

# THE CURSE OF ZENO THE HELLENE

by Robert Quinlivan

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IN HIS DEATH, IBN ARABI PROVED himself among the greatest of intellects. He was from a young age renown for his mastery of foreign tongues and for his knowledge of the manner by which one might geometrically derive the qibla—the direction one faced toward Mecca during prayer, and a central concern of the intellectuals among the Caliph's court. For his many accomplishments, Ibn Arabi procured, at a mere fourteen years of age, a position among the Caliph's astronomers and sages at the library of Mahdia where he was to spend the rest of his life among the scholars of the city beside the sea, devoted in whole to cataloguing the attempts by man to illuminate nature. He bid a farewell to his tearful mother who, despite her grief, knew in her maternal soul that this was her son's fate. He traveled by camel from his desert home to the sea, and upon arrival, withdrew into the library, emerging only for prayer. His mother never saw him again.

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Abdul Rahman al Ibrahim was an dignitary in the court of the Caliph when he met the young Ibn Arabi. He was summoned to the Caliph one afternoon to attend to a trivial matter of court politics—an unpleasant errand, but one which fell square within Abdul Rahman's duties in the court. He passed through a garden near the gate to the court, where he paused to admire the fragrance of a blooming olive tree. It was here that he first saw Ibn Arabi, sitting alone in the shade of the tree. The scholar, beardless in his youth, bore a sallow expression and held his head in his hands, as one who was suffering a great loss. The young man's sadness was magnetic; he approached, gently.

"Ibn Arabi," said Abdul Rahman. He addressed him by name, for Ibn Arabi was well known, being the youngest of the sages of Mahdia, and his vocation plainly recognizable by dress. "What is the cause of your sorrow? What is it that troubles you so?"

"I shall never complete my research during my lifetime," said Ibn Arabi, his face red with

exhaustion. "I reflected upon it this evening, as I was finishing my afternoon studies. I have acquired more texts for the great library, musty tomes obtained through traders from the Hellenic lands. I intended to read them, but their markings are unusual, their contents incomplete. Learning the language has taken months, and each time I feel I have acquired a true understanding of the Hellenic script and manner of thought, I stumble upon an aberrant fragment with which I must reckon. And my labor will not end with the Hellenic script, for there are hundreds and thousands of books of unknown subject in the library, written in thousands of scripts, all of which must be read and catalogued.

"And so many hours have I consumed in pursuit of my goal by the light of an oil lamp in the depths of the library, surrounded by the stench of so many rotting tomes, their words disappearing forever, knowledge evaporating like water in the desert. If only I could read them before it is too late, but alas! I am but one man."

Abdul Rahman was moved by the scholar's beautiful words of sorrow. As he watched him speak, tears of passion pooled in Ibn Arabi's eyes. Truly this was a young man who had given his life to the illumination of the world, for it seemed to cause him pain to imagine the destruction of a book. He took the young man's hand in his own and, placing the other on his shoulder, sought to impart some modicum of wisdom worthy of a sage.

"The thought of the parchments rotting pains me as well, my friend."

Here Ibn Arabi grew dark and brooding. In that moment, he seemed much older, the scars of time momentarily flickering across his face.

"One volume in particular vexes me, for it is of a mysterious construction. On my first attempt at translation, I thought that it resembled the writings of the Phoenicians, or of the Iberians, but I have researched texts and found no comparison among them."

He pulled from his robes a scrap of parchment tucked inside a book. Abdul Rahman looked astonished. Had he pulled the pages from the library and brought them into the bleaching sun?

"Fear not, my friend," said Ibn Arabi, laughing. "This is merely a copy I have produced—I don't dare risk bringing such a book from its resting place in the library."

Abdul Rahman glanced at the scrap of parchment. Arcane symbols of a bizarre script were painted upon it, hand copied by Ibn Arabi's pen. The alien letters were like nothing Abdul Rahman had ever seen, their brutal shapes oddly discordant and linked with strange jagged lines. Yet there was a beauty to the writing as well, narrowly grasped through the veil of its rough form.

"Unlike anything you have seen, is it not?" said Ibn Arabi.

Abdul Rahman agreed. He was fairly well versed in the languages of the world, but he had certainly never seen anything like this strange scrawl. He touched the paper where the symbols were written. A shiver shot down his spine. There was something very odd about it.

