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The Adept



The Adept

A Short Story

by

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The revelation struck him as he was making copies of the Emerald Tablet for his students, half sleeping, half daydreaming. *Haec est totius fortitudinis fortitudo fortis, quia vincet omnem rem subtilem, omnemque solidam penetrabit.* Fortis, not materian.

Suddenly wide awake he stared at the scroll in front of him. Fortis, not materian! He jumped up from the table and rushed to the shelves lining the walls of the scriptorium. He grabbed the Arabic copy of the Emerald Tablet, then the Greek, but he already knew what he would find there. They both spoke of force, energy, power, not substance.

Alios sank back in his seat, scrolls forgotten on his lap, and gazed absently ahead. Particles of dust were dancing in the beams of sunlight that penetrated through glass roof panels. The scriptorium, furnished only with writing desks and shelves, was deserted and quiet at this early hour.

Force. The text clearly said force. So why was it, thought Alios, that for hundreds of years generations of alchemists looked for a substance? Rex Regum, Draco Elixir, Lapis Immortalitas. The Philosopher's Stone. They wasted their lives away trying to produce this elusive purple colored stone which was meant to turn any metal into gold. But what if the principle of transmutation was not some stone or powder, but a force? That did make much more sense. And that was what the sacred text of the Emerald Tablet said: fortis, not materian.

Yet, how could it be that all those generations of alchemists, Adepts and Masters alike, looked for the wrong thing, if the truth was right in front of their eyes? The writings of

Hermes Trismegistus, father of alchemy and other occult studies, were the first thing that a novice read at the Alchemist Academy. Everyone knew them, and yet, they all searched for a substance.

A feeling of uneasiness took hold of Alios. Could it be that he had missed some crucial moment in his training? Could he have dozed off at some lecture, while the novices were explained this simple paradigm shift? Or was it something that was so obvious that it did not even merit mentioning. Could it be one of those things that was quite apparent to everyone else but him, like table manners or heraldry.

A timid cough startled Alios out of his exasperation. A novice was standing in front of him, eyes lowered respectfully, holding a rolled up parchment with a golden seal.

“A letter for you, sir.”

Alios took the parchment and was about to wave the boy away when he thought better of it. He looked at the novice, clad in the usual black robe girded with a hempen rope, thirteen, maybe fourteen years old, hair cut short, face covered in freckles and pimples. Alios was twenty-two, wore a gray robe with a silver chain, commanding deference of an Adept of Alchemy.

“What's your name?”

“Meralion Augustius of Tver, sir.”

Another pompous ass, thought Alios. “Tell me, Meralion Augustius of Tver,” he pronounced the name with exaggeration and enjoyed seeing the boy flinch, “which writings of Hermes Trismegistus have you studied?”

“All of them, sir. I'm in my fourth year.”

Definitely a pompous ass, decided Alios, one of those who are destined for the Academy by their lord-fathers straight after slipping from between the legs of their lady-

mothers.

“What are the Seven Principles mentioned in the Kybalion?”

“The Principle of Mentalism, the Principle of Correspondence, the Principle of Vibration, the Principle of Polarity, the Principle of Rhythm, Principle of Cause and Effect, and the Principle of Gender, sir,” the novice recited.

“What is the Principle of Transmutation?”

“Principio Transmutationis is the formula of Chrysopoeia, or transmutation of any metal into gold by means of applying the Philosopher's Stone, sir,” the boy said with a note of indignation at being asked such a basic question. Even a stable boy at the Academy would know the answer to that.

“Why the Philosopher's Stone?”

Confusion replaced the pout on the boy's pimpled countenance. “Sir?”

“Why would you apply a stone to any metal in order to transform it into gold?”

“Because,” the novice hesitated, “that's what Hermes Trismegistus wrote?”

Alios studied the boy for a moment with an unchanging expression. It would not do to question him any more. Dimwit he might be, but with more guidance even he will notice that this is precisely not what Hermes Trismegistus wrote. He waved his hand dismissively and the novice scuttled out of the scriptorium leaving Alios alone with the letter.

He recognized the seal. The letter was from Master Lothar, the man to whom he owed his life. Ten years ago Lothar caught a kitchen boy sneaking into the library at the viceroy's court and instead of having him whipped he took an interest in the inquisitive lad. He found that the kitchen boy was smart and eager to learn and that he exhibited some natural aptitude for the occult as well. On his way back to the Alchemist Academy Master Lothar took the boy and oversaw his education henceforth. Years passed, Alios graduated and changed the

black robe for a gray one. Not long after, Master Lothar retired from the Academy and politics and moved out of the city. He was quietly passing his old days at his family estate where, Alios read in the letter, he was inviting his former pupil to visit.

