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The Scribe of Hattusa

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Introduction

The city the world remembers as Hattusa clung to its hills like a fortress of stone and wind. Walls bristled with towers, lion jaws bared along the gate, and the road to the palace climbed among boulders that held the day's heat long into the cold Anatolian night. Within those walls, behind cedar doors and beneath beam-shadowed ceilings, lay rooms stacked with damp clay and quiet power: the tablet houses where reeds whispered and kingdoms were made legible. This is the story of a young hand in that chorus of whispers, a scribe whose strokes traveled farther than his feet ever could.

In the Bronze Age, when messengers rode with crested helms and treaty gods drew storms out of the northern sky, diplomacy did not end with the clasp of hands or the exchange of gifts. It hardened in clay. Words set down in Akkadian—the lingua franca—crossed borders more surely than men did. The Hittite court answered Egypt, bargained with Arzawa, outfoxed the Kaska when it could not crush them, and called on sun and storm to punish perjurers. All of it passed through the tablet house: letters dictated at a pace breath could sustain, clauses pared and strengthened, the soft margins cradling every “if,” “unless,” and “by the gods.” Between reed and clay there lived a craft as perilous as any on the battlefield.

Our scribe begins in the quiet labors of a copyist, learning to make lines that neither falter nor boast. He is taught to feel the weight of a seal impression like a verdict, to leave space for the king's redactions, and to score the edges with a colophon that will outlast his name. His world seems orderly: the Great King speaks, the queen adds grace and steel, the tablet house translates breath into permanence. But permanence is a wish. Clay can be broken. Words can be bent. A messenger's shadow can hide a knife, and the wrong tablet, mistakenly or maliciously filed, can tilt a kingdom.

It is through mistakes and marvels that he is drawn into the court's living web. He learns that every treaty is a wager, every clause a compromise gnawed thin by necessity. He discovers what spies know: that information is a currency whose coins are rumor, implication, and omission. He touches tablets that warm again as if with the breath that first formed them, and he sees how law can be a shelter or a snare depending on who stands beneath it. The archive is not a mausoleum of knowledge; it is a battlefield conducted in whispers and strokes of a stylus.

Yet there is dignity in the craft. The scribe learns to listen for what the clay will accept and what it will reject, to read the minute difference between an honest impression and a counterfeit one, to hear the tension between a king's anger and a diplomat's courtesy. He comes to understand that treaties do not only bind kings; they bind the people who must live within their terms. The curses that close them—those fierce

invocations of gods and mountains—are less a threat than a plea for order in a world riven by ambition and drought, by winter raids and summer embassies.

This novel follows the thread of one life through the loom of a court where law was sung to the gods and archived in the cool dark. While the names of power ring in the halls, it is the quiet labor that fascinates: the moment when a clause is struck and a war is spared, when a scribe hesitates and history tips. There are embassies and betrayals, trials and festivals, letters that smolder like embers long after their fires are out. But above all, there is the ache—and the privilege—of making memory durable, of trusting that a thumb's pressure on wet clay can carry a people's intent across seasons and storms.

If you read on, you will step into rooms lit by oil lamps, where the air is thick with damp earth and smoke, and into courtyards where envoys from a dozen lands weigh words like silver. You will meet a young man who learns that the line between truth and usefulness is a trench you can fall into if you forget to look down. And perhaps you will come to feel, as he does, that clay and conscience are strangely alike: both soften under heat, both set when handled with care, and both, once broken, reveal the fault lines that were always there.

CHAPTER ONE: Clay and Reed

The morning air in the upper city of Hattusa was sharp enough to cut, smelling of juniper smoke and the damp, stony breath of the mountains. For Pudu-Hepa's sake, the sun had finally cleared the jagged peaks of the Devrez valley, but it had yet to reach the shadows of the Great Temple's lower courtyards. In those depths, where the light was gray and the stone was cold, Hanni sat on a low wooden stool, staring at a lump of gray mud that was supposed to become a masterpiece of administrative precision. He was nineteen years old, his fingers were stained a permanent shade of river-silt, and his lower back already possessed the structural integrity of a wilted leek.