"Pray to Allah for patience, Ibn Arabi," said Abdul Rahman. "For each of us is allotted but one life on this earth, and we must entrust others to complete what we begin. A farmer sows a seed in the spring, hoping for a bountiful harvest in the summer. Such is the way of the world."

"Thank you," said Ibn Arabi, hesitant. "Perhaps you are correct."

"Come now, Ibn Arabi. Your youth clouds your judgment, my friend. Time slows for no man. Make what use of it you can," said Abdul Rahman.

Ibn Arabi smiled wanly. He could not tell whether the meaning of his words had soothed or if Ibn Arabi had simply been placated by their tenor, but he had dallied too long and had cause to proceed with haste on his daily duties, though it pained him to leave the young sage where he sat beneath the olive tree. He bid Ibn Arabi farewell and hastened down the stair toward the court to meet the Caliph, leaving the young man in the garden.

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For many weeks, Abdul Rahman saw no sign of the troubled Ibn Arabi in the streets of Mahdia. When he inquired into the scholar's whereabouts, he was told that Ibn Arabi seldom left the library.

One afternoon, Abdul Rahman was again called upon by the Caliph to perform a duty requiring his appearance before the court. As he walked to the court's gate, he was stopped by a familiar voice.

"Abdul Rahman," Ibn Arabi said, joyfully.

Abdul Rahman embraced the young sage. He was glad to see his friend was in such good spirits, though he seemed to have grown somewhat thinner, the bones in his face visible.

"If you are not in too much of a hurry," said Ibn Arabi, "perhaps you would stay a moment with me in the garden. It is a favorite place of mine."

Abdul Rahman realized then that he was standing at the same garden with the olive tree where he had first encountered Ibn Arabi. It was unusual for the sage to be outside the library, let alone making idle conversation, and though Abdul Rahman was eager to meet with the Caliph, having been granted the considerable fortune of conversing again with the elusive

Ibn Arabi, he supposed that delaying a moment would be prudent. They sat beside a patch of chrysanthemums in the shade of the tree. A warm ocean breeze drifted through the city, mingling with the fragrance of the flowers.

"Come, tell me of your studies," he said, grasping the young man's hand. "Surely you are in possession of great knowledge, Ibn Arabi. But what is the greatest knowledge you possess, that a mere dignitary such as myself might learn?"

"I have studied the writing of the Hellenes," said Ibn Arabi, "a most learned people. And I have read the works of the sages of those lands. Long have I puzzled over those texts, and there is much to be learned from them. But there is one riddle in particular, once told in that land, that I shall repeat for you, Abdul Rahman, that you might learn something of my work. Apart from all others, this alone is the most valuable, and the most perplexing.

"Let us say that a baker makes a loaf of bread for the Caliph. And the loaf of bread is sliced in twain. Would you not agree that these halves could themselves be sliced in twain, and that the sum of the pieces would still equal the whole loaf?"

Abdul Rahman agreed with Ibn Arabi's reasoning, though he knew not the purpose of the scholar's inquiry.

"Now say that each half loaf is in turn sliced in twain, and each of those halves is sliced in twain, and so on. How is the baker to bring the bread to the Caliph?"

"A loaf of bread sliced into small pieces," Abdul Rahman replied, "is still, when summed, equal to the amount of the whole loaf. The baker may hand the pieces to the Caliph and his duty is done."

"Ah, a reasonable answer, my friend!" said Ibn Arabi. "But let us say we continue slicing the bread until it can be sliced no further. Then each slice is of a maximally small size, for which there is no smaller size."

Abdul Rahman at last seemed to grasp the puzzle that Ibn Arabi had discovered. For if the slices of bread could be made smaller and smaller, would there not be an endless number of slices?

"You see, my friend," said Ibn Arabi, "Division applied infinitely produces an enormous number of very small pieces, which cannot be handled in the usual manner. It is as if, by the act of division, the bread has been multiplied a million-fold in its forms."

Abdul Rahman nodded, not fully comprehending the significance of what Ibn Arabi had said, but grasping that what had been discussed was of great scholarly importance, for it seemed to describe the nature of physical things. He felt blessed to be thought so highly

of by Ibn Arabi as to share his findings with him, for Abdul Rahman's intellectual life had waned following the assumption of his duty to the Caliph, his time now occupied by practical concerns of governance and law, rarely on such matters as literature or science.

