. During C.'s watch it moved. He woke us and we all saw its eyes open.

The others looked to me for guidance. I have learned a good many languages, but there was no reason to think, even if it had speech, that it would understand any tongue we know. I tried a few simple gambits, in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Hebrew, Persian. C. tried a phrase or two he had picked up in Dravidia. There was no response. I think we all were a little relieved.

Our problems had suddenly multiplied. We couldn't leave it to die. If we made the mistake of allowing the superstitious locals to see it, we could all end up dead. We finally agreed to smuggle it into the nearby town, where we could at least avoid death by exposure, and possibly formulate a longer range plan. We didn't know then about the sham census.

We took the last room at the worst inn, what must originally have been a tool shed tacked on to a wall of the stinking stables. For that we had to bribe the innkeeper with a sum ten times what, on another occasion, he might have had the impudence to ask for his best room.

It suited our purposes well. There was a door directly into the stables, and we could unslung the bundled creature from our camels unseen. We put it in the narrow, collapsing bed and tried to tend to its needs. B. did what he could to determine the functions of its body, largely by analogy. C. mixed concoctions to purify the air. They certainly improved the fragrance of that place.

Apart from fetching and carrying, I pondered. Its great wings seemed a powerful clue. On our world a bird of that size is incapable of flight. The ostrich of Mesech, the dodo of Dina Harobi, the cassowary of Abadiou, all have atrophied wings, small and useless. What was the implication? If on its own world it flew, then it somehow weighed less. Perhaps it found its weight here oppressive. Should we float it in a bath, perhaps? Or a pod.

Although its alertness was plainly growing, its health seemed to be declining. We made covert trips to the vessel by night, bringing back what we thought might be of use. Between us we had gathered much worldly wisdom, but this was beyond the world we knew. We debated endlessly, largely in Greek for the technical vocabulary, but switching to Persian for the expression of strong emotion.

When it spoke, every hair on my body stood straight up. C.'s hand went to his dagger, and B., who had his back to it, became as still as stone and raised his eyes to mine, as if to read in them my thoughts. The voice was like the wind in the desert. The accent was over-inflected, pure, and mild, like an actor saving himself in rehearsal. The words, as I realized only later, were Greek.

“Great joy to you. I call myself Akakan.”

The name was a succession of glottals and gutturals. I have rendered them as closely as possible in the Greek alphabet.

B. turned slowly, placing a hand gently on C.'s shoulder.

“Greetings. I call myself Balthazar.”

C. released his dagger and took his cue, bowing gallantly, hand to heart.

“Long life and good health. I am Caspar.”

The creature's eyes moved to me.

“Melchior,” I croaked.

“I thank you for your attention to the needs of my body,” said Akakan.

“We regret we were unable to provide greater assistance,” said B.

“May I ask the condition of my vessel?”

We were silent. Akakan's eyes flicked to each of our faces.

“Were any of its contents preserved?”

“It may be possible to salvage some items,” I said.

Akakan appeared to consider for a moment. There was no good news for him in this.

“What remains of the substance in the pod?”

“There may be a little left.”

In our impatience to remove the body we had spilled most of the gel on the earth, and it had soaked in, or dried out.

In any case it was gone.

“Might I trouble you to recover what you can and bring it to me?”

“Certainly.”

Akakan paused, perhaps exhausted.

“Can we help you in any other way?” asked B.

“I would greatly appreciate it if you told me what you can of this world,” said Akakan.

For days we scarcely slept. Akakan's hunger for knowledge grew as we fed it, and it seemed to revive him. His grasp of our tongue improved with every hour. And when he asked questions, they were so pointed and startling that I am sure we learned more from them than did he from our answers.

But when we asked him to tell us of his world, or his people, he would pause, then offer very little.

“Time enough does not remain, even to teach you the words in which I could describe them.”

What gel we could find he asked us to massage into his skin, and that also seemed to ease him. C. is doing his best to recreate the gel, so far without success.

And now I have brought the object Akakan described, and which seems of such importance to him. It was in a jumble of wreckage, from which I had to lever it out using a twisted piece of the light, strong substance of which the vessel was made. I hope I didn't harm it.

Akakan extends a hand from beneath a furred wing. Its four fingers are pale and splayed, their ends somewhat sticky and bulbous. Each rotates on a ball and socket at its base, and bends at four joints. He touches the object lightly, repeating a sequence of movements at first rapidly and then more slowly and deliberately. At length he drops it on the floor and withdraws his hand beneath his wing.

“Is something wrong, Akakan? Did I break it?”

