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DEPARTURES

Harry Turtledove



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The stories in this book appear in chronological order, starting in the early second century B.C. and ending about a thousand years from now. Rather more are science fiction than fantasy, but it's hard to tell into which genre a couple of them can fall. They are intended to amuse and entertain, with a little luck, to provoke thought. Some of the notes talk about how they came to be written, others about the ideas they examine. One of the things that makes science fiction and fantasy the exciting fields they are is that they let a writer look at ideas from angles impossible to achieve in other genres. I hope you enjoy these unusual angles.

Our own civilization owes Greece in the fifth century B.C. so much: democracy, the drama, the liberation both of the examination of the natural world and of historical inquiry from the straitjacket of theology. But before these things could flower, Greece had to succeed in repelling the invasion of the Persian Empire, the mightiest state of the day. This she did, by a narrow margin. But suppose Greece had failed ...

COUNTING POTSDERDS

THE SHIP CLUNG CLOSE TO LAND, LIKE A ROACH scuttling along a wall. When at last the coast veered north and west, the ship conformed, steering oars squealing in their sockets and henna-dyed wool sail billowing as it filled with wind to push the vessel onto its new course.

When the ship changed direction, the eunuch Mithredath summoned the captain to the starboard rail with a slight nod. "We draw near, then, Agbaal?" Mithredath asked. His voice a nameless tone between tenor and contralto, was cool, precise, and intelligent.

The Phoenician captain bowed low. The sun sparked off a silver hoop in his left ear. "My master, we do." Agbaal pointed to the headland the ship had just rounded. "That is the Cape of Sounion. If the wind holds, we should be in Peiraeus by evening—a day early," he added slyly.

"You will be rewarded if we are," Mithredath promised. Agbaal, satisfied, bowed again, and, after glancing at his important passenger for permission, went back to overseeing his crew.

Mithredath would have paid gold darics from his own purse to shorten the time he spent away from the royal court, but there was no need for that: he had come to this western backwater at the royal command and so could draw upon the treasury of Khrrish, King of Kings, as he required. Not for the first time, he vowed that he would not stint.

The day was brilliantly clear. Mithredath could see a long way. The only other ships visible were a couple of tiny fishing boats and a slow, wallowing vessel probably full of wheat from Egypt. Gulls mewed and squawked overhead.

Mithredath tried to imagine what the narrow, island-flecked sea had looked like during those great days four centuries before, when the first Khrrish, the Conqueror, had led his huge fleet to the triumph that had subjected the western Yauna to Persia once and for all. He could not; he was not used enough to ships to picture hordes of them all moving together like so many sheep in a herd on its way to the marketplace of Babylon.

That thought, he realized with a wry nod, showed him what he was most familiar with: the baking but oh so fertile plain between the Tigris and Euphrates. He also knew Ektabana well, the summer capital of the Kings of Kings, nestled in the shade of Mount Aurvant, though he had never suffered through a winter there. But until this journey he had never thought of travel on the sea.

Yet to his surprise Mithredath was finding a strange sort of beauty here. The water over which he sailed was a blue deep enough almost to be wine-purple, the sky another blue so different as to make him wonder how the same word could apply to both. The land rising steeply from sea to sky was by turns rocky and bare and shaggy with green-gray olive trees. The combination was peculiar but somehow, in its own way, harmonious.

True to his promise, Agbaal brought Mithredath to his destination with the sun still in the sky. True to his, the eunuch pressed a pair of goldpieces into the captain's palm. Agbaal bowed almost double; his swarthy face glowed with pride when Mithredath offered him his cheek to kiss, as if the two of them were near in rank.

The docks swarmed with the merchant folk of the Western Sea: There were Phoenician like Agbaal, in turbans, tunics, and mantles; Italians wearing long white robes draped over one shoulder; and, of course, there were many native Yauna or, as they called themselves, Hellenes, milling about. Their slightly singsong speech was heard more than Aramaic, the empire's common tongue, understood everywhere from India to the edges of the Gallic lands.

Mithredath's rich brocaded robes, the gold bracelets on his wrists, and the piles of baggage his servants brought onto the docks drew touts—as a honey pot draws flies, he thought sourly. He picked a fellow whose Aramaic had less of a Hellenic hiss to it than most, the man said, “Be so good as to lead me to the satrap's palace.”

“Of course, my master,” the man said, but his face fell. He would still get his fee from Mithredath, but had just had his hopes dashed of collecting another from the innkeeper upon whom he would have foisted Mithredath. *Too bad*, Mithredath thought.

He was used to Babylon's sensible grid of streets; these small western towns had the narrow, stinking lanes running every which way and sometimes abruptly petering out. He was glad he had hired a guide; anyone unfamiliar with these alleys could not have found his way through them.

Though larger than its neighbors, the satrap's residence—palace, Mithredath discovered—was far too grand a word-looked like any other house hereabouts. It presented a plain, whitewashed front to the world. Mithredath sniffed. To his way of thinking, anyone who would do someone should let the world know it.

He paid the guide—well enough to keep him from sneering but not extravagantly—and rapped on the door with his pomegranate-headed walking stick. A moment later a guard opened the little eye-level observation window to peer out at him. “Who comes?” the fellow demanded fiercely.

Mithredath stood where the man could see him clearly and answered not with the accented Aramaic in which he had been challenged but in pure, clear Persian:

“I am Mithredath, *saris*”—somehow, in his own tongue, “eunuch” became almost a word of pride—“and servant to Khrish, King of Kings, king of lands containing many men, king of this great earth far and wide, son of Marduniya the king, an Achaemenid, a Persian, son of a Persian, of Aryan seed. May Ahura Mazda smile upon him and make long his reign. I am come to the satrapy of the Yauna of the western mainland upon a mission given me from his own royal lips. I would discuss this with your master, the satrap Vahauka.”