"Now, if one were to continue," said Ibn Arabi, "taking halves of halves of halves, how many pieces of bread must the man bring to the Caliph?"

Abdul Rahman perceived his ignorance before the young scholar. He could not answer Ibn Arabi's question, though he strained his cognition. How many such minuscule pieces must a man gather before he can be said to have carried the entire loaf? Puzzled, he at last conceded defeat.

"The answer, my dear Abdul Rahman," said Ibn Arabi, "is that the number of pieces of bread is *infinite*—a number from which no greater number follows. A man cannot gather an infinite quantity of pieces. Therefore, Abdul Rahman, it must be impossible for the man to bring the bread to the Caliph. He will never perform his duty."

Abdul Rahman was baffled. What was the strange way of thinking of these Hellenes? Abdul Rahman was consternated as he considered the riddle and its startling conclusion.

Division, according to the riddle, was destructive. For a loaf of bread divided infinitely would surely vanish from sight. A man could never fully carry the divided bread, for to do so would require gathering an unending sea of minuscule pieces. It would thus seem impossible for the man to meet his duty under such circumstances. But when Abdul Rahman reflected on the riddle he found no trickery in it, no flaws in its reasoning, no suspect omission of detail. The conclusion was both impossible and inevitable.

Abdul Rahman looked at Ibn Arabi with an expression of bafflement. Whereas before, Ibn Arabi's words had seemed quite wise, he now heard the jabbering of a madman. For Abdul Rahman had studied the sciences of the world before, and this multiplication by division seemed quite counter to reason. He was sure now that some trick lay in its formulation, that Ibn Arabi had deliberately posed it to him to confuse him—to humiliate him!

He blushed, certain he had made a fool of himself. A distant chime rang out over Mahdia, signaling the time of day. Never mind the absurd riddle for now: his duties called to him.

"You must excuse me," said Abdul Rahman, a subtle irritation boiling inside him. "I must attend to my duties."

He quickly climbed the stairs to the court, glancing behind him once more to see Ibn Arabi

alone among the flowers.

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A week passed. The height of the summer months made life slower as the people of Mahdia avoided the sun's heat. Abdul Rahman traveled about the city performing his duties without haste, the whole while his mind set on Ibn Arabi. What peculiar work had he come across in his research? And what was he to make of this riddle of multiplication by division, which seemed to recur throughout the Hellenic texts? He wished to dismiss the young sage as a madman, to be free of him.

One evening as Abdul Rahman was walking the street toward his home, Ibn Arabi rushed to his side with great excitement. He seemed somehow diminished, pale, his clothing disheveled and his appearance unkempt, and in the clear evening the lingering deep red of the dying day appeared to fall straight through him.

"My friend, I have made a wonderful discovery," said Ibn Arabi, keeping his voice to a whisper. "I can *read* it. I can *read* it, Abdul Rahman!"

"What? What can you read?"

"The book with the strange letters."

"But how?" said Abdul Rahman. "Was it not the only text of its kind?"

"In a forgotten chamber of the library's depths, I found a translation of a text by Zeno the Hellene—the same author who penned the riddle we have discussed, if you recall it. By comparing the two translations I was able to divine the meaning of the individual symbols in combination, and by this process produced an index of words—oh, it cost me days of arduous labor, but it *worked*, Abdul Rahman! Using this index, I was able to translate a portion of the book into Greek, and then translate the Greek into Arabic and then—"

Ibn Arabi's genius amazed Abdul Rahman. Had he truly translated a book of unknown language in a period of a few short days? A language which neither he nor any of the other scholars had any knowledge of whatsoever? A joy for the young sage filled him. He embraced Ibn Arabi and led him into his home where his wife had been preparing dinner. There they sat and supped on a dish of couscous and lamb as the hot evening slid into a cool night.

Upon the conclusion of their dinner, Abdul Rahman apologized to Ibn Arabi for having rudely rejected his riddle.

"I suppose I felt foolish," he said, "like a dwarf in the presence of a giant."

"It is no matter, my friend," said Ibn Arabi, smiling. "The manner of my thought is strange to many, even among the other sages. Yet you,

Abdul Rahman, seem to grasp something of my work, even if you are consternated by my conclusions."

Abdul Rahman supposed that he had perhaps responded with undue frustration. He resolved to place more faith in Ibn Arabi, who had, after all, bestowed upon him the honor of serving as confidante.