“No, Melchior. I am afraid there is damage to the part of the vessel that supports its function. Consequently I have no way to send any message to my home.”

“You had hoped to summon help?”

“Help? No, by the time help arrived, your world would have passed many thousands of times around its star. I had hoped to send the information I have learned here. My mission is to gather knowledge, and I had hoped to fulfill it.”

So the earth revolves around the sun. And the sun is a star. That explains a great deal. C. smacks his fist into his palm.

“That is why you cannot go home. ”

C. is a man of some brilliance but little tact.

"From voyages of discovery, one can never truly return."

C. fingers his mustaches in consternation.

"You left alone, knowing you could never come back?"

"Not alone. There were many in my ship. But I alone escaped its destruction, in the small vessel you found. The light you saw was the great ship. A malfunction. None of our creations is perfect."

We are interrupted by raised voices outside. I open the door and step out. A heavily pregnant girl is seated on a mule. The man who leads the mule is arguing with the innkeeper, who does nothing but shrug and simper, gesturing at the stable. I step forward.

"How much?"



The innkeeper names a figure. I am past being shocked by his avarice. I place a gold coin in his grubby hand and he goes off well pleased.

The young man's dark eyebrows are lowered. His blood is up and he is ready to transfer his anger to me.

"My husband thanks you. He is Joseph. I am Mary. Give him your hand, Joseph."

Her voice is soft and firm, with a maturity that does not show in the unblemished child's face.

Joseph wipes his hand on his robe and extends it to me.

"Joseph."

"I am Melchior."

His grip is painfully strong. The fingers are coarsened by labor. A tekton of some sort, perhaps a stonemason.

"You are here for the census, Melchior?"

Joseph is still suspicious and hostile.

"No, I am not of these parts."

"I am of the house of David. So we had to come to Bethlehem to register. All the way from Nazareth. It was hard on Mary. I make a good living. I usually pay my own way."

"I meant no disrespect, Joseph. The innkeeper is exploiting the situation to the utmost. Few could afford his prices."

"And how do you come by your wealth, Melchior?"

"Joseph, I am very tired. Go inside and make me a place to lie down."

"I am a carpenter, Melchior. I am not ashamed to say it. An honest workman."

Having fired his parting shot, he turns to his wife and helps her down. With her he is most gentle and solicitous. She places a hand on the small of her back and massages it. Joseph leads the mule inside. Mary looks at me with a little smile on her lips.

"Would you mind?"

She pats the place she was massaging.

"Just here."

"Certainly."

I place my hands on her and gently rub the base of her spine with my thumbs.

"Harder. Don't be shy."

I press my thumbs in deep.

"That's good. My husband is an honest, decent man, Melchior, whose family claims to be of the house of David, but he has not the patience for rogues like that innkeeper."

"There is no dealing with such men."

"Oh, I usually find a way. Thank you."

I lift my hands away. She smiles again and walks into the stable with a surprising lightness. I go back into our wretched little room.

"A married couple. They're in the stable. She will give birth within days."

"Melchior, why did you intervene? The innkeeper would have sent them away. Now we shall surely be discovered."

C. speaks in Persian. I omit the words he adds for emphasis only.

"What, Caspar, you would have her drop her lamb in those filthy streets?"

"A parturition? I should be very glad to observe it."

Akakan is showing a sudden spark of life.

"There is a delicacy about such matters, Akakan. And I fear your presence might alarm the young people. In any event, your existence must be kept secret, as we have explained."

Akakan subsides. B. is stroking his beard, never a good sign.

"Perhaps I might offer my services in examining the young woman. I could relay to Akakan my findings."

The trick with B. is to say nothing. He has a remarkable facility for arguing against himself.

"But it might seem strange that a physician of my stature should happen to be nearby, and should offer his services freely. It would be certain to arouse suspicion."

B. continues to stroke his beard.

"Perhaps they will ask for assistance. Until then it might be better to do nothing. She seemed healthy enough, Melchior?"

"Positively robust."

"Better to wait, then."

"If you think so."

There is not long to wait. There is a violent rapping on the door communicating with the stables. I open it enough to see Joseph, who is in terrible distress.

"Melchior, I need your help. She is...I can't..."

Gesturing at the others to remain silent, I step into the stables. Mary is on a bed of straw, wearing only a white shift, her face pale and perspiring. She is shivering and the occasional groan escapes her lips. There is a sudden excess of pain, and she lurches in her bed, whimpering.

"Joseph, I need to fetch a physician. May I do so?"

"Yes, yes, anything."