He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

He did not wait long. He heard a thump on the other side of the door and guessed the guard had dropped his spear in surprise. Mithredath did not smile. Years at the court of the King of Kings had schooled him against revealing his thoughts to a dangerous world. His face was perfectly composed when the guard flung the door wide and shouted, “Enter, servant of the King of Kings!”

The guard bowed low. Mithredath walked past him, returning the courtesy with a bow barely more than a nod. Some people, he thought, deserved to be reminded from time to time of their station.

As he had intended, more people in the satrap's residence than the door guard heard his announcement. A majordomo came rushing to greet him in the outer hall. He wore the rectangular mantle of a Hellene over Persian trousers. His bow Mithredath returned in full.

he would be a power in this miniature court.

The majordomo said, “Excellent *saris*”—he was a cautious one, too, Mithredath thought again not smiling—“his Highness Vahauka, great satrap of the Yauna of the western mainland, now dines with the secretary, with the *ganzabara* of the satrapy, and with the general of the garrison. He bids you join them if your long journey from the court of the King of Kings, may Ahura Mazda smile upon him and make long his reign, has not left you too tired.”

“The gracious invitation honors me,” Mithredath said. “I accept with pleasure.” He was glad to get the chance to meet the *ganzabara* so soon; the financial official was the one who would have to meet his tablet of credit from the court.

“Come this way, then.” The majordomo led Mithredath out to the central courtyard where the satrap and his officers were dining. Here at last the eunuch felt himself among Persians again, for most of the courtyard was given over to a proper paradise, a formal garden of roses, tulips, and other bright blooms. Their fragrance, mingled with the odors of cooking, made Mithredath’s nostrils twitch.

“Lord Vahauka, I present the *saris* Mithredath, servant of the King of Kings,” the majordomo said loudly. Mithredath began to prostrate himself, as he would have before Khrish, but Vahauka, a lean, gray-bearded Persian of about fifty, stopped him with a wave. The satrap turned his head, presenting his cheek to the eunuch.

“My lord is gracious,” Mithredath said as he stepped up to Vahauka and let his lips brush the satrap’s beard.

“We are both the King of Kings’ servants; how can our ranks greatly differ?” Vahauka said. His fellow diners nodded and murmured in agreement. He went on, “Mithredath, I present you to my secretary Rishi-kidin”—a perfumed, sweating Babylonian in linen undertunic, woollen overtunic, and short white cloak—“the *ganzabara* Hermippos”—a clean-shaven Hellene who like the majordomo, wore trousers—“and the general of this satrapy, Tadanmu”—a Persian with a no-nonsense look in his eyes, dressed rather more plainly than suited his station.

Mithredath kissed more cheeks. After the satrap’s example, his aides could hardly show the eunuch less favor. The feel of Hermippos’ face was strange; only among his own kind was Mithredath used to smooth skin against his lips. Not being the only beardless person present made him feel extraordinarily masculine. He laughed at himself for the conceit.

“Here, sit by me,” Vahauka said when the introductions were done. He shouted for his servants to bring Mithredath food and wine. “Refresh yourself; when you have finished perhaps you will favor us by telling what business of the King of Kings, may Ahura Mazda smile upon him and make long his reign, brings you to this far western land.”

“With pleasure, my lord,” Mithredath said. Then for some time he was busy with food and drink. The wines were excellent; the satrapy of the Yauna of the western mainland was known for its grapes, though grapes were one of the few things it was known for, even in Babylon. The food pleased Mithredath less. Vahauka might be used to salted olives, but olives was enough to last Mithredath a lifetime.

Servants lit torches as twilight gave way to darkness. Insects fluttered around the light whose smoke was sweet with frankincense. Every so often a nightjar or bat would dive into view, snatch a bug, and vanish again.

The majordomo led in three flute girls wearing only wisps of filmy cloth. Vahauka seated

them away, saying, "Our distinguished guest's news will prove more interesting than the songs and dances, which we have all seen and heard before, and surely he will not miss them in any way."

Mithredath glanced at the satrap from under lowered brows. Was that a sly dig at his condition? If so, Vahauka was a fool, which might account for his governing only this undistinguished satrapy. Eunuchs' memories for slights were notoriously long, and Mithredath soon would be far closer to the ear of the King of Kings again than Vahauka could dream of coming.

For the moment, of course, Mithredath remained the soul of courtesy. "As my lord wishes to know, then, that I am come at the command of the King of Kings, may Ahura Mazda smile upon him and make long his reign, to learn more of the deeds of his splendid forefather the first Khshish, called the Conqueror, that those deeds may be celebrated once again and redound to the further glory of the present King of Kings, who proudly bears the same name."

A brief silence followed as the officials thought over what he had said. Vahauka asked, "This is your sole commission, excellent *saris*?"

"It is, my lord."

"Then we will be pleased to render you such assistance as we may be capable of," the satrap said fulsomely. His aides were quick to echo him. Mithredath heard the relief in their voices. He knew why it was there: no misdeed of theirs had come to the notice of the King of Kings.

"You want to learn how the first Khshish took Hellas, eh?" Hermippos said. Mithredath almost failed to recognize the King of Kings' name in his mouth; flavored by his native speech, it came out sounding like "Xerxes." The *ganzabara* went on. "The ruins of Athens, I suppose, would be the best place for that."