"You did not describe the contents of the book with the strange writing," said Abdul Rahman, eager to win back his friend's trust, "Please, do explain."

"Ah yes," said Ibn Arabi. "I meant to discuss this with you, my friend, but I fear I have grown distracted in the dying light of day. The text to which you refer is of great antiquity, perhaps the oldest book in the library. The spine reads 'The Book of Transformations' in its language of origin but no enscribed name claims its authorship, and I know not the time or place of its composition. It was known by Zeno the Hellene, who provided a translation and appeared to reference the text in his riddles."

"And how were you able to read it so quickly?" said Abdul Rahman. "You are a renowned scholar, the greatest in the world, yet surely not even Ibn Arabi could learn to read a lost language in a few short hours?"

"Abdul Rahman, as you so wisely reminded me before, I am subjected to the limits of the bodily flesh. But I am not quite as limited as others."

With this, Ibn Arabi stood and made his way to the door. Again he appeared pale, faded, as though he were somehow not entirely himself.

"Please, join me at the library. I will show you what I have learned."

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Abdul Rahman, despite his eagerness to prove a useful witness to Ibn Arabi's work, struggled to follow his visitor through the moonlit streets of Mahdia. At times Ibn Arabi's figure seemed to disappear in the darkness, only to re-emerge around the corner. Through the city he followed him, and when at last they arrived at the library, Ibn Arabi descended the stairs to a narrow stone pathway. From there, a long hallway, dimly lit by the light of hanging oil lamps, led into the depths of the great library. The walls of these corridors were lined with dust and soot from age and disuse, for only the sages resided among these forgotten pathways, and commoners, even dignitaries, were not permitted among them unless invited.

At last, Ibn Arabi pulled a brass handle on a large door and entered into a wide chamber. There stood a vast room of bookshelves, the walls lined with tomes. Abdul Rahman was then

struck by the pungent smell of decay, the earthy aroma of rotting paper. In the center of the room, a table stood amid the books, and on it a number of tomes opened along their spines, beside which lay an oil lamp, a scroll of parchment, and an ink well.

"Here is where I live, my friend," said Ibn Arabi, a tone of sadness on his breath, "among the books. This is where I do my work. And this is the book of which I spoke."

Ibn Arabi handed a weighty, tattered book to Abdul Rahman. Its cover was etched with the same strange symbols that Ibn Arabi had shown him before. It was indeed old, and appeared to have been severely damaged by the elements of nature, a verily crueler force than the hands of men.

"And your method, Ibn Arabi," said Abdul Rahman. "You said that you had translated this text in but a week. How have you accomplished such a feat?"

"Through the method of division, my friend," said Ibn Arabi. But his mouth had not moved, and the voice appeared to be originating from afar. Just then, there emerged from the stack of shelves another man, bearing the countenance and appearance of Ibn Arabi in all respects.

"Yes, it is true, Abdul Rahman," said the first man who had handed him the book.

A shiver shot down Abdul Rahman's spine as he realized that there were now two men in the library. Abdul Rahman turned his head from one to the next, and back again. Upon inspection, the men both bore the face of Ibn Arabi — they *were* Ibn Arabi. There were two Ibn Arabis, each looking a bit faded, flickering like a lamp without enough oil. Abdul Rahman blinked and rubbed his eyes, and when he looked up again, there stood the single Ibn Arabi, smiling.

"My friend," said Ibn Arabi, "it is true what the Hellene sages wrote. Just as the bread can be split into any number of smaller pieces, so can a man be thusly divided, if he knows the technique."

Abdul Rahman was aghast at what he had seen. He stumbled back from his friend and clutched a bookshelf as if the floor might drop out from beneath him.

"This...this is *sorcery*, Ibn Arabi. Think of the danger! What if you divide yourself and you are unable to undo the transformation?" said Abdul Rahman.

"The transformation is merely that," said Ibn Arabi, "a transformation. The mutation of a thing from one form to the next. When I am two, I am two half-men, each a piece of me spread over a distance. When I am four, I am four quarter-men."

"And when you are a hundred? A thousand? Ten-thousand?"

"Always I am one man," said Ibn Arabi, "my soul spread out. Do you not see? I can be in two places at once—speak with two people at once. Or a hundred. Or a thousand. Do you not understand the power, Abdul Rahman? Imagine how you could serve the Caliph if only you had a hundred hands instead of just the two."