I bring B. and C. B. is completely in his element. He touches Mary in various places. He palpates her abdomen at some length, his face expressionless. He times her contractions. Then he reaches under her shift. He consults in whispers with C., who nods and returns to our room. B. gestures for Joseph and me to approach.

"It is an extremely awkward breech delivery. I am unable to rotate it. She is in danger. I propose a Caesarean section."

Joseph nods, then looks to me for enlightenment.

"He wants to cut her. To bring the baby out."

"But she will die!"

B. turns to Joseph.

"I am a surgeon trained in the Egyptian arts. She and the baby will live. You must leave us now."

"I will stay."

"This will not be pretty, Joseph."

"I will stay."

B. nods. Then he turns to me, with a long and searching look. I go close and whisper in Persian.

"Have you ever done this before?"

"Many times, but only if the mother is in extremis or dead. In any case they never survive the shock. However Caspar says he has some potion that will deal with that. I am not convinced, but we have no choice. Do nothing and the baby will die and kill her in the process."

B. insists on a ritual cleansing. He has us wash our faces, hands and feet in water C. has boiled. Then B. patiently baptizes his gleaming surgical instruments. Meanwhile Mary is writhing in agony.

"You wish to appease the gods, Balthazar?" I hiss.

"Whether you worship them or not, Melchior, certain gods must be appeased."

C. returns, carrying a vial of potion. I go to him.

"Henbane, opium, frankincense, mandrake and a dash of hemlock," says C. "Measuring the correct quantities is the tricky bit. Too much hemlock and they never recover consciousness. Too little and they don't go under. How much would you say she weighs?"

I am no expert, but I doubt the frankincense has any real purpose. C. just likes his concoctions to smell good.

"What must she do?"

He explains. I kneel next to Mary.

"You must drink a little. Then wait. After a few minutes you should drink a little more. Eventually you will sleep."

She turns wild eyes to me and gasps.

"Will I wake?"

I touch the vial to her lips. She drinks. There is no need for a second dose. I step back and consider. I turn to Joseph.

"We have with us a holy creature who will bless this enterprise. May I fetch him?"

Joseph stares at me in wonder. He nods.

I return to our room. Akakan raises his eyes to me.

"May I lift you in my arms, Akakan? An event is taking place that you will not want to miss."

"Please do so."

I carry him into the stable, and place him on the straw next to Mary. Joseph watches in awe and bewilderment.

I must say it is a remarkable experience to watch B. at his work. His cuts in human flesh are as deft and decisive as the brush strokes of the artists of Han. In a few minutes it is over. B. lifts a bloody, wriggling infant out of Mary's inert body. He gestures to me. I cut the umbilicus. He places the child in Joseph's arms.

"You have a son."

Joseph's response is to burst into tears. I have no choice but to join him. I place my hands on his shoulders and kiss him. His beard prickles.

"Congratulations, Joseph."

"A son."

He grips my arm. There will be bruises tomorrow.

B. sews Mary's flesh together, with the delicacy and speed of a seamstress. Then he rubs an ointment all over her belly.

"Myrrh," says Joseph. "I had a rich aunt whose house stank of it."

"It does smell rather like myrrh," says B. "It will guard the wound from putrefaction. It banishes the invisible humors. It is commonly used in embalming, but I have found it of great use to the living."

I step closer.

"Will she recover?"

"If Caspar's potion doesn't kill her."

C. bathes the child as Joseph holds it. I have never been much moved by babies, but this one is beautiful. In my somewhat limited experience, their heads near crushed in the passage through the birth canal, infants invariably look like squashed pomegranates. This child has had no such violent introduction to the world, and it has the luminous, gentle face of its mother. Its eyes are wide open and regard us all with a steady gaze.

The proud father even presents the baby to Akakan, who extends a thin hand. The tiny pink fingers curl around Akakan's sticky digit. The child finds unremarkable the presence at its birth of a being from a distant star. All things are equally miraculous.

"Bring him here, Joseph."

Mary is awake, and her voice is firm. It seems C. has judged his potion correctly. Mary takes the child and puts it to her breast, where it latches on immediately and commences a vigorous suckling. She looks up at us. Her face glows with contentment. Then she turns to Akakan. Like the baby, she shows not the slightest surprise.

"I am Mary," she says.

"Great joy to you," he answers in lilting Aramaic. "I call myself Akakan."

"Have you been in Bethlehem long?"

"A few days."

"And how was your trip?"

We leave them chatting. Joseph, exhausted, is asleep against a cattle stall. B., C., and I move to our room.

"What now?"

"Don't ask me," I say.

"Will they expose us?"

"Mary, I think, is to be relied upon. And Joseph has not the faintest idea what is going on. If he gives some garbled account of what he has seen, who will believe him?"

