

A New Kind of Alchemy

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Here, in this dark room deep in a rusting old factory, behind a seething, stinking abattoir, and in the skeletal shadows of a disused gasometer, I work alone, like an alchemist. But the gold I seek to create has no colour. It is not a precious metal – it is far more valuable than that. When it glitters, it catches the eye, and the imagination. It is clear, like a diamond, but it is worth more than even those. It is the very essence of being, of survival.

I seek to create water.

For a while, the oceans rose. The ice caps melted, and the polar creatures moved further towards the poles, instinctively seeking the cold. The warm places were even warmer now, and across the planet, coastal cities, towns and villages were pushed back by the rising sea, creeping backwards street by street, year by year, as foundations were eroded and buildings fell, crumbling into the waves. Everywhere people began to move to higher ground like livestock fleeing a flood, a tide of desperate refugees who had seen this coming, but refused to accept it until the water was upon their thresholds.

Then, some time after the glaciers and the floes were gone, the people; crowded together on the plateaus and hills and mountains, began to notice something peculiar. The sea was retreating.

It couldn't be explained in simpler terms than this: the ocean was evaporating. The water drew back, and the concentration of salt in the sea climbed. Nothing could survive it. No fish, no crustacean, no plant could live in the listless, heavy brine, which stirred with dull colour as the sun moved on the oil-like surface. Cultures which had once relied on what they netted, hooked and speared turned their backs on the sea, and looked to the land to survive. Salt was the new enemy. It seemed that water was leaving the earth for good.

Science couldn't explain it. And in a thousand different ways, religion did its best to explain why. In much of the world, religion had died, churches and mosques replaced by the universities and other temples to science. But now, as the crisis deepened and fomenting questions grew and metastasised, religion and faith were awoken from sleep, to provide reason where science had failed. Perhaps God, the gods, the ancestors, the cosmos were angry, displeased, seeking retribution. The appropriate sacrifices were made, the necessary and prescribed placations and intercessions by priests and soothsayers. Seasons of prayer and self-flagellation did nothing. The water continued on its terrible exodus.

In time, the reasons became far less important than solutions. First, humankind tried to capture their waste water. Whether industrial, biological or agricultural, they cleaned it, reused it, over and over until it was so pure that it had no taste at all. They tried anything to lessen the load on the oceans. And yet the sea levels continued to fall, as crops breathed and people perspired, and the precious water turned to vapour and drifted away.

To limit water loss, huge greenhouses were built, so large that they developed their own weather systems. There were certain crackpot scientists who suggested that these structures could be used as bio-domes, with whole towns built beneath them. Then these crackpots became politicians, and their idea was put into action. And it worked, for some. But how can anyone build enough bio-domes to house and feed twelve, fifteen, twenty, thirty billion?

One thing was clear; the people of earth needed to find more water. Governments and private enterprise established institutes and bodies for just that purpose. Like the alchemists of old who sought to turn common metals into gold, scientists searched for ways to extract water, or to turn other substances into water. Or to create water.

And it was while the world was distracted by the receding tide, and the endless search to replace it, that the Agencia came to power. They came with their dark eyes and pale faces, and their secrets, and their empty pasts. They came promising salvation. They came promising a way forward.

Who the Agencia were was a subject of often wild speculation, a topic for discussion in the underground pomace-wine bars, or in hushed conversations in the street, beneath the skyways and rails, or deep in the towering arcologies themselves.

They divided opinion like the parties of a revolution. They offered hope; they brought nothing but false hope and a self-serving lust for power. They were men and women of vision; they were men and women with nothing to lose, nothing to live or die for.

But regardless of the Agencia's private philosophy, what was never in dispute was their public agenda – putting all of their scientific resources to work to find water.

Of course there were the sceptics, as there always are. The Agencia didn't really have humankind's best interests at heart, but knew that to control the most basic human need would be to hold power in the greatest, most potent way possible. This was the Agencia's true mission, the detractors said. But they didn't say it very loudly.

Whatever the real reason, part of the Agencia's mission was to recruit the brightest and best for their laboratories.

And one day, they came for me.

Several Agencia came to my School, deep in the city. We were studying geometry, or perhaps calculus – it was so long ago. But I do remember that it had to be one or the other, since it was Master Servio teaching us that day. Master Servio was old, hunched, and very hard of hearing, and I recall that he didn't hear the first knock at the classroom door.

Three men were in the hallway. The Agencia wore civilian clothes, but they had a particular look, and a way of standing; not so much stern as impassive, and with very straight backs. And the eyes. These men weren't as anonymous as they'd have liked to think.