"Aye!" "Indeed!" "Well said!" Vahauka, Rishi-kidin, and Tadanmu all spoke at once. Mithredath smiled, but only to himself. How eager they were to get him out of their hair! Perhaps they, or some of them, *were* up to something about which Khshish should know.

Still, Hermippos had a point. As Mithredath had learned in Babylon preparing for this mission, Athens had led the western Yauna in their fight against the Conqueror. The eunuchs sighed. Having come so far already, he supposed poking through rubble could not make things much worse.

Hermippos said, "If you like, excellent *saris*, I will provide you with a secretary who reads and writes not only Aramaic but also the Hellenic tongue. It is still often used here and in the ancient days of which you spoke would have been the only written language, I suppose."

"I accept with thanks," Mithredath said sincerely, dipping his head. He'd picked up a few words of the tongue of the Hellenes on his westward journey, but it had never occurred to him that he might also need to learn the strange, angular script the locals used. He sighed again, wishing he were home.

Vahauka might have been peering into his thoughts. "Tell us of the news of the court," he said to Mithredath. Here in this distant land we learn of it but slowly and imperfectly."

Nodding, Mithredath gave such gossip as he thought safe to give; he had no intention of setting out all of Khshish's business—or his scandals—before these men he did not know. He was, though, so circumspect that he blundered, for after he was through, Tadanmu observed, "You have said nothing, excellent *saris*, of the King of Kings' cousin, the great lord Kurash."

“I pray your pardon, my lord. I did not mention him because he has been seeing to his estates these past few months and hence is not currently in attendance upon the King of Kings, may Ahura Mazda smile upon him and make long his reign. Lord Kurash is well, though, so far as I know, and I have heard he has new sons by two of his younger wives.”

“And likely hiked up the midwife’s skirts after she came away from each one of them, to celebrate the news.” Tadanmu chuckled. Kurash’s prowess and his zeal in exercising it were notorious.

The general asked more of Kurash. Mithredath declined to be drawn out, and Tadanmu subsided. Mithredath made a mental note all the same. Kurash’s ambitions, or rather the forestalling of them, were the main reason the eunuch had come to the satrapy of the Yauri of the western mainland. New glory accruing to Khrrish the Conqueror would also reflect onto his namesake, the present occupant—under Ahura Mazda—of the throne of the King of Kings.

Mithredath drained his cup and held it out for more. A servant hurried up to fill it. The eunuch sipped, rolled the wine around in his mouth so he could appreciate it fully, and nodded in slow pleasure. Here was one reason, anyhow, to approve of this western venture. He cherished such reasons. He had not found many of them.

“My lord?”

Mithredath looked around to see who the young Hellene was addressing, then realized with a start that the fellow was talking to him. The ignorance of these provincials! “No lord I,” he said. “I am but a *saris* in the service of the King of Kings.”

He watched a flush rise under the young man’s clear skin. “My apologies, my—excellent *saris*,” the Hellene said, correcting himself. “You are called Mithredath, though, are you not?”

“That is my name,” the eunuch admitted, adding icily, “You have the advantage of me, believe.”

The fellow’s flush grew deeper. “Apologies again. My name is Polydoros; I thought Hermippos would have mentioned me. If it please you, I am to be your guide to the ruins of Athens.”

“Ah!” Mithredath studied this Polydoros with fresh interest. But no, his first impression had been accurate: the fellow was well on the brash side of thirty. Wondering if the *ganzaba* was trying to palm some worthless relative off on him, he said cautiously, “I had looked for an older man.”

“To be fluent in Aramaic and the Hellenic tongue both, you mean?” Polydoros said, and Mithredath found himself nodding. The Hellene explained, “It’s coming from a banking family that does it, excellent *saris*. Most of the inland towns in this satrapy still cling to the old language for doing business, so naturally I’ve had to learn to read and write it as well as speak it.”

“Ah,” Mithredath said again. That made a certain amount of sense. “We’ll see how things go, then.”

“Very good,” Polydoros said. “What are your plans? Will you travel up to the ruins each day or had you planned actually to stay in Athens?”

“Just how far inland is it?” Mithredath asked.

“A parasang and a half, maybe.”

“Close to two hours walk each way? In the little time I’d have in the ruins, how could I hope to accomplish anything? I’d sooner pitch a tent there and spend a much shorter while with a bit more discomfort. That will let me return to the east all the sooner.”

“As you wish, excellent *saris*. After tomorrow, I shall be at your service.”

“Why not go tomorrow?” Mithredath asked rather grumpily. “I can send my servants out once to buy tent cloth and other necessities.”

“You pardon, sir, but as I said, I am of a banking family. Tomorrow the monthly silver shipment from the Laurion mines south of here will arrive, and I’ll need to be present to help with weighing and assaying the metal. The mines don’t produce as they did when the great lode was found not long after Hellas came under Persia, but there will still be close to a talent of silver: forty or fifty pounds of it, certainly.”

“Do what you must, of course,” Mithredath said, yielding to necessity. “I’ll look forward to seeing you morning after next, then.” He bowed, indicating that Polydoros could go.

But the Hellene did not depart immediately. Instead he stood with a faraway expression on his face, looking through Mithredath rather than at him. The eunuch was growing annoyed when at last Polydoros said dreamily, “I wonder how the conquest would have gone, had the Athenians stumbled onto that silver before Khsrish’s”—he pronounced it *Xerxes*’—“campaign. Money buys the sinews of war.”

