

ROBIN SHORTT

THE MARTEN AND THE SCORPION



PRaise FOR THE MARTEN AND THE SCORPION

Shortt (*Wellside*) plunges readers into the underbelly of medieval Samarkand in this beguiling fantasy. // Clever, tightly written, and full of action, this thrilling novel is an epic wuxia film wrought in paper and ink. —*Publishers Weekly*

Robin Shortt's madly fast-paced, pungently vivid wuxia-influenced tale... //...a wildly colorful cast of characters... // ... the real fun of this breakneck paced story was discovering, along with Darya, the palimpsest of the jiang hu world—the world of the chivalric martial artist—overlying the real world of the Silk Road, bringing with it mysteries and even hints of magic. // ...I relished this novel from beginning to end, and I really hope that there will be more adventures with Darya and her friends. —Sherwood Smith, creator of the Sartorias-deles universe and Wren's world, Nebula award finalist

The Marten and the Scorpion is an extraordinary tapestry of mythologies, rich with adventure and secrets, and an urchin of a heroine, as ragged and tenacious as a broken blade. Shortt's sharp, eloquent words bring to life a unique and enthralling world of intrigue and danger, where Kung Fu masters from the furthest reaches of the Silk Road flit over the rooftops of medieval Samarkand, while the streets below crawl with assassins, cutthroats, poison and plague. I loved it. I devoured it. I want more. —Leife Shallcross, author of *The Beast's Heart*, winner of the Aurealis award

Also by Robin Shortt:

Wellside

THE MARTEN AND THE SCORPION

BY ROBIN SHORTT



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In memory of Jin Yong, Wang Dulu and Gu Long

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I've used the Wade-Giles transliteration system in this book, rather than the more commonly used Pinyin. I'm aware that using a Western-designed system rather than a Chinese one may appear culturally loaded, to say the least, and I apologize to anyone I've offended. However, while Pinyin is unquestionably superior for learning (and typing!) Chinese, W-G is still the champ for giving a non-Chinese speaking Western audience an idea of how Mandarin Chinese is actually pronounced (if you disagree, listen to someone pronounce wuxia as "wuck-see-ya" then get back to me).

CHAPTER ONE

In Samarkand we love a fight, or anyway we love to watch one. Anything from a shoving match to a stabbing is guaranteed to draw a crowd. So it's no surprise that the two men arguing in the Street of the Rope-sellers have an audience, a dozen or so pedestrians who've put off whatever errand they were running and gathered round. They're hoping the disagreement turns into a beat-down.

So am I. But not for the same reason.

The two men glare at each other across a brightly-coloured rug, one of dozens that make a patchwork tapestry of the street. Each rug is piled with merchandise—rope of course, but also leather saddlebags, immense clay pots, rolls of hemp. Behind each rug a merchant proclaims the quality of their goods (at the top of their voice) to passers-by.

Laid out on this particular rug are a dozen Kashani roofing tiles in brilliant green-and-gold glaze. The merchant squatting behind them is a lanky Ghurid with his round turban tied Indian-style. On the other side of the rug, the street side, is a Khwarezmian, almost as wide as he is tall, wrapped in a richly-patterned robe. He's trying to buy some tiles, but he isn't making himself understood; maybe the Ghurid can't follow his heavily-accented Persian, or maybe he just doesn't like Khwarezmians and is trying to piss this one off. The Ghurid is chewing betel and every so often he spits a red wad into the dust at the Khwarezmian's feet, and the big man clenches his fists every time it happens.

I'm just across the street, sitting on the cloth awning that shades a teahouse's doorway. Now I run my hand over my shaved scalp, back then forward. That's the signal. A short figure on the street corner with his hair in three stubby braids detaches himself from the wall he's slouching against and makes his way towards the two men.

The Khwarezmian snorts and turns away, shaking his head. Looks like there's not going to be a fight after all. The crowd starts to break up, but then the kid with the braids tugs on the large man's robe, who instantly slaps his hand down on the purse tucked into his belt. This is a Samarkand bazaar, and anyone who lets their mind wander while strangers bump into them is going to wind up broke in a hurry.