"But this power is beyond your grasp," said Abdul Rahman, "Does a power not fully grasped not pose a danger?"

"What danger? Watch me, Abdul Rahman."

The air seemed to slide apart. Where once had stood Ibn Arabi, there were instead two identical men, dressed in clothing similar to Ibn Arabi's robes. One walked to a bookshelf on the opposite end of the chamber, lifted a volume from the shelves, and began to read it. Then another Ibn Arabi formed out of the duplicate and reached for a different book.

"You see," said the other Ibn Arabi, who still stood beside him, "there is no cause for worry. It is multiplication by division. I am still Ibn Arabi, the scholar, and your friend."

At that moment, the Ibn Arabi that Abdul Rahman was speaking with folded along some invisible edge, and a third Ibn Arabi split off from him. The newly formed man was even more faded and flickering than the previous two, and his appearance seemed to diminish the others. The third Ibn Arabi placed his hand on Abdul Rahman's shoulder, smiled, and said, "Do not be afraid, my friend."

Abdul Rahman screamed and ran out of the library.

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That night Abdul Rahman slept unsoundly. His dreams were haunted by visions of a dark library corridor filled with rotting books. As the pages rotted into dust, he felt his own flesh begin to rot. Reaching down to feel his side, he found that he himself was made of paper—rotting, foul parchments.

When he awoke, it was not yet dawn, and the city was still deep in the cloak of night. He dared not utter a word of what he had seen to his wife, fearing that the words would make it real. He felt a pressing fear for his friend, the young sage of Mahdia, for he had begun to feel for Ibn Arabi the protective concern of a father for his son.

He rushed at once to the great library, whereupon he found the door to the corridor opened and the oil lamps still lit. At the end of the corridor, he came to Ibn Arabi's chamber. He peered inside.

There he saw the flickering image of hundreds of Ibn Arabis holding books, standing, sitting or reclining between the shelves. So faint was their appearance that it almost seemed that the books

were hovering inches above the floor. Among the throng, not a word was heard, but only the turning of hundreds of pages at once.

"Abdul Rahman, you have returned!" The voice came from somewhere, though which Ibn Arabi had spoken was not clear.

"I have just unearthed a text of the Akkadian language, one thought lost. It is an account of the early history of that land which, millennia ago, passed into the annals of history. As I fear someday we shall as well one day, Abdul Rahman. All of us shall be forgotten when the veil of time creeps over us. And another tome about the lost city of Atlante—had you not heard of it?"

"Ibn Arabi," said Abdul Rahman, "I beg of you, give up this foolish power. End your ceaseless reading of the tomes, for this unnatural division will surely have dire consequences. A man is given but one lifetime in which to learn what he might, and to ask for more is—"

"But one lifetime! Ha! Abdul Rahman, you speak like a fool. Were you to encounter a horseman in the time when men walked, would you say, 'Give up your horse, for it is not natural to proceed at such a pace'? For that is precisely what you are asking of me, Abdul Rahman. You would surrender such a power as to make lost knowledge live again out of fear."

"You call me, your friend, a fool? Can you not see what changes this power has wrought upon you? The Ibn Arabi I once knew was patient and kind, a man who wept openly for the demise of a single book. Now he has mutilated his very being for the sake of 'lost knowledge'. This man is not a man at all. Instead, he is a phantasm, a ghostly apparition. Look at what you have become, Ibn Arabi!"

One' Ibn Arabi stepped out of the crowd, diminished and flickering.

"If I do not read them," said Ibn Arabi, "they will vanish. Oh, if you could only know them, Abdul Rahman. The wonders contained therein! The thrill of knowing the *unknown*!"

A single tear crept down the faded Ibn Arabi's cheek and for a moment the pall of age that had before seemed to have possessed Ibn Arabi passed, and he wept like a boy.