A banker indeed, Mithredath thought scornfully. “Money does not buy bravery,” he said.

“Perhaps not, excellent *saris*, but even the bravest man, were he naked, would fare badly against an armored warrior with a spear. Had Athens been able to build ships to match the Persian fleet, the Hellenes might not have fallen under the empire’s control.”

Mithredath snorted. “All the subject peoples have their reasons why they should have heeded off Persia. None did.”

“Of course you are right, excellent *saris*,” Polydoros said politely, wise enough to hide his true feelings, whatever they were. “It was but a fancy of the moment.” He bowed. “Till the day after tomorrow.” He hurried off.

“I came to the proper decision.” Mithredath lifted his soft felt cap from his head and used it to wipe sweat from his face. “I shouldn’t care to have to make this journey coming and going each day.”

“As you say, excellent *saris*.” With a broad-brimmed straw hat and thin, short Hellenic mantle, Polydoros was more comfortably dressed than Mithredath, but he was sweating, too. Behind them the eunuch’s servants and a donkey bore their burdens in stolid silence. One of the servants led a sheep that kept trying to stop and nibble grass and shrubs.

Something crunched under Mithredath’s shoe. He looked down and saw a broken piece of pottery and, close by it, half-buried in weeds, a chunk of brick. “A house stood here once,” he said. He heard the surprise in his voice and felt foolish. But knowing this wilderness had been a city was not the same as stumbling over its remains.

Polydoros was more familiar with the site. He pointed. “You can see a fragment of the old wall there among the olive trees.”

Had he noticed it, Mithredath would have taken it for a pile of rocks. Now that he looked closely, though, he saw they had been worked to fit together.

“Most of what used to be here, I suppose, has been carried off over the years,” Polydoros

said. Mithredath nodded. Stealing already worked stone would be easier for a peasant than working it himself. Polydoros pointed again, to the top of one of the hillocks ahead. "More of the wall around the akropolis—the citadel, you would say in Aramaic—is left because it is harder to get the rock down."

"Aye," Mithredath said, pleased to find the Hellene thinking along with him. It was his turn to point. "That is the way up to the—the citadel?" At the last moment he decided against trying to echo the local word Polydoros had used.

The Hellene dipped his head, a gesture Mithredath had learned to equate with a nod. "Of course, it would have been an easier ramp to climb when it was kept clear of brush," Polydoros said dryly.

"So it would." The eunuch's heart was already beating fast; he had endured more exertion on this western journey than ever before in his life. Still, he had a job to do. "Let us go up. That is the citadel, the ruins there will be important ones and may tell me what I need to learn of Athens."

"As you say, excellent *sans*."

On reaching the top of the akropolis, Mithredath felt a bit like a conqueror himself. Not only was the ancient ramp overgrown, it was also gullied. One of the eunuch's servants was limped with a twisted ankle; had the donkey stumbled into that hole, it probably would have broken a leg. Mithredath was winded, and even Polydoros, who seemed ready for anything, was breathing hard.

Rank grass and weeds also grew on the flat ground on top of the citadel, between the stones of the wrecked wall, and over the lower parts of the destroyed buildings the Persians had sacked so long ago. One of those buildings, a large one, had been unfinished when Athens fell. Marble column drums thrust up from the undergrowth. Mithredath could still see score marks on them.

In front of those half columns stood a marble stele whose shape was familiar to the eunuch—there were many like it in Babylon—but which did not belong with the ruins around it. Not was the inscription carved onto that stele written in the local language, but in Aramaic and in the wedge-shaped characters the Persians had once used and the native Babylonians sometimes employed.

A thrill ran through Mithredath as he read the Aramaic text: " 'Khshish, King of Kings declares: You who may be king hereafter, of lies beware. I, Khshish, King of Kings, having pulled down this city, center of the rebel Yauna, decree that it shall remain wilderness forevermore. You who may be king hereafter and obey these words, may Ahura Mazda be your friend and may your seed be made numerous; may Ahura Mazda make your days long; may whatever you do be successful. You who may be king hereafter, if you see this stele and its words and follow them not, may Ahura Mazda curse you, and of your seed more may there not be, and may Ahura Mazda pull down all you make as I, Khshish, King of Kings, have pulled down this city, center of the rebel Yauna.'

"A mighty lord, Khshish the Conqueror, to have his decree obeyed down across the years," Mithredath said, proud to be of the same Persian race as the long-ago King of Kings, though of his own seed, of course, more there would never be.

"Mighty indeed," Polydoros said tonelessly.

Mithredath looked at him sharply, then relaxed. Polydoros was, after all, a Hellene.

Expecting him to be overjoyed before an inscription celebrating the defeat of his forefather was too much to ask.

The eunuch rummaged in one of the packs on the donkey's back until he found a sheet of papyrus, a reed pen, and a bottle of ink. He copied the Aramaic portion of Khrrish's inscription. He presumed the Persian text said the same thing, but could not read it. Perhaps some magus with antiquarian leanings might still be able to, perhaps not. The present Khrrish would care only about the Aramaic. Of that the eunuch was certain.

He looked at what he had written. He frowned and compared the papyrus to the text carved into the stele. He had copied everything written there. Still, something seemed to be missing.

Perhaps Polydoros could supply it; he was a native of these parts. Mithredath turned to him. "Tell me, please, good Polydoros, do you know the name of the king of Athens whom Khrrish the Conqueror overcame?"

The Hellene frowned. "Excellent *saris*, I do not. The last king of Athens whose name I know is Kodros, and he is a man of legend, from long before the time of Xerxes."