He looks down at the one who did the tugging, and relaxes a little—this kid doesn't *seem* like your typical pocket-picking street rat. He's wearing a commoner's salwar kameez, a long loose shirt and pants, but over it is a Turkish-style kaftan of fine make, although it's seen better days. A large scab decorates his nose. The Khwarezmian double-checks his money is still there, and then takes a careful step back from the boy, just in case he is a street rat after all. "What do you want?" he says.

The kid clasps his hands respectfully in front of himself and responds in Khwarezmian Persian, which makes the big guy raise an eyebrow. "If it pleases you, sir—I know something of this man's language." He nods at the Ghurid, who looks right through him. "I can translate if you wish." His accent's a little off—I could have done it better—but it'll do.

"And what's in it for you?" asks the Khwarezmian.

I drop to the ground and edge closer so I can hear better. My stomach cramps up, reminding me I haven't eaten in a day, but I'm in the current now and it's easy to ignore.

The crowd are a lot taller than I am—even the kids, I'm such a runt—and between their jostling bodies I catch a glimpse of the kid piously raising his hands to heaven. "Is it not written in the *Wisdom of Royal Glory*, 'Make life your capital and goodness the profit thereof,

and tomorrow you shall have fine food and dress'? My family may have fallen into penury, but we beg no charity; feel free to pay what you feel I deserve."

I roll my eyes, but the Khwarezmian's glitter greedily, and anyone with half a brain could tell this kid what he's likely to get. "You are a credit to your family, boy. Now," he says, tapping one of the glazed tiles on the rug with his foot, "ask this man if he has ten thousand such tiles; my home in Gurganj needs a new roof."

The boy nods seriously and turns to the Ghurid. "*He asks if you have ten thousand of those tiles.*" My Urdu isn't as good as my Persian, but it's still better than his.

The Ghurid grunts. "*Is that all he said? He's been flapping his lips for the last half hour.*"

The boy hesitates. "Well..."

"*Well what?*" asks the Ghurid.

The boy glances at the Khwarezmian. "*He says the workmanship is poor, but he will order that many since a man who sells such must be a charity case.*"

The Ghurid's nostrils flare. He pops another betel leaf into his face. "*Is that so? Tell this fellow that I have ten thousand. Ask him how much he will pay me.*"

The kid turns to the Khwarezmian. "He says 'yes.'"

"Just 'yes?'" says the Khwarezmian, glancing at the Ghurid tile-seller who's glaring at him openly.

"He says—I am sure he did not mean this, but—"

"Just tell me," says the fat man, returning the tile-seller's glare now.

The kid clears his throat. "He says that he usually does not entertain such small offers, but he will make an exception for you since you have clearly fallen on hard times."

"He does, does he?" says the Khwarezmian through clenched teeth. "'Small', he says? Tell him that—in spite of his discourtesy—I will pay a thousand dirhams for ten thousand tiles. But his men must load the caravan for free, I will pay no extra for that."

The thinning crowd thickens again as the likelihood of a fight goes up. I tense up and my eyes scan the forest of legs, plotting routes in and out.

The Ghurid is looking expectantly at the kid, who clears his throat again, looking uncomfortable. The man spits a red clot in the dust and rises slowly from his squat. He's nearly a head taller than the Khwarezmian. "*Tell me.*"

The kid actually blushes. "*He says five hundred dirhams, no less—and you must get off your fat ass and load them yourself.*"

A minute later, the men are standing nose-to-nose, each yelling at each other in his own language, not bothering to wait for a translation. The crowd is cheering them on raucously. When the Ghurid raises a fist, I move.

All the two men see is a skinny kid dashing through the crowd, not looking where they're going, and crashing into the Khwarezmian's legs. The fat merchant barks in annoyance, grabs my shoulder and pushes me aside without even looking at me, sending me sprawling on the dusty bricks. I pick myself up, screeching curses at both men, and run.

That's the last I see of them, but the rest of the scene plays out in my mind as I sprint down the street. The Khwarezmian turns back to the Ghurid, his mouth open to deliver another stream of curses—and then his brain catches up to what just happened. His hand flies to his belt, and finds an empty space where his purse used to be. Wildly he looks around for his translator, who has also disappeared. He turns back to the Ghurid, his hand raised, trying to explain, when a fist crashes into his nose and knocks him on his ass. The crowd claps appreciatively, and neither man is thinking of anything much for the next few minutes.