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The Alchemist Academy was housed in an ancient palazzo in the center of the city. It had its own gardens stretching between the main building and the riverfront enclosed within a high wall. Top floor of the palazzo held the scriptorium and a library, lower floors were devoted to lecture halls and student dormitories, ground floor held the refectory and shrines.

Underground vaults were given to alchemist laboratories.

Leaving the scriptorium Alios jumped down two marble steps at a time, in his agitation quite forgetting about Adepts' dignity. He crossed the herbary and entered a side wing of the palazzo given to the staff. His modest rooms were on the ground floor, but he didn't mind.

He threw the letter onto his desk. Not now, the old man would have to wait. He dismissed Master Lothar and the students' transcripts and settled down to a more immediate task. This, thought Alios, was the most important task of all, the opus magnum of every alchemist — the search for the Philosopher's Stone. No, the Philosopher's Force, he corrected himself.

He started by copying all hermetic texts that made a reference to energy rather than to substance and realized that, apart from Hermes Trismegistus himself, only two of his direct students did so. All later texts made the inexplicable alteration. And the tradition of thinking of the transmutation principle in these terms made the alchemists read substance even into

those primal texts which actually spoke of force. Fools, thought Alios, old complacent fools.

He redrew the schemata, recalculated equations, checked and rechecked again. It seemed to him as if suddenly all the puzzle pieces started to fit in all the right places. All those enigmatic formulas lost their obscurity and actually made perfect logical sense. He had to be right. Clutching his new diagrams Alios ran down to the laboratory vaults.

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He was correct.

Once he was sure he was on to something, he managed to convince the old decanus of the Academy to grant him temporary release from didactic duties. He always found teaching irksome but had to comply. Most of the highborn Adepts found positions at court or with their noble relatives or established independent laboratories. Alios was a kitchen boy, his mother a cook, his father unknown. He had no money to establish himself and no court would take on a base-born alchemist, even if he was one of the best in his year. So after graduation Alios stayed at the Academy and taught the novices in exchange for his modest quarters and the right to use the Academy's labs.

Now he spent every waking hour down in the vaults. Using reinterpreted ancient schemata, powerful spells and all the wisdom of alchemy — including the four stages of spiritual sublimation, just to be on the safe side — he tried to build a device that would allow him to arrest energy. Captorum, he called it. He built it. Then he rebuilt it.

Finally it worked. At least with the energy of heat it did. He managed to arrest the warmth of a candle and release it at will from the captorum. It worked with a bigger fire just as well, and with the heat of boiling water and burning magnesium, too. He was close, he

knew it.

Once he mastered the process of Chrysopoeia he would be able to produce as much gold as he wanted. As much gold as all of those priggish nobles had, put together. And then let them dare turn their noble noses at him.

Only he couldn't do that. If a poor Academy Adept suddenly turned into a Croesus, all the world would know that he had the Philosopher's Stone — Philosopher's Force, that is — and all the world would be after it. And if they managed to get it, anyone could make as much gold as they wanted and then it would lose its value. No, he had to protect his discovery, he had to be careful, keep it a secret as long as possible. Maybe forever.

Even as these anxieties occupied a part of his mind, he did not lose his resolve. The future, he felt, was bright and close at hand. He had built the captorum, arrested the heat, and now it was time to take the next step.

For heat was not the energy that he needed to master. No. It was what Hermes Trismegistus referred to as *fortitudo fortis*, the power of all powers, energy above all energies. And Alios had no doubt that this specific force was none other than anima — the energy of life.

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The day was sunny and already very warm when Alios rode under a carved stone gate and stopped his horse at the top of the hill to admire the view stretching before him. Lush orchards and vineyards rolled smoothly all the way down to the sea. Right on the edge of the high shore stood a great mansion, white marble walls reflecting the sun. Its terraces hung directly over the waves that crushed lazily into the cliff. An alley pillared by cypress trees led

from the gate to the mansion and ancient sculptures adorned the estate gardens.

Master Lothar was rich, his family noble and powerful. And it was the immense wealth and the old age of his mentor that finally swayed the Adept to share his secret. He hoped that Lothar would prove beyond the temptation. As he admired the view, Alios thought that surely no amount of gold could buy the Master any more comforts than he already had. Besides, Alios decided, he did not have a choice but to confide in the old man and seek his help.