"I might have known this was going too smoothly." Mithredath sighed. Then he brightened. "It was to learn such things, after all, that I came here." He scratched his head; he did not approve of loose ends. "But how is it you know of this—Kodros, you said?—and not of the man who must have been Athens's last king?"

"Excellent *saris*," Polydoros said hesitantly, "in the legends of my people Kodros is the last king of Athens."

"Ridiculous," Mithredath snorted. "*Someone* must rule, is it not so? This Athens must have been an enemy worthy of Khrrish's hatred for him to destroy it utterly and afterward curse it. Such an enemy will have had rulers, and able ones, to oppose the King of Kings. How can we have lacked them for all the time since the death of Kodros? Did not one lead it all those years? I cannot believe that."

"Nor I," Polydoros admitted.

"Very strange." Mithredath glanced over to the unhappy sheep his servants had urged—and dragged—up the overgrown ramp. "Here, before Khrrish's victory stele, seems as good a spot as any to offer up the beast." He drew the dagger that hung from his belt and cut a spray of leaves from a nearby bush. He put the leaves in his cap. "They should be myrtle, but any will do in a pinch."

Polydoros watched Mithredath lead the sheep over to the marble pillar and set the dagger against its neck. "Just like that?" the Hellene asked. "No altar? No ritual fire? No libation? No flute players? No grain sprinkled before you sacrifice?"

"The good god Ahura Mazda does not need them to hear my prayer."

Polydoros shrugged. "Our rites are different."

Mithredath cut the sheep's throat. As the beast kicked toward death, he beseeched Ahura Mazda to help him succeed in his quest for knowledge with which to glorify the King of Kings. He was forbidden to pray for any more personal or private good, but with this sacrifice had no need to do so in any case.

"Does your god require any of the flesh of you?" Polydoros asked as the eunuch began the gory job of butchering the carcass and setting the disjointed pieces on a heap of soft greenery.

"No, it is mine to do with as I will. A magus should pray over it, but as none is here, w

shall have to make do.”

“Is that garlic growing over there? It will flavor the meat once it’s cooked.” Polydoros licked his chops.

Mithredath felt saliva flow into his own mouth. He turned to a servant. “You can get a fire going now, Tishtrya.”

“What are you doing?” Polydoros asked the next morning.

“Looking through the notes I made before I left Babylon,” Mithredath said. “Here, I knew there was something that would tell me who ruled here when the first Khshtrish came. An old tablet says he led Demos of Athens into captivity. Who is this Demos, if Kodros was the last king here?”

“‘Dēmos’ isn’t a who, I’m afraid, excellent *saris*, but rather a what,” Polydoros said. “Whoever wrote your tablet wanted to celebrate the King of Kings, as you do, but did not know the Hellenic tongue well. ‘Dēmos of Athens’ simply means ‘the people of Athens.’”

“Oh.” Mithredath sighed. “If you knew the trouble I had finding that—” He shuffled scraps of papyrus, briefly looked happy, then grew cautious again. “I also found something about ‘Boulē of Athens.’ Someone told me *ē* was the feminine ending in your language, so I took Boulē to be Dēmos’ wife. You’re going to tell me that’s wrong, too, though, aren’t you?”

Polydoros dipped his head. “I’m sorry, but I must, excellent *saris*. ‘Boulē’ means ‘council.’”

“Oh.” The eunuch’s sigh was longer this time. “The people of Athens, the council of Athens—where is the king of Athens?” He glared at Polydoros as if the young banker were responsible for making that elusive monarch disappear. Then he sighed once more. “That’s what I came here to find out, I suppose. Where are we most likely to find whatever records or decrees this town kept before it came under the rule of the King of Kings?”

“There are two likely places,” Polydoros said after a visible pause for thought that made Mithredath very much approve of him. “One is up here, in the citadel. The other would be down there”— He pointed north and west —“in the agora, the city’s marketplace. Anyone who came into the city from the countryside to do business would be able to read the records there.”

“Sensible,” Mithredath said. “We’ll cast about here for a while, then, and go down again later. The fewer trips up and down that ramp I take, the happier I shall be.” When Polydoros agreed, the eunuch turned to his servants. “Tishtrya, Raga, you will be able to help in this enterprise, too. All you need do is look for anything with writing on it and let me know. Polydoros know if you actually find something.”

The servants’ nods were gloomy; they had looked forward to relaxing while their master worked. Mithredath expected little from them but did not feel like having them sit idle. He was surprised when, a few minutes later, one of them came trotting through the rubble and undergrowth, waving excitedly to show he had found something.

“What is it, Raga?” the eunuch asked.

“Words, master, carved on an old wall,” Raga replied. “Come see!”

“I shall,” Mithredath said. He and Polydoros followed the servant back to where his companion was waiting. Tishtrya proudly pointed at the inscription. The eunuch’s hopes fell at once: it was too short to be the kind of thing he was seeking. He turned to Polydoros. “What does it say?”

“*Kalos Arkhias*,” the Hellene replied. “ ‘Arkhias is beautiful.’ It’s praise of a pretty boy, excellent *saris*, nothing more; you could see the like chalked or scratched on half the walls of Peiraieus.”

“Nasty buggers,” Tishtrya muttered under his breath in Persian. Polydoros’ eyes went hard for a moment, but he said nothing. Mithredath upbraided his servant; at the same time he made a mental note that the Hellene understood some Persian.

The search resumed. The citadel of Athens was not a large place; a man could easily walk the length of it in a quarter of an hour. But how many such trips would he have to take across it, Mithredath wondered, to make sure he missed nothing? Assuming, of course, he added to himself a moment later, anything was there to be missed.