After one of us had alerted Master Servio to the presence of the men, he went to the door. 'Yes? I'm teaching here, you know.'

'We won't take very long,' said the eldest of the Agencia. Then he stepped closer to Master Servio, and leaned in, speaking in a low voice.

'Eh? What's that?' Servio demanded. 'You'll need to speak up.'

The eldest Agencia spoke a little louder, although his actual words were still indistinguishable. Except for one word – my name.

Master Servio turned around slowly, looked directly at me. 'Sava,' he said.

I stood. I confess that I felt a little giddy, but it was more from fear than excitement. The Agencia had that kind of reputation.

'Sava Freedman?' the eldest Agencia said.

'Yes. Is there ... a problem?'

He gave a small shake of the head. 'Not here. Thank you,' he said to Master Servio, who stepped back into the classroom and closed the door, leaving me in the hallway with the Agencia.

'Come with us, Sava; we need to talk.'

Wordlessly, and with my heart pounding, I followed them to an empty classroom, which overlooked the tired, dusty apartment blocks that surround the School. The eldest Agencia sat at the front desk, and gestured for me to sit at one of the student desks. The other two Agencia remained standing, one behind me, the other beside the Agencia who, it was now clear, was in charge.

'What's this about?' I asked, glancing around at them. 'Have I done something wrong?'

The Agencia in charge raised his hand. 'Sava, I am Arsenio.'

I bit the inside of my bottom lip. Only the most important Agencia went by a single name. I said nothing. He'd have been expecting me to shut up and listen.

'You're not in any trouble, Sava. Quite the opposite. But we have been watching you. We know a great deal more about you than where you live,' he said, glancing about the room. 'We know what you do, we know what interests and excites and concerns you. But none of that is the point of why we're here. We're here talking to you because we know you have a gift.'

'What kind of gift?' Quickly, I thought over my results. I was very average, perhaps slightly above. But in each of my classes, there were at least a dozen students who scored consistently higher. Perhaps they had the wrong person.

'We've got the right person,' Arsenio said, showing me for the first time his remarkable ability to know what others were thinking. 'We aren't interested in your marks, as such. We've been through your assessments, your exams, your tests, we've spoken to several of your masters. Yes, your marks are solid, but more than that – of far greater interest to us – you show a clearly superior ability to

think laterally, to learn, to question, and to find ways through the unlikely, the improbable, and perhaps even the impossible. In short, we need you, Sava. You'll be joining the Sperimentale. You've heard of this?'

Of course I had, but only as rumour. I wasn't even sure that it was real.

'No. What is it?'

Arsenio pursed his lips as he looked out the window and considered his answer.

'Is it a place? In a sense. Is it a group of people? Also true, in a way. But it's also a way of thinking, right at the very edge of what's possible. The Sperimentale find ways to look at the improbable, the unlikely, to consider every possibility. We imagine the unimaginable, and in that become closer to achieving the impossible.'

'Like what?' I blurted out, before reminding myself that it probably wasn't my place to speak.

'What is the most pressing need of humankind?' Arsenio asked.

'That's easy. Water.'

'And what is impossible to do with water?'

'Find it?'

He smiled. 'Oh, it can be found easily enough. The problem is that there's just not enough of it. No, there's something far closer to impossible.'

I hesitated before answering. 'Creating water?' I suggested.

I expected Arsenio to smile, if I was right. But he didn't. Rather, he simply stood up, stepped forward, and extended his hand.

'Welcome to the Sperimentale, Sava Freedman.'

The School was my home – the only home I'd ever known – and yet I suspect I was seduced by something Arsenio had said. Perhaps it was the way he referred to my supposed gift. I'd never been extraordinary, or at least not in my own mind. In the few minutes I was given to pack the few things I owned, I allowed myself to bask in this knowledge. I might have been average, but I'd been chosen.

In the end, I went without a single backward glance. I went to live, study and work at the Sperimentale, and suddenly I was truly average once more, possibly even more so than I had been at the School. Here, I was just one of many who'd been taken from their own schools, each chosen for their gift for thinking at the margins of what is possible. Some call it genius. I don't feel comfortable with that term. Some are born with the gift of music, or oratory, or physical superiority. It seemed that I, like the hundred or so others with whom I shared a room, was born with this. With a fertile mind that would explore and probe in new and uncharted ways. And perhaps would, with a little good fortune, save a planet.