The last weeks spent in the Academy vaults were a grim memory. Capturing heat proved easy, but other energies did not. Once Alios did manage to arrest the force of a moving object — a round, rolling stone — but even this experiment he couldn't repeat.

And as for capturing anima, that proved a total disaster. No matter how he tried to arrest the energy of life, it never worked. He tried to work his spells on live creatures, killed them in the captorium, drowned them, burned them. It never worked. One dead mouse after another, no result. He stole a carrier pigeon from the rookery. Caught a cat. Nothing. He winced at the memory of the beggar boy he had found in the city. Nothing worked. He had no choice but to ask the old man for advice.

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Lothar received his former student in his study, a large octagonal room at the top of the mansion vaulted with a marble cupola displaying a map of heavens in gold incrustation. Large windows were opened to allow in the sea breeze. Lothar was in all white, his robe girded with a golden chain as befitting a Master of Alchemy. He warmly embraced Alios.

“I am very glad to see you, my boy, very glad. It is good of you to visit an old man in

his solitude.”

“Master, your invitation was an honor.”

“Come, let us sit, my legs tire easily these days. Let us drink wine and talk of the world.”

A pretty young servant girl brought in chilled wine and bowls with olives, dates, and cured cheese. She helped the Master to rest his feet on a low cushioned stool and the old man patted her fondly on the back. “Thank you, my dear. You may leave us now.”

He followed her with his eyes to the door and turned back to Alios with a sigh. “Ah, to be young again. It is true that we always desire that which we cannot have.”

“As you say, Master.”

“Ha, I see your mind is occupied by different matters, and well so. Tell me, how is the old Academy? What news from the city?”

“Master.” Alios leaned forward, too impatient to indulge in gossip. “I have made a discovery.”

“A discovery, you say?” It seemed to Lothar when looking at the young man sitting at his table he could see a glimpse of the excited boy he caught at viceroy's court all those years ago. “You must tell me all about it.”

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“A force. But of course! So simple, so brilliant... and right before our eyes all these years. A force!”

“Yes Master, I believe so.”

“But, if it is true, then... why, the Philosopher's Stone would be a possibility yet, a

new possibility.”

Alios nodded cautiously.

“But is this truly so? Have you tried out your theory, my boy?”

“Yes Master, I have built a special apparatus, a captorum.” He brought out a parchment with the design of his contraption and spread it before the old man. “These here are magnets, and the lenses are made of moonstone,” Alios explained while pointing to various elements in his drawing. “I first built the frame out of steel but that of course did not work. I built a second one of iridium. And here is where I work the spells.”

“I see.” Master Lothar was thoughtfully following Alios' explanations. “Very well, very clever indeed, dear boy. To capture the energy and then release it at will, yes.”

Lothar stood up, and, forgetting about his hurting legs, started pacing about the hall tugging at his beard, “Why yes, the elegant simplicity. Capture the life force, and you have immortality. Of course!”

He turned around not trying to conceal his enthusiasm, “My dear Alios, I always knew you were going to do great things! But even I did not expect you to solve the biggest mystery of all time, and you not even a Master yet. But maybe precisely what it takes is a young mind. Oh, to be young again! And to think that I lived to see the day. And, thanks to you, I shall live many a more.”

In his excitement Lothar failed to notice the apprehension settling on Alios's face. He wants to live many more days, the Adept thought, he does not want the gold, he wants the immortality. Alios felt the cold grip of panic squeezing his guts. The old fool! Everyone will notice if he does not die soon. And then they will know and come after my discovery. I can't let it happen. No.

“Master, my captorum is not quite finished yet. There are still problems...”

“Problems, you say?”

“Yes, Master. I have managed to capture the energy of heat, and the energy of motion, but that only once. For some reason I could never repeat the experiment. And it did not work with any other force either.”

“No, it did not, did it?” Lothar slowly returned to his seat.

“I never managed to capture anima, Master. And I have tried different sources and different circumstances too.”

“I see.”

“I have tried everything.”

Lothar scrutinized the young man thoughtfully. “And when you managed to capture motion, was that during the full moon?”

“Yes,” Alios replied uncertainly, “how did you know?”

Lothar nodded, smiling to himself. He leaned back in his armchair to look at the heavenly map above them. “Yes. I see.”