CHAPTER TWO

The Khwarezmian's purse is a heavy weight inside my kameez as I cut through the Bazaar of Haberdashers, heading for the rendezvous with Masoud. I know no one's following, I can feel it, but I run anyway—I'm still riding the buzz that a clean lift gives me, and besides, the bricks will chill my bare feet if I stand still for long. Winter's supposed to be over, but you wouldn't know it.

I'm still in the current, hardly breaking stride as I dodge through the gaps in the crowd. They don't even see me. I'm just another Samarkand street rat, not worth even a moment of their time. Then I pass a street stall where an old man pushes chunks of fatty mutton around on a domed iron griddle, and the smell of it almost brings me to my knees.

I lean against a wall, hugging my belly as my stomach knots up, and wait for the wave of dizziness to break over me and ebb away. The old man glances at me, then back at the griddle. "No food for beggars."

Even though my guts are still twisting, I stand straight. "I'm not a beggar." He grunts, not looking up. "I'm. Not. A *beggar*." I'll show him. I sneak my hand into my kameez, and feel the weight of the purse against my chest. Then I hesitate. A street rat with a bulging purse is something he'll remember. And if word gets back to Nina and Oleg that I've been spending their money...But I don't give a damn. I'm no beggar and I'll *prove it*—

"Be off," he says again. "Or are you going to make trouble?" He looks up, over my shoulder. "Sirs? Sirs?"

I turn my head. Across the street are three lean men with drooping moustaches and caps of green felt, dark braids down to their shoulders. They're ahdath, the city guards. They look up, and one of them begins to amble our way.

If they think I'm causing trouble, they'll grab me and pat me down. No way they'll believe the purse is mine; even if they do, no way they'll let me keep it. I imagine Nina's face when she learns I had my day's take confiscated.

I turn away, but not before I hawk and spit at the old man's griddle. A hearty glob of it lands among the chunks of meat, and sizzles. The old man's reedy curses follow me as I push my way back into the crowd.

What energy I had is well and truly gone. Every step is an effort, and the crowds are a confusing jumble. When I reach the Square of the Money-changers, my legs are trembling jelly.

The square is almost at the centre of Samarkand, in the looming shadow of the city courthouse. Up against the courthouse wall is a fountain, a stone bowl a few yards wide with a fat rim to sit on and a trickle of water running into it from a clay pipe. There are dozens of these fountains in Samarkand, built decades ago by the Black Khans to show the city's legendary hospitality. To a street rat, that last part is a joke. Samarkand is certainly hospitable—to khans, and landlords, and rich merchants, and anyone with money to spend—but if *we* slip up, even once, then down we go, and no one will help us up again.

Masoud is sitting on the rim of the fountain. He's turned his kaftan inside-out to show the lining, which is patched and shabby, not worth a second glance from anyone. As I approach he peels the old scab off the healthy brown skin of his nose—he'd glued it on with spit—and slips it into a pocket to use again. The only traces of the translator in the bazaar are those braids of his, but of course he's way too proud to ever undo them.

I can't help running a hand over my own scalp. The skin is rough with nicks and scratches; Nina shaves my head every two weeks, and she's not too careful with the razor.

“That was a terrible lift,” Masoud says as I walk up to the fountain. “You barely gave me time to get away.” Like he’s lecturing some baby straight out of the orphanage, even though I’ve been lifting just as long as he has. My stomach twists again, and this time it’s anger as well as hunger doing the twisting.

“Piss off, Masoud,” I snap as I sit beside him. “I’m faster than you and you know it. All you did was run the scam, just—” I raise a hand, fingers and thumb opening and closing miming *blah-blah-blah*, while my other hand reaches into my kameez and takes out the Khwarezmian’s purse.

“Faster, huh?” His hand shoots out without warning and grabs my wrist before I can react. “Yeah. Right. And you still can’t climb. We see you practicing, it’s pathetic.” He pulls at my arm. I resist, or try to, but I can’t even hold my hand still, much less pull it back. I look at Masoud’s own hand, with its healthy layer of fat under the skin, a sharp contrast to the skin-and-bone of my own. Masoud is one of Nina’s favourites, and he always has enough to eat.

A tiny grunt of effort escapes my lips. Masoud smirks and plucks the purse out of my hand. He lets go of my wrist and I snatch my arm back. The skin is hot. I’m going to bruise.