We sought water in the most incongruous of places – soil, rock, elements both inert and volatile. There were long hours of experimenting, speculating and endless hours of trial and error with little reward. Frustration filled my head with noise, like a room full of clocks. We used chemical, mechanical, even mysterious Other-sciences in our search. I saw Arsenio quite often, but he was not one of the mentors. Other Agencia filled that role, and they were so alike, like so many shades of grey. They were driven, stern but benign, focused solely on our task. On what they often termed 'The Bigger Landscape'.

And later, after some months, I was moved to another unit. I was sworn to secrecy. I was one of the 'Trusted'. And in that unit, we conducted strange experiments on animals. At first, I hesitated. Animals were a vital source of food for a starving planet. And yet, while the experiments made headway, slowly and in ways that were often difficult to map, I never thought to consider the cruelty we were inflicting on those poor creatures. The greater good, I believe it's called.

But we never hurt people. After all, what is of greater good than humankind, noble in reason and infinite of faculties?

One might ask.

Often in the evenings I would go to a place I knew, where I could slip out of the complex of laboratories and sit alone, trying to push aside the matters of the day, trying to think of anything but the great, pressing urgency that drove us on.

From that place I would look down on the people who moved through the streets like a clotting wound, worry and thirst weighing down the edges of their faces. Moving where? Home from work, to their families? I knew of families. I knew I'd once had one, and I tried to remember them, reminded as I was in this way. My parents, and the other one.

One day I sought out Arsenio, and he invited me into his office.

'Sit,' he said. 'Are you all right, Sava?'

'Why?' I asked cautiously.

'I hear you're doing very good work.'

'Thank you.'

'You should be pleased.'

'I am,' I said. 'I am pleased.'

'And yet I see ... this,' he said waving a hand at my face. 'This despondency.'

'I've been thinking.'

'That's what you're here to do.'

‘Yes, but about other things.’

He frowned, very slightly. ‘Not your work? We need your powers directed at the problem in hand. Like a laser, Sava. Focused.’

‘I know. But I’ve been thinking about my parents. Do you think they’re still alive?’

He shook his head. ‘I don’t know. Perhaps. Possibly not. Why do you care?’

‘Because they’re my parents.’

His face was impassive. ‘And?’

‘They’re family.’

‘They are? Interesting. We found you where, Sava? Remind me.’

‘At the School.’

‘Right. So do you think they care if you’re still alive?’

‘I was one child too many,’ I explained. ‘That’s all. It was necessary.’

‘Others find a way, Sava. Why couldn’t they?’

‘No,’ I snapped, standing up. ‘You’re wrong about them.’

Arsenio remained seated, his face still blank. ‘I don’t believe so.’

‘They wouldn’t have abandoned me. Not without a good reason.’

He stood and went to the window, looking down on the masses in the street. ‘So many people. All the same, or different?’

‘Different. And the same, in different ways.’

‘How can you know all of them?’ he asked.

‘We can’t.’

‘I didn’t say “we” – I said “you”. How can you know all of them?’

I lowered my eyes. ‘I can’t.’

‘So how do you know whether the people who left you at the School as an infant did so with a good reason, or something more nefarious?’

I wanted to say ‘I can’t’, but the words wouldn’t come.

Arsenio turned, came around the end of the desk, and placed his hand on the curve of my neck, like a father might. I feel sure that this was the first time he’d touched me.

‘Think about this, Sava: even if your family is alive, how long can they survive without water? This is why the best thing you can do for them is to focus on your work. Like a laser.’

Then, late one Dryspell evening, as the sun’s sullen glow sank low over the domes of the city and the skyways, I watched the teeming desperate population below, and remembered something one of my tutors once told me: ‘The human body is sixty per cent water.’

One night I escaped, during one of the frequent raids by the mobs that flouted the curfew. The Sperimentale was no longer the secret it had once been, and the impatient mobs attacked, searching for water.

I slipped away during one of these melees, with everything I needed stored in my mind. I found this place, made a home of sorts here, and most evenings I flout the curfew myself.

But I’m not part of some ham-fisted rabble. I work alone, silently, with growing efficiency, harvesting the crop from which I will draw the precious fluid. Then I bring my bounty back to my dark, stained room, where I set to work amongst the benches and the urns and the jars and pipes and flames. And with my work disguised by the sounds and smells of the abattoir, I get to bending the margins of science and religion until they tangle together in some kind of bastard melange.

During one of my harvesting sorties I may come face to face with my family. One or the other, perhaps all three. Could be I’ll recognise them, but more likely I won’t. It won’t make much difference either way. Because now I work alone, like an alchemist, every day and night a little closer to creating gold. But the gold I’ll create will be precious, and pure, and bounteous, and no-one – and everyone – will know its source.