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“There is wisdom beyond what you were taught at the Academy. Knowledge deemed so powerful and dangerous that it has been kept hidden from the world for generations.”

Lothar returned his gaze from the golden stars and fixed it upon Alios.

“You were taught that Hermes Trismegistus learned the secrets of alchemy, theurgy, and astrology from the god Toth. And that is true. The story is seldom told in full, however. You see, when Toth realized that the conjuncture of these three parts of wisdom gave Hermes the knowledge of the creation itself, the power over life and death, he decided that no man should be allowed to near the gods so much. So Toth called upon the goddess of chaos to breed discord among the students of Hermes. Ephaphras took the alchemist lore and left to

found the Academy. Melanthios seized the theurgic teachings and fled, but he was captured and killed by robbers. His scrolls were spread among commoners and his knowledge was lost to the world. Hesperos, who understood the danger that worried Toth, decided to guard his legacy well. He established the First Order, a secret brotherhood to guard the knowledge of astrology.”

“But Master,” Alios could not help but blurt out, “astrology is well known to all men who can read and observe the sky.”

“Ah, so it is, my boy, so it is. But it is the knowledge that men have managed to acquire themselves, and not that which has been revealed to Hermes by the gods. The wisdom guarded by Hesperos and his followers cannot be gained either by spells or observations. It is divine.”

This was becoming interesting, thought Alios. Did the old man know more than the other Masters of the Academy? Could it be that he had a solution to his problem and knew how to make the captorum work?

“Master, how did you know that it was a full moon when I managed to capture the energy of motion?”

“I knew it because my mentor, the great Master Carloman, belonged to the First Order. And he deemed me worthy to carry on his task. So he passed the secret sacred lore of Hermetic Astrology to me before he died. He told me that there were other lines of the First Order, mentor passing on his knowledge to his apprentice, but none knew the other. In this way Hesperos made sure that the knowledge was not lost even if one member of the Order died before passing it on, while keeping it hidden from the world.”

Alios could feel his hands starting to sweat. He thought he could hear his heart pounding.

“This divine astrology, does it explain the way heavenly bodies influence earthly forces and energies?”

“It does, indeed,” Lothar nodded with a smile. “This and more. It contains the knowledge necessary for you to be able to use your captorum to its full potential.”

So he was right. Alios was squeezing the armrests of his chair as he tried to compose himself. He was right. It was possible to catch the energy of anima and wield it. To change metals into gold. To prolong life. And maybe for other purposes too, who knew. And Lothar had the knowledge, he belonged to the First Order.

“My dear boy,” said the old man after contemplating him for a while, “I decided some time ago that you were my most worthy student. You and none other should become a brother of the First Order and take on the task of guarding the legacy of Hesperos. I believe,” he said with a smile, “this might be just the right moment to pass on my knowledge to you.”

Lothar rose once again and went to a massive wooden chest. He drew out an old key from the folds of his white robe and unlocked it, then spread his arms over the lid and murmured an invocation. Alios heard a faint pop and the old man lifted the heavy lid.

“The Hesperian Chart is somewhere here,” he said leaning over the chest and searching among old scrolls.

Alios swiftly stood up and moved quietly to the other side of the room where a set of shelves contained all sorts of objects, jars, ampoules, and dried herbs. He quickly scanned the labels and grabbed a little glass phial containing a translucent liquid. Returning to the table he made a fuss of refilling their goblets and slipped a couple of drops from the phial into the Master's wine. He was calmly biting on a fig when the old man finally exclaimed and turned around with a scroll in his hand, “Here it is!”

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“Now.” Lothar took a sip of his wine and spread the scroll on the table. “Let me see if I remember the code in which I wrote it.” Giggling like a novice he pored over a chart filled with odd signs and writings in a script Ailos has never seen before.

“The code, Master?”

“Oh yes. This is a further precaution the First Order uses to guard its secrets,” he said and took another sip of his wine, and coughed. “The learning is passed from Master to Apprentice, but each man codes it in a way known only to him, to make sure that it does not pass into the wrong hands. You will have to do the same,” he smiled warmly at Ailos.

Then he coughed, coughed again, and holding one hand to his chest took another mouthful of wine.

“My boy, you look quite awestruck.”

“Master, ...”

A sudden spasm contracted Lothar’s features as yet another cough shook his body. He fell forward onto the table knocking down his goblet, and ruby-red liquor spilled onto the Hesperian Chart.

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