

It was cold. Wind had scrubbed the sky clear of clouds, and the stars shone in their myriads seeming, in their hard light, to make the night colder still. To the man pacing back and forth on the roof of one of the city's tall temples, they resolved themselves into familiar patterns. He had watched them dancing slowly through the year and the seasons and hinting at things present and things to come. Tantalizing hints, never certain, always teasing out the limits of possibility. From boyhood he had come to the rooftop, learning from others and teaching himself and feeling the deliberate passing of time, night after night. This night, he was restless. His eyes were not on the stars, but on the sleeping city spread out beneath him. He knew every one of the tangled streets; he had stood countless times in the open, public places; more than once he had stood on the walls with sword and bow when war had come to the city gates. The night sky was his life's work – the city was his home. Both were complicated creations: the one by human hands and the other by divine hands. They each held their mysteries and their perils and their beauty. Sometimes, he thought, there was more than a tenuous connection between the two, more than the uncertain link between the lives of the city's people and the patterns of the stars.

There were, of course, those who claimed to make that link absolute. They sat in the marketplaces and on the steps of temples and palaces promising to explain the tangled matters of love and money, greed and desire: certainty for a few coins, the future clear as tonight's sky. It was easy to despise them; many whom he knew did. Yet he himself looked at these ragged traders in human hopes and their earnest, eager, sometimes desperate customers with something akin to pity. Who, even the rich and the wise, didn't want the future to be certain, didn't long for a clear connection between an event, a choice, and its consequences? And now, here, this night, wasn't he hoping for

something more certain than the persistent tugging at his mind, the sense that something momentous was there to be discerned in the night sky?

He put his hands on the parapet and leaned out over the wall, looking into the shadows of the city, studying the familiar patterns of all that lay beneath him, hoping that there he might discover what he was looking for. Hoping that the earth would give him a certainty that the heavens would not.

Then there was someone beside him, who had come up so quietly that it was as if he had simply appeared out of the night air. An old man, with lined face and white hair who still stood tall and straight, an old friend whose every line and wrinkle and movement was known and cherished by the one whom now he had joined there on the rooftop. He, too, gazed out over the city and the two stood for a while in silence. Finally the old man spoke.

“Numbidian,” he said.

Then the silence continued for a time. The wind picked up and pulled at the long cloaks both men wore. The younger man shivered. Then he in his turn spoke.

“I know, Telfima. Here I stand one more night, no more certain than I was last night and the night before. Do we go, do we stay, or do we simply wait?”

“Well,” replied Telfima, “This much I do know. If we go searching for this thing or,” and he paused, “this person that the star whispers to us of, it will be no short journey. We both know that.”

“Tell me, Telfima,” asked Numbidian, “when was the last time you got as far as the city gates, never mind actually passing through them?”

Telfima laughed. “A very long time. Whatever adventurous spirit I may have had left me years ago. I’m an old man, in case you’ve not noticed. I like my comforts. If I wasn’t sure of finding you up here, I would have stayed by my fireside.”

Numbidian looked at his friend for a moment, and then once more turned his gaze over the sleeping city. “I know, old friend,” he said. “But if I must go, I would like you to go with me.”

Telfima sighed. “That is undoubtedly what will happen. Frankly, I’d miss you more than my fireside. But not yet. There’s still too much you and I don’t know.”

The weeks passed, and Numbidian spent every clear night on the rooftop of the building that was palace and temple and library and home. He stayed until the dawn eclipsed the stars; and, often half asleep, walked unsteadily down the twisting stairs, striding out into the morning to feel the sun warm on his face, his feet stirring up dust in the street, smelling the acrid tang with pleasure. On one such morning, he was greeted by a man of much the same age as he; but where Numbidian was tall and sharp featured, the other, Celsorious, was broad and short, with a round face and a

substantial girth. Looking up at Numbidian, Celsorious said, "You've been looking at that strange star for months, I'm told. Well, while you've been looking, I've been reading. Tell me, what do you know of a people known as the Jews?"

"Only that they live a very long way from here. Near the shores of the Great Sea that the Romans would have the world believe belongs entirely to them." Numbidian spread his hands in a wry gesture.