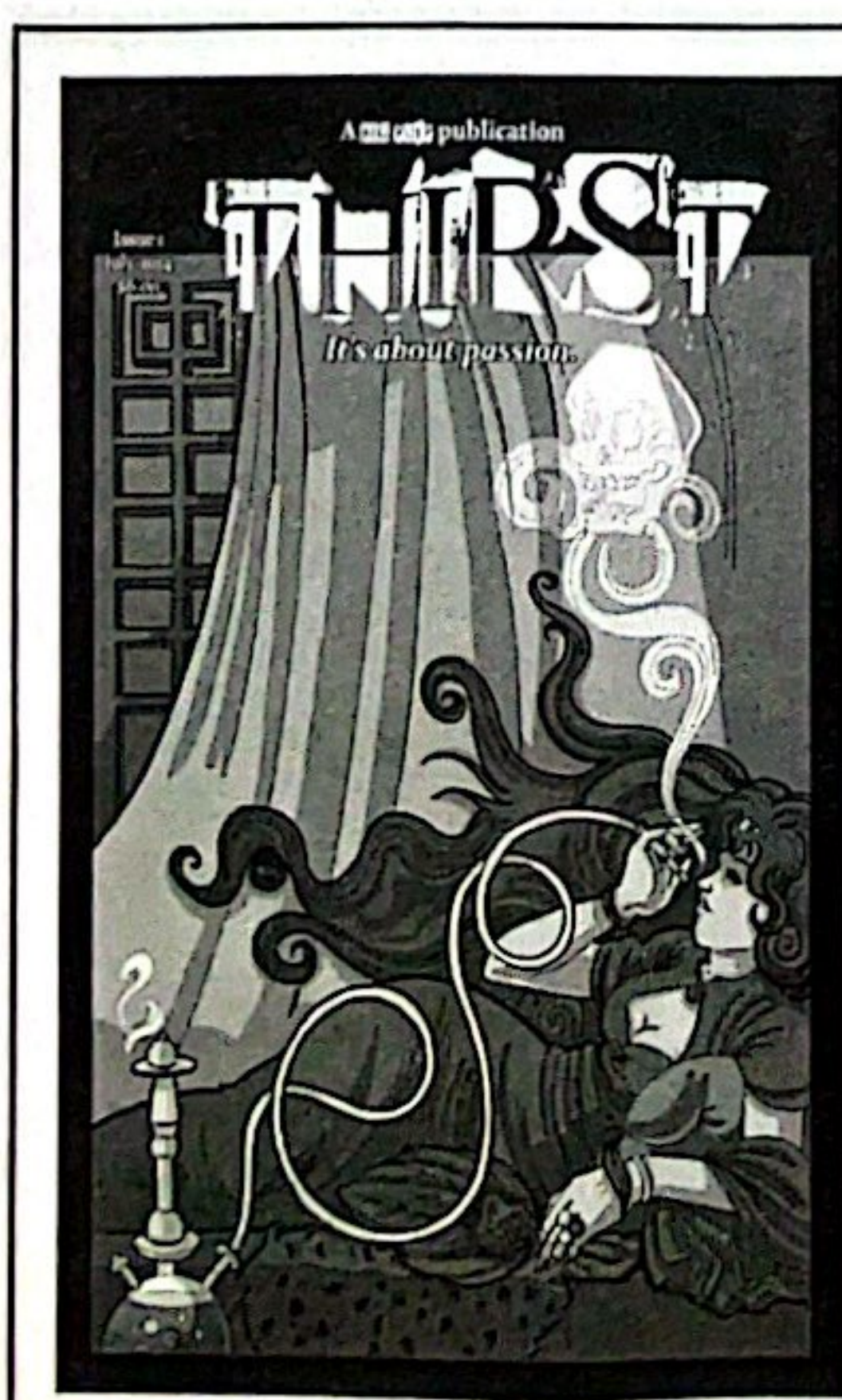
Abdul Rahman recalled Ibn Arabi's tears for the rotting parchments in the library. How was a young man, so in love with knowledge, to accept its inevitable death? How was an empty vessel to remain unfilled?

"I am sorry, my friend," said Ibn Arabi. His face grew pallid, and then there was one more Ibn Arabi among the crowd.

"I must know," he said. "There are hundreds of books in this library. And then hundreds in Baghdad, and many more in the lands beyond."

The two folded along some edge of space, and then there were four, eight, sixteen, dozens, hundreds, until Abdul Rahman lost count. The pages of the books began to fly again at a furious pace. He could faintly make out the silhouettes—by now, nothing more than dim shades—well enough to see that multiple Ibn Arabis were reading different portions of the same book, splitting the task endlessly, and the visages of the readers faded into nothing.

With that the books dropped to the ground in a thunderous clap. A deep silence permeated the room, and the oil lamp, still left on the table, at last exhausted itself.



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