Around him, the House of Tablets was waking up with a series of rhythmic, domestic sounds. Senior scribes—men with deep creases around their eyes and even deeper grudges against the junior staff—were unrolling their leather satchels and inspecting the quality of the morning's charcoal. Water was being poured into stone basins to keep the clay supply at the perfect consistency. If the clay was too wet, the stylus would drag and leave jagged, unreadable burrs; if it was too dry, the surface would crack under the pressure of the wedge, turning a royal decree into a shattered jigsaw puzzle. Hanni wiped his forehead with the back of a muddy hand, inadvertently streaking his brow with the very substance he was struggling to master.

His task today was humdrum but essential: he was copying a list of grain rations for the garrison at Ankuwa. It was the kind of work given to apprentices to ensure they didn't ruin anything important, like a land deed or a curse-laden treaty with a volatile vassal. Hanni took his reed stylus, a slender piece of polished wood shaved to a precise triangular tip, and poised it over the damp rectangular slab. With a practiced flick of the wrist, he pressed the edge of the reed into the clay. *Vertical. Horizontal. Diagonal.* The cuneiform characters emerged—small, disciplined wedges that looked like the footprints of very organized birds.

"You're holding your breath again, Hanni," a voice rasped from behind him. It was Master Kanti, a man whose skin looked remarkably like the parchment he occasionally worked on, yellowed and etched with a thousand fine lines. Kanti had been a scribe since the days of the Old Kingdom, or so the younger boys joked. He moved with a limp that he claimed was a war wound from a Kaska raid, though everyone suspected he had simply tripped over a stack of tax records in the dark. "If you don't breathe, the clay feels your tension. It becomes stubborn. A scribe must be as fluid as the water that mixed the earth."

Hanni exhaled sharply, his shoulders dropping two inches. "The signs for 'barley' are smaller than usual on the original, Master. I was trying to match the hand of the senior

clerk." He gestured to the battered tablet he was meant to be duplicating, a piece of work that had likely been drafted in a hurry by someone who cared more about their lunch than the aesthetics of the archive. The original was sloppy, the wedges shallow and leaning to the left, but Hanni's orders were to produce a "clean" copy for the permanent records of the grain-stores.

Kanti leaned over, squinting through the dim light of the high, narrow window. He poked a bony finger at Hanni's work. "Do not copy the errors of your betters. If the clerk was lazy, you must be diligent. The Great King does not want a record of a clerk's haste; he wants a record of his grain. If a dispute arises three years from now, and the wedges are too faint to read, the governor of Ankuwa will claim he was owed twice as much, and it will be your head—or at least your reputation—that pays the difference. Now, smooth that line out and start the section on emmer wheat again."

Hanni sighed, took a flat wooden spatula, and literally erased the last three lines of his morning's labor. It was the most frustrating part of the craft. In Hattusa, words were not fleeting things; they were physical objects that could be kneaded back into nothingness. He spent the next hour in silence, the only sound the scratching of reeds and the distant lowing of oxen in the temple precincts. As the sun climbed higher, the House of Tablets warmed, and the smell of damp earth intensified. This was the scent of power in the Hittite Empire. Not gold, not incense, but wet dirt shaped into the will of the gods and the kings.

By midday, Hanni had finished the grain list and moved on to something slightly more interesting: a draft of a legal dispute between two shepherds over a boundary stone near Arinna. This required a different tone. The wedges needed to be firmer, more authoritative. Law was the backbone of the Sun's realm, and the scribes were the ones who kept that spine straight. He enjoyed the logic of it—the "if-then" structure of the Hittite legal code. *If a man moves a boundary stone, he shall pay such-and-such in silver.* It was clean. It was predictable. It was nothing like the messy, sweating reality of the city outside the doors.

"Hanni! To the inner archive," a messenger called out, breaking his concentration. This wasn't just any messenger; he wore the sash of the palace guard. The inner archive was where the sensitive documents lived—the letters from foreign kings, the secret instructions to generals, and the treaties written on silver and bronze. Apprentices were rarely allowed beyond the heavy cedar doors that separated the common copying room from the royal vaults. Hanni looked at Master Kanti, who merely nodded, a flicker of something like curiosity in his rheumy eyes.