Polydoros sat down in the narrow shade of an overthrown chunk of masonry and fanned himself with his straw hat. He might have been thinking with Mithredath’s mind, for he said, “This could take forever, you know, excellent *saris*.”

“Yes,” was all Mithredath cared to reply to that obvious truth.

“We need to plan what to do, then, rather than simply wandering about up here,” the Hellene went on. Mithredath nodded; Polydoros seemed to have a talent for straightforward thinking. After more consideration Polydoros said, “Let’s make a circuit of the wall first. Decrees often go up on the side of a wall so people can see them. It is not the same in Babylon?”

“It is,” Mithredath agreed. He and Polydoros made their way back to the ramp up which they had come.

They walked north and east along the wall. Mithredath’s heart beat faster when he saw letters scratched onto a stone, but it was only another graffito extolling a youth’s beauty. Then, when they were about halfway along the northern reach of the wall, opposite the ruins of some many-columned building, Polydoros suddenly pointed and exclaimed, “There, look! Zeus; that’s what we’re after!”

Mithredath’s eyes followed the Hellene’s finger. The slab Polydoros had spied was flatter and paler than the surrounding stones. As they hurried toward it, Mithredath saw the slab was covered with letters in the angular script the Hellenes used for their own language. If there was someone praising a pretty boy, he’d been very long-winded.

“What does it say?” the eunuch asked. He fought against excitement; for all he knew, the inscription had been ancient when Khsrish took Athens.

“Let me see.” Polydoros studied the letters. So, in his more ignorant way, did Mithredath. He could see that the stone carving here was more regular than the scratchings his servant had and he and Polydoros had come upon before. That in itself, he suspected, marked an official document.

“Well?” he asked impatiently. He took out pen and ink and papyrus and got ready to transcribe the words Polydoros was presumably rendering into Aramaic.

“This is part of what you seek, I think,” the Hellene said at last.

“Tell me, then!” Had he been a whole man, Mithredath’s voice would have cracked; as he was what he was, it merely rose a little.

“I’m about to. Here: ‘It seemed good to the council and to the people’ ... *boulē* and *dēmō* again, you see?”

“A plague on the council and people!” Mithredath broke in. “Who in Ahura Mazda’s name

was the king?"

"I'm coming to that, I think. Let me go on: 'With the tribe of Antiokhis presiding, Leostratos serving as chairman, Hypsikhides as secretary—' "

"The king!" Mithredath shouted. "Where is the name of the king?"

"It is not on the stone," Polydoros admitted. He sounded puzzled. Mithredath, for his part, was about ready to grind his teeth. Polydoros continued. "This may be it: 'Aristeides proposed these things concerning the words of the prophetess of Delphi and the Persians:

" 'Let the Athenians fortify the citadel with beams of wood as well as stone to meet the Persians, just as was bade by the prophetess. Let the council choose woodsmen and carpenters to do this, and let them be paid from the public treasury. Let all this be done as quickly as possible, Xerxes already having come to Asian Sardis. Let there be good fortune to the people of Athens.' "

"Read it over again," Mithredath said. "Read it slowly so that I can be sure I have your Yauna names correct."

"Not all Hellenes are Ionians," Polydoros said. Mithredath shrugged. How these westerners chose to divide themselves was their business, and he did not care one way or the other. But Khrrish, back in Babylon, would think of them all as Yauna. And so, in his report, Yauna that would be.

Polydoros finished reading. Mithredath's pen stopped its scratching race across the sheet of papyrus. The eunuch read what he had written. He read it again. "Is, ah, Leostratos the ruler of Athens, then? And this Aristeides his minister? Or is Aristeides the king? The measure of his, I gather."

"So it would seem, excellent *saris*," Polydoros said. "But our words for 'king' are *anax* and more usually, *basileus*. Neither of those is here."

"No," Mithredath said morosely. He mentally damned all the ancient Athenians to Ahriman and the House of the Lie for confusing him so. Khrrish and his courtiers would *not* be pleased if Mithredath had traveled so far, had spent so much gold from the King of Kings' treasury without finding what he had set out to find. Nothing was more dreadful for a eunuch—for anyone, but for a eunuch especially—than losing the favor of the King of Kings.

Mithredath read the translated inscription once more. "You have rendered this accurately into Aramaic?"

"As best I could, excellent *saris*," Polydoros said stiffly.

"I pray your pardon, good Polydoros," the eunuch said. "I meant no disrespect, I assure you. It's only that there is much here I do not understand."

"Nor I," Polydoros said, but some of the ice was gone from his voice.

Mithredath bowed. "Thank you. Help me, then, if you will, to put together the pieces of this broken pot. What does this phrase mean: 'it seemed good to the council and to the people'? Why does the stone carver set that down? Why should anyone care what the people think? Theirs is only to obey, after all."

"True, excellent *saris*" Polydoros said. "Your questions are all to the point. The only difficulty"—he spread his hands and smiled wryly—"is that I have no answers to them."

Mithredath sat down on a chunk of limestone that, from its fluted side, might once have been part of a column. Weeds scratched his ankles through the straps of his sandals. A spider ran across his instep and was gone before he could swat it. In the distance he heard h

servants crunching through brush. A hoopoe called its strange, trilling call. Otherwise silence ruled the dead citadel.

The eunuch rubbed his smooth chin. “How is Peiraiæus ruled? Maybe that will tell me something of Athens’s ways before the Conqueror came.”