“See? Weak. Even little Nasr’s stronger than you now, and he’s almost as fast.” He loosens the drawstring of the purse and peers inside. “What if that Khwarezmian had grabbed you? Or some do-gooder in the crowd? No way you could have gotten loose.”

“That slow-ass old man couldn’t have caught me in a million years,” I retort. “Why didn’t you ask Nasr to be your lifter, then, if he’s so good?”

“I did,” says Masoud. Coins clink as he rummages in the purse. “Oleg has him running some errand all day. Anyway, he made the climb yesterday, didn’t you hear?”

“Nasr made thief?” Masoud smirks, and I feel a little cold inside. Nasr was the only pickpocket in the Martens who had my back. With him gone, I’m alone.

All that's left of the rush from lifting the purse is a tremble in my hands and a tight knot in my chest. A wave of exhaustion breaks over me, washing away any desire to keep the argument going. After all... he's right, isn't he?

While Masoud counts the coins I lean over the fountain and scoop up a double handful of water to splash on my face. The cold makes me gasp, but it snaps me fully awake again. I look at my reflection as it wobbles in the water, and scrub at myself until the pale dust I'd caked on my skin is gone.

I'm a mongrel, like Masoud and all the rest of the Martens. Most of them, like most of the rest of Samarkand, are a mix of Turk and Persian, but I'm darker, like the merchants from the kingdoms in the south. My nose is like theirs too, a little...but guessing is pointless. What am I going to do, go looking for my real family? I *think* I remember my parents, but I'm not in any hurry to catch up with them.

Masoud holds a coin up in the sunlight, a silver mu'ayyadi dirham. Even if the rest of the purse is only coppers, it's still enough to make quota. I'll eat tonight. The knot in my chest loosens a little. Then Masoud opens his mouth again.

"I don't get it, Darya," he says. "You're a *girl*. Why not just work in the orphanage, wash the floors and cook and stuff?" He's dancing the dirham across the knuckles of one hand, showing off. "It's not like you're ever going to make thief—"

"That's not up to you," I snap. Masoud gives me an unpleasant smile. The dirham stops neatly and reverses direction, rolling over the back of his hand.

"Get real. I'm going to be running the thieves soon, and you know it. So then what are you going to do? You can't lift and scam forever. Just...give up. Go be a girl. Until Nina sells you off to a whorehouse—"

Almost before I know I'm going to do it, I grab the coin. Masoud yanks his hand back—far too late—and glares at me furiously. He sticks his hand out, palm up. "Give it back."

“Take it back. I’m not that fast, remember?” He reaches for it again, but I sway back and his hand grasps empty air.

“How much did we get?” I say.

“Enough.” Another grab, which I avoid with ease.

“Let me see,” I say, standing up. This lift has been the first good luck I’ve had in more than a week and Masoud better not pocket any of it before we reach the courtyard. The less we hand over to Nina, the less I’ll have to eat tonight, and the more time and energy I’ll have to spend hustling to make it up. Energy I might not have.

He ignores me, his eyes still on the coin. “Let me *see*,” I repeat, and I grab for the purse, which is a mistake. His hand closes on my wrist again and the coin tumbles to the ground, rolls away from the fountain on its edge. Masoud can’t help glancing after it, leaving himself open, and I clench my fist, intent on giving him a fat lip for that whorehouse line.

The flat slap of a foot on the bricks makes me turn my head. Someone’s stepped on the rolling coin.

“Well,” says a drawling voice, “look who it is.”

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This book is a clumsy tribute to the wuxia (“martial hero”, kind of) genre. In wuxia you will find the best two-fisted adventure stories ever created by anyone, anywhere on earth. Thanks to every wuxia writer out there, from the legends of the genre to everyone grinding out a two-thousand-chapter monster on Qidian right now.

Very, very few wuxia novels have been translated into English (they didn’t even bother to translate Wang Dulu’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* after the movie won four Oscars for Christ’s sake), so a big thank-you to Pleco and Skritter for giving me enough Chinese ability to read them at all.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin grew up in Canberra and lives in Vancouver. His stories have appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* and the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild anthology *Winds of Change*. His wildly original debut novel *Wellside* was shortlisted for the Aurealis award. You can follow the author online at: [@robinshortt2](#)

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