

## Christmas Morning, 2013

For weeks now Gudapharasa had been troubled by odd dreams. Sleepless afternoons left him hard pressed to see clearly the stars in the night sky, let alone read their signs and portents. Spells, incantations and execrations that he used to know by heart, he now had to read slowly and carefully in order for them to produce the desired effect. Because so many of them depended on the rhythm of the poetic clauses, he often had to repeat them several times to get the meter right.

And people noticed. Fewer and fewer were coming to him for advice and counsel, and no one seemed interested in the blessings of his god, Ahura Mazda. The townspeople of his village Gondophares -- Parthians for the most part -- steered clear of the modest house he had built next to the highest point on the surrounding wall. But each evening, not a few could be seen looking up into the same night sky that he stared at, wondering what he was missing.

Gondophares. You have heard of this village many times, though by a shorter name easier for western tongues to say: it is Kandahar to you and me, and as in the old days, much good and much that is not good live there together side by side. That is why the magus settled there in the first place. There was good money to be made by someone who could see the difference between good and evil, and what's more who could beckon the former and ward off the latter.

Gudapharasa knew that he had to do something, and he knew what it was -- though the task would take long and cost much. If there was a bright side to his plan at all it was that the frankincense that was so important to the spells he cast would be cheaper to buy in the west, not having to pay the merchant's fee for bringing it to the region of Afghan.

He would go to Mari, on the Euphrates, where many like him were trained in the arts and sciences of the order of Magi. Perhaps he would find old

friends there. He thought of his teachers, his fellow students and the few pupils he in turn tutored and mentored as they learned the stars, the mixtures of gold, frankincense and myrrh which served as the base of so many potions and salves.

Their names and faces came rushing into his mind like a wave at the beach, cool and refreshing memories washing over the heat of his recent anxiety.

Larvandad and Mormisdas of Syria, Basanater of Ethiopia, Kagpha of Armenia – his own best student, Balthazar of Arabia and his closest comrade back in the day, Melchior of the once great Empire of Persia.

He would travel the long road to Mari, and once there he would offer the 30 day prayers, one prayer for each day of the month, invoking the special spirit that blessed each day and asking for that spirit to intercede for him to Ahura Mazda. Those prayers, those blessings and the good counsel of his teachers, friends and students would surely return him to the right path and relieve his troubles.

So he gathered a few things into a saddlebag and journeyed with his old donkey – sometimes riding it, sometimes walking with it to give it some rest – heading steadily west by south to the great valley and the city of Mari.

If you are clever, it may have already occurred to you that someone else set out on a journey by donkey at about the same time, though the pregnancy of his wife prevented him from making the same good progress that Gudapharasa was making.

At Mari, it did not take the magus long before finding two others – and two friends at that – who had recently arrived with similar concerns. Their cloaks were as worn and road dirty as his was, though they had had a day or two to locate the bathhouse to clean themselves. Melchior and Balthazar had already found each other, and when they saw their old friend they rushed to greet him.

“Gaspar!” they cried out. “What errand brings you back to us?” “Gaspar,” they called him, a nickname much easier on their tongues than “Gudapharasa.”

At dinner that night, each in turn spoke of the disturbances and disruptions that interfered with “business as usual.” Their stories were surprisingly similar, the notes combining to create an eerie harmony that stretched from the Nile to the Indus River. Wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, drought and everywhere fear and anxiety on the increase that none of the three of them could stem.

They agreed to spend the next day sharing their experiences with Karsudan of Ethiopia, now the principal of the magi at Mari. He welcomed them warmly, but became colder as they told their stories, even furrowing his brow from time to time. As afternoon drew to a close he raised his hand and put an end to the conversation. He would think about what he had told them, consult the stars that very night, and they would continue the next morning.

But that plan collapsed in the middle of that night when Karsudan and all of Mari was awakened by a light of a kind no one had ever seen before.

He sent word that all of them present in the city should join him at once for council. There were many more present than Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar, perhaps a dozen all together, including some whom Gaspar recognized vaguely.

You and I know what that light was. The Gospel of Luke describes it plainly enough: “Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the Glory of the Lord shone around them.”

The *Shekinah*, the glory of the Lord was the source of that light, and in Bethlehem it looked like a bolt of lightning that didn’t just flash and disappear, but stayed on as if someone had forgotten to switch it off.

But 200 miles away to the East, that glory looked like a new star in the sky: brighter, clearer and somehow more mobile than the countless thousands that Karsudan and his ilk tracked night after night.

He closed his eyes, and the assembly of the Magi fell silent for many minutes.

With his eyes still closed Karsudan spoke of what he could see. "This is a new star, a new kind of star. It sits low in the sky, lower than our mother Moon itself and it is pointing at something.

"I cannot see what it is pointing at, but I know where it is. It began in the sky over the kingdom of Judea, over the kingdom of those odd Jews who still insist that there is only one God in the universe, instead of the many we see working each day in our world.

"Now it has moved over us. This star is a powerful sign and we need to know more."

Karsudan opened his eyes and looked at the magi before him. Each and every one looked down at the earth, praying that they might be spared some onerous task.

"Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar: you have all come here these last days because you have sensed trouble in the world. I therefore send you to the west to find out why this new star has traveled from there to here. Go now. We do not know how long the star will shine or where it will go from Judea. I will send other magi as I can.

"And you must not go empty-handed. Take the tools of your trade, take gold and frankincense and myrrh and offer them as gifts to the new king. Or, if they are not acceptable, use them to cast spells of safety for your return."

There was a great sigh of relief from all the others who were not sent, though I suspect in the long run – knowing what we now know – they might have regretted their reluctance.

The three magi, once friends now compatriots, set out to the Caravanserai to load their donkeys for the journey – for Melchior and Balthazar had traveled much as Caspar had to reach Mari in the first place.

Once there, the chief steward of the principal interrupted their preparations. “No, friends, your donkeys are too slow for this journey. You must travel fast. My master has released for you three of these Amalekite beasts. They are faster, can carry more provisions, and do not need so much water as your donkeys. We will keep them safe.”

So Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar mounted their Amalekite beasts – camels, you and I would call them – and bid farewell to the steward and the others standing in awe looking at this remarkable sight. They promised with many oaths to return with all deliberate speed with the news they were sure to uncover.

Dawn was close, but the light in the west showed no sign of dimming. It stayed above them, East of Bethlehem, as they began their journey.

The steward turned to them one last time and said, “My master bids you: follow that star.”

And so they did, for nine days, until they reached Jerusalem to ask for counsel.

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