“I beg leave to doubt it, excellent *saris*. The city is no different from any other in the empire. The King of Kings, may Zeus and the other gods smile on him, appoints the town governor, who is responsible to the satrap. In the smaller towns the satrap makes the appointment.”

“You’re right. That doesn’t help.” Mithredath read the inscription again. By now he was getting sick of it and put the papyrus back in his lap with a petulant grunt. “‘The *people*,’” he repeated. “It almost sounds as if they and the council are sovereign and these men mere ministers, so to speak.”

“I can imagine a council conducting affairs, I suppose,” Polydoros said slowly, “though I doubt one could decide matters as well or as fast as a single man. But how could anyone know about what all the people of a city thought on a question? And even if for some reason the people were asked about one matter, surely no one could expect to reckon up what they thought about each of the many concerns a city has every day.”

“I was hoping you would give me a different slant on the question. Unfortunately, I think just as you do.” Mithredath sighed and heaved himself up off his makeshift seat. “I suppose all we can do now is search further and hope we find more words to help us pierce the mystery.”

The eunuch, the Hellene, and the two servants prowled the citadel for the next two days. Tishtrya almost stepped on a viper, but killed it with his stick before it could strike. Mithredath came to admire the broken statuary he kept stumbling over. It was far more restrained than the ebullient, emotional sculpture he was used to, but had a spare elegance of its own.

The searchers came across a good number of inscriptions, but none that helped unravel the riddle the first long one had posed. Most were broken or worn almost to illegibility. Twice Polydoros found the formula “it seemed good to the council and to the people.” Each time Mithredath swore in frustration because the rest of the stone was, in one case, buried beneath masonry and therefore would have taken twenty men to move, and in the other case missing altogether.

“Enough of this place,” Mithredath said on the evening of that second day. “I don’t care any longer if the answer is right under my feet. I think it would run away from me like a rabbit from a fox if I dug for it. Tomorrow we will search down below, in the marketplace. Maybe our luck will be better there.”

No one argued with him, although they all knew they had not thoroughly explored the citadel—that would be a job for months or years, not days. They rolled themselves in the blankets—no matter how hot the days were, the nights stayed chilly—and slept.

The marketplace had fewer ruins than the citadel. “How do I know this still is part of the marketplace?” Mithredath asked pointedly as he, Polydoros, and the servants picked their way along through grass, bushes, and brush. Before Polydoros could answer, the eunuch added, “Aii!” He had just kicked a large stone, with painful results.

He pushed away the brush that hid it. It was a very large stone; he felt like a idiot for not having seen it. In his anger, he bent down to push the stone over. "Wait!" Polydoros said. "It has letters on it." He read them and began to laugh.

"What, if I may ask, strikes you funny?" Glacial dignity, Mithredath thought, was preferable to hopping up and down on one foot.

"It says, 'I am the boundary stone of the agora,' " Polydoros told him.

"Oh," the eunuch said, feeling foolish all over again.

The most prominent wrecked building was a couple of minutes' walk north of them; its wrecked facade had eight columns, two of them still standing at their full height and supporting fragments of an architrave. "Shall we examine that first?" Polydoros asked, pointing.

Mithredath's throbbing toes made him contrary. "No, let's save it for last and wander about for a while. After all, it isn't going anywhere."

"As you wish," Polydoros said politely. Behind them, Mithredath's servants sighed. The eunuch pretended he had not heard.

"What's that?" Mithredath asked a minute or so later, seeing another piece of stone poking up from out of the weeds—seeing it, thankfully, before he had a closer encounter with it.

"By the shape, it's the base a statue once stood on," Polydoros said. He walked over to it. "Two statues," he amended. "I see insets carved for four feet. Ah, there's writing on it here." He pulled weeds aside and read, "'Harmodios and Aristogeiton, those who slew the tyrant Hipparkhos.' "

"What's a tyrant?" Mithredath frowned at the unfamiliar word. "Some sort of legendary monster?"

"No, merely a man who ruled a city but was not of any kingly line. Many towns among the Hellenes used to have them."

"Ah. Thank you." Mithredath thought about that for a moment, then said incredulously. "There was in the marketplace of Athens a statue celebrating men who killed the city ruler?"

"So it would seem, excellent *saris*," Polydoros said. "Put that way, it is surprising, is it not?"

"It's madness," the eunuch said, shuddering at the idea. "As well for all that Persia conquered you Yauna. Who knows what lunacy you might otherwise have loosed on the world?"

"Hmm," was all Polydoros said to that. The Hellene jerked his chin toward the ruined building, which was now quite close. "Shall we go over to it now?"

But Mithredath reacted to the Hellenic perversity exemplified by the ruined statue base with perversity of his own: "No, we'll go around it, see what else is here." He knew he was being difficult, and reveled in it. What could Polydoros do about it?

Nothing, obviously. "As you wish," the Hellene repeated. He then proceeded to skirt the ruins by an even larger margin than Mithredath would have chosen. *Take that*, the eunuch thought. Smiling behind Polydoros' back, he followed him north and west.

Still, enough was enough. "I'm certain *this* isn't the marketplace any more," Mithredath said when the Hellene had led him almost all the way to Athens' overthrown gates.

"No, I suppose not," Polydoros admitted. "Are you ready to head back now?"

“More than ready.” Mithredath caught Polydoros’ eye. They grinned at each other, both of them a little sheepish. Mithredath glanced at his servants. They did not seem amused, and he knew better than to seem annoyed.