Hanni wiped his hands on a rag that was already saturated with gray silt and followed the guard. They moved through the labyrinthine corridors of the Great Temple complex, passing priests in white linen and laborers hauling baskets of fruit for the afternoon offerings. The air grew cooler and quieter as they approached the palace

wing. Here, the walls were thick stone, designed to survive fire and siege. Behind these walls, the "thousand gods of Hatti" were called upon to witness the promises of men. It was a place of heavy silences and long shadows.

Inside the inner archive, the atmosphere was different. There was no chatter here. Three senior scribes sat at a long stone table, their styluses moving with a speed that Hanni found intimidating. At the head of the table sat Chief Scribe Zida, a man whose influence was said to be second only to the King's personal advisors. Zida didn't look up as Hanni entered. He was staring intensely at a small, reddish tablet that looked nothing like the local clay of Hattusa. It was a letter from abroad, written in the cramped, complex Akkadian of the Babylonian court or perhaps Egypt.

"We have a backlog," Zida said, his voice like grinding stones. He finally looked at Hanni, his eyes scanning the young man for any sign of incompetence. "The diplomatic correspondence from the south has tripled since the last moon. The Great King demands a digest of the border disputes in the Lower Land before the evening meal. You, apprentice. You have been recommended for your clarity of hand, if not your speed. You will take these rough notes—dictated by the envoy from Ugarit—and you will put them into a formal report. Do not embellish. Do not omit the names of the deities. And for the sake of the Storm-God, do not smudge the seal impressions."

Hanni took the stack of wooden wax-boards—the "notebooks" used for temporary drafts—with trembling hands. This was a jump from grain rations to international politics. The notes were a jumble of Akkadian loanwords and Hittite shorthand, a linguistic stew that reflected the chaotic nature of Bronze Age diplomacy. He was led to a small corner desk, isolated from the others, and given a fresh slab of the finest, most refined clay he had ever touched. It felt like silk between his fingers.

As he began to decipher the envoy's notes, Hanni realized he was looking at a series of complaints regarding kidnapped merchants and raided caravans. It was a puzzle of geography and genealogy. He had to map out who had offended whom, which mountain pass had been blocked, and exactly how many shekels of silver were being demanded in restitution. It was a world he had only ever heard of in the marketplace—a world of dust, blood, and high-stakes bargaining. Every wedge he pressed into the clay felt heavier than the last. He wasn't just recording facts; he was framing a narrative that the King would use to decide between peace and a summer campaign.

The afternoon wore on, and Hanni lost himself in the work. He learned to distinguish between the formal "Great King" (the Pharaoh or the King of Babylon) and the "Small Kings" who peppered the Levant with their petty squabbles. He learned that a misplaced "not" in a sentence about a marriage dowry could cause a diplomatic incident that lasted generations. By the time the shadows had stretched across the archive floor, his report was complete. The clay was starting to set, taking on a dull,

matte finish that signaled it was ready for the drying racks.

He brought the tablet to Zida, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. The Chief Scribe took the tablet, held it up to the light of an oil lamp, and read in silence for what felt like an eternity. He ran a thumb over the edge, checking for consistency. Hanni waited for the rebuke, the order to smash the clay and start again, or perhaps a dismissal that would send him back to the grain-counting rooms for the rest of his natural life.

"Your Akkadian signs are a bit archaic," Zida remarked, not unkindly. "You use the old-fashioned 'sha' wedge. But the layout is logical, and you haven't confused the King's sister with his concubine, which is more than I can say for the last boy we brought in here. Go, get some food. Tomorrow, we start on the draft for the Egyptian embassy. They are coming north with a caravan of gifts and a list of demands as long as the Halys river. We will need every hand that doesn't shake."

Hanni stumbled out into the cool evening air of the temple courtyard, his mind buzzing. The sun had set, and the first stars were appearing over the black silhouette of the city walls. He felt a strange sense of vertigo. He had spent the day sitting on a stool in a room full of mud, yet he felt as though he had traveled across the burning sands to the gates of Memphis and back. He looked at his stained, calloused fingers and realized that the Master was right. The clay didn't just record the world; in the hands of the right scribe, it held the world together. As he walked toward the apprentice quarters, the smell of the evening fires seemed different—less like smoke, and more like the beginning of something permanent.

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