"We must leave immediately," says C.

"Out of the question," says B. "I must attend to my patient for at least a week. The incision will require dressing four times a day."

In the next days Akakan spends much time in the company of Mary. They seem to have a great deal to talk about. She recovers her strength quickly, and spends hours by his side, occasionally passing the infant to him.

Akakan calls me over.

"Mary has a question for you."

"How do I raise him to be like you?"

"Like me?"

"All of you. A healer, a teacher, a wizard. A seeker. I don't know what you call yourselves."

"We generally call each other doctor."

Mary holds the child up and speaks to him.

"My son the doctor."

The infant has a look of internal concentration, and another pungent odor joins the potpourri of the stable. Mary carries him away to a manger and proceeds to unswaddle him.

Akakan turns to me.

"Your females, Melchior. Are they all like that?"

I shake my head.

"There is much variation."

"And you tell me your society is organized as a patriarchy?"

We continue to discuss with Akakan all that might interest him, from botany to politics. At first, unable to read his facial expressions, or any meaning in the lilting inflection of his voice, I thought him without emotion. Now I have come to recognize a few of his tells, in the movements of his eyes and the set of his wings.

Towards the end of the week Akakan exhibits a strange excitement. He calls us all to gather around. All except Joseph, for whom Mary finds an errand that will keep him away for some hours.

"Think of the star you followed," says Akakan. "Do you recall how brightly it blazed?"

We nod.

"That power is as nothing to what your quest will eventually unleash. Now, imagine that power in the hands of your Herod."

We are silent.

"You worship your animal passions. Your gods are lust, greed and revenge. If you are to survive beyond the critical point of knowledge, you must mature. There must be no more Herods. To achieve that is a greater challenge than to wander the stars."

"Can it be achieved, Akakan?"

"I am the proof."

"But why have we not seen more of you?"

The vertical irises of Akakan's eyes thin in a characteristic blink.

"Few worlds survive. Often enough we have returned to find a flourishing race vanished, and a desert where once was a garden."

"So we must alter the very nature of our race? How is that possible? Must we take control of the earth?"

C. twirls his mustaches in agitation. From the order's experience in Persia, we know better than to attempt to seize power directly. Their authority challenged, despots take bitter reprisals. We operate in secrecy stricter than ever before.

"No. We take control of their hearts."

So preoccupied was Mary with the child, it did not occur to me that she was listening.

"Of their hearts, Mary?" I say.

"It is simple enough. They must be persuaded."

Akakan blinks again.

"Yes. They must be persuaded."



"But of what?"

"That there is strength in humility," says Mary. "That the rich may be poor, and the poor rich. That we are all of one family. That all deserve respect, and forgiveness. That kindness is no weakness but a virtue. That we are here to serve each other."

B. and C. are staring at her. She raises her eyebrows and they close their mouths and look away.

The plan gradually emerges.

C. thinks he has succeeded in emulating the gel, with a formula based on the beeswax compound with which he daily grooms his mustaches. Akakan seems to be responding to its application. When C. has manufactured enough of it. B. and C. will take Akakan back to his pod and encase him in gel. Akakan has given them instructions for shutting him into the pod. He says he can live indefinitely in a deep sleep, from which he may one day be awakened by a search party from his world. I suspect this is all to spare our feelings. He feels himself a burden on us. Akakan does not expect to rise again.

When they have buried the pod as directed, B. and C. will take the news to the rest of the order. We are used to concealing our knowledge for our own sake, to avoid persecution. Now we must do it for the sake of mankind. Instead of encouraging the pursuit of knowledge we are to preach the doctrine of harmony and peace.

"I'll deal with Joseph," says Mary. We are leaving that matter in capable hands.

And I? I have had C. make up a potion, without color, odor or taste, that will bring a quick and painless death to any who touch or ingest it. My road leads to Rome. The reign of Augustus has been long and relatively peaceful. His passing must be timed to ensure a succession of incompetent tyrants. The efficient imperial machine he has built will slowly shake itself apart. There will follow a long period of darkness and chaos, and the spread of learning will be greatly slowed.

Perhaps it will give us time enough.

"You are love made flesh."

Mary is murmuring to the child at her breast. We watch her for a moment. She raises her eyes.

"God is love."

"Yes," says Akakan at last.

I shake my head.

"Not a popular notion."

"I will teach it to him," says Mary. "I will tell him he is the child of love, the son of God, sent to bring God's message to the world. Sent to save us all."

"Will he believe it?"

Mary turns her sweet face to me.

"Joseph believes I'm a virgin."