Something crunched under the eunuch’s foot. Curious, he bent down. Then, more curious, he showed Polydoros what he had found. “What’s this?”

“An *ostrakon*—a potsherd,” Polydoros amended, remembering to put the Yauna word in Aramaic.

“I knew *that*,” Mithredath said impatiently. “I’ve stepped on enough of them these past few days. But what’s this written on it?”

“Hmm?” Polydoros took a closer look. “A name—Themistokles, son of Neokles.”

“Why write on a potsherd?”

“Cheaper than papyrus.” Polydoros shrugged. “People are always breaking pots and always have sherds around.”

“Why just a name, then? Why not some message to go with it?”

“Excellent *saris*, I have no idea.”

“Hrmp,” Mithredath said. He took another step and heard another crunch. He was not especially surprised to find another potsherd under his foot; as Polydoros had said, people were always breaking pots. He was surprised, though, to find he had stepped on two sherds in a row with writing on them. He handed the second piece of broken pottery to Polydoros and pointed at the letters.

“Themistokles, Neokles’ son, again,” the Hellene said.

“That’s all?” Mithredath asked. Polydoros dipped his head to show it was. The eunuch gave him a quizzical look. “Good Polydoros, why write just a man’s name—just his name, minus you, nothing else—on two different pieces of broken pottery? If one makes no sense, do it twice somehow?”

“Not to me, excellent *saris*.” Polydoros shifted his feet like a schoolboy caught in some mischief by his master. This time his sandal crunched on something. Mithredath felt a certain sense of inevitability as Polydoros looked at the sherd, found writing on it, and read “Themistokles, son of Neokles.”

The eunuch put hands on hips. “Just how many of these things are there?” He turned to his servants. “Tear out some brush here. My curiosity has the better of me. Let’s see how many sherds we can turn up.”

The look Raga and Tishtrya exchanged was eloquent. Like any master with good sense, Mithredath pretended not to see it. The servants bent and began uprooting shrubs and weeds. They moved at first with the resigned slowness servants always used on unwelcome tasks, but then even they began to show some interest as sherd followed sherd in quick succession.

“Themistokles, Neokles’ son,” Polydoros read again and again, and then once, to vary the monotony, “Themistokles of the district Phrearrios.” He turned to Mithredath and raised an eyebrow. “I think we may assume this to be the same man referred to by the rest of the sherds.”

“Er, yes.” Mithredath watched the pile of potsherds grow by Polydoros’ feet. He began to feel like a sorcerer whose spell had proved stronger than he had expected.

His servants had speculations of their own. “Who d’you suppose this Themis-whatever was?” Tishtrya asked Raga as they worked together to uproot a particularly stubborn plant.

“Probably a he-whore putting his name about so he’d have plenty of trade,” Raga panted. Mithredath, listening, did not dismiss the idea out of hand. It made more sense than anything he’d been able to think of.

“Themistokles, son of Neokles,” Polydoros said almost an hour later. He put down another sherd. “That makes, ah, ninety-two.”

“Enough.” Mithredath threw his hands in the air. “At this rate we could go on all summer. I think there are more important things to do.”

“Like the ruin, for example?” Polydoros asked slyly.

“Well, now that you mention it, yes,” Mithredath said with such grace as he could muster. He kicked a foot toward the pile of potsherds. “We’ll leave this rubbish here. I see no use for it but to prove how strange the men of Athens were, and it would glorify neither Khshish the Conqueror nor through him our Khshish IV, may Ahura Mazda make long his reign, to say he overcame a race of madmen.”

The eunuch’s servants laughed at that: they were Persians, too. Polydoros managed a lopsided smile. He was on the quiet side as the four men made their way back to the ruined building in the marketplace.

Once they were there, the Hellene quickly regained his good spirits, for he found he had a chance to gloat. “This building is called the *Stoa Basileios*,” he said, pointing to letters carved on an overthrown piece of frieze. “The Royal Portico. If we wanted to learn of kings, we should have come here first.”

Chagrin and excitement warred in Mithredath. Excitement won. “Good Polydoros, you were right. Find me here, if you can, a list of the kings of Athens. The last one, surely, will be the man Khshish overcame.” Which will mean, he added to himself, that I can get out of these ruins and this whole backward satrapy.

Seized perhaps by some of that same hope, Raga and Tishtrya searched the ruins with three times the energy they had shown hunting for potsherds. Stones untouched since the Persian sack save by wind, rain, and scurrying mice went crashing over as the servants scoured the area for more bits of writing.

Mithredath found the first new inscription himself, but already had learned not to be overwhelmed by an idle wall scratching. All the same, he called Polydoros over. “‘Phrynikhos thinks Aiskhylos is beautiful,’ ” the Hellene read dutifully.

“About what I expected, but one never knows.” Mithredath nodded and went on looking. He had been gelded just before puberty; feeling desire was as alien to him as Athens’ battered rocky landscape. He knew he would never understand what drove this Phrynikhos to declare his lust for the pretty boy. Lust—other men’s lust—was just something he had used to advance himself, back when he was young enough to trade on it. Once in a while, abstractly, he wondered what it was like.

Raga let out a shout that drove all such useless fancies from his mind. “Here’s a big flat stone covered with letters!” Everyone came rushing over to see. The servant went on. “I saw this wasn’t one stone here but two, the white one covering the gray. So I used my staff to lever the white one off, and look!” He was as proud as if he’d done the writing himself.

Mithredath plunged pen into ink and readied his papyrus. “What does it say?” he asked Polydoros.

The Hellene plucked nervously at his beard and looked from the inscription to Mithredath.

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