"Well, let me tell you something more, then," said Celsorious looking just a little smug. "They really are a remarkable people, living on their little piece of land and holding fast to their demanding God. Nothing casual about them and their God. Worship, it seems, isn't just the usual things, prayers and sacrifices and such. This God seems to care about women and orphans and foreigners and especially the poor. There's a rigorous justice in the faith of the Jews that counts for a great deal."

"A worthy nation, then," said Numbidian.

"Yes, but the point is that for a very long time they've been waiting for a king."

"They have no one to rule them?" asked Numbidian. He sounded puzzled.

"Oh yes, they've had kings for a long time. And from what I understand, they're a province of Rome with a Roman governor as well as a local king. But here's the matter: they wait for no ordinary ruler. First, if I understand their scriptures the right way, this king's claim to rule is precisely his humble beginnings. And it seems that

there's less about politics and more about religion when it comes to his purposes. I don't read about conquest but about righteousness. I must tell you that I find it all very hard to understand."

"Which is very interesting," replied Numbidian. "But have you stopped me on the street just to tell me this?"

Again, Celsorious' face entertained a brief hint of smugness. "Just suppose that this premonition, this portent that you've been so energetic about, has something to do with this king in the country of the Jews?"

"Can you be certain about this?" asked Numbidian.

Celsorious laughed. "Of course not! When do we leave?"

"I haven't really thought about that," said Numbidian. "It's only this new star – so faint, so far, that's all any of us knows."

"Well, let me tell you something," said Celsorious, a bit of his laughter still in his voice. "Early this morning, after I'd finished reading and knowing how you've been spending your time these last weeks, do you know what I did?"

"No," said Numbidian, a doubtful smile on his face.

“Well, then,” said Celsorious, “here’s what I did. I set two of my servants to packing up my things, you know, what I’ll need for our journey.”

“You’re packing? I can’t even be certain where we’re going,” said Numbidian.

“Who ways you have to be?” replied Celsorious. “Tell me, do you think I’m right about searching in the country of the Jews?”

“I mist tell you, “said Numbidian, “what you’ve told me is an interesting possibility. But don’t you think we ought to think about all this?”

“Nonsense,” retorted Celsorious. “Sooner or later, whatever it is that’s out there is going to pull you down from your rooftop and onto a camel’s back. We both know that, right?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Numbidian slowly.

“Well we’re none of us getting any younger, are we? Especially Telfima. He was telling me, oh, yesterday I think it was...”

Numbidian interrupted. “You meant the two of you have been planning this?”

“Of course we have. You’re the wisest among us – we know that and so do you. No, don’t shake your head, it doesn’t become you. The wisest, I said, and I mean it; but left to your own devices that star you’ve been searching out would be fast waning

before you'd made up your mind to go looking for the reason for it. And here's what you need to consider: if we're going to go looking among the Jews, nothing could be better for us. And if their God is at all like they seem honestly to believe that He is, the matter is out of our hands entirely. If there's someone to be found, we'll find that someone. They claim, you know, that their God is the only one and he has the whole world as his creation and possession. Now, look. The morning is getting along. You go home and do whatever you have to do to be off. Telfima and I will meet you at the city gate before nightfall."

For the first time in many years, Numbidian felt entirely breathless as he watched Celsorious set his large bulk hurrying off down the street. These things take time, he kept telling himself all the rest of the day – as he and his household rushed about making preparations for his journey. The study of the heavens, the groping for understanding, the drawing of the enormously important interconnections between the dance of the stars and the complicated events of human lives and of the fate of nations: this was his heart's labor and had been since he was a boy. Now he was about to set out into the unknown on a chance, on a whim. Celsorious could not climb a flight of stairs without getting red and the face and short of breath. Now he was ordering up this journey like an overexcited boy.

But as the day's shadows lengthened into evening, Numbidian was at the city gate accompanied by a single servant and beasts for riding and for bearing food and belongings. His friends were not there. He watched the merchants closing their shops and taking down their tents; he saw soldiers march in from the country before the gates were shut for the night; he observed the ceremony as guards on the walls changed

duty from one company to another; he saw children kicking something back and forth in the dusty street, calling out to each other. The sun had nearly set. Had Telfima and Celsorious gone on ahead of him? Had they changed their minds?

“Look! He managed to get here ahead of us!” Celsorious’ loud voice filled the open square before the city gates. “I told you he’d be eager to be off!”

Numbidian turned and saw his two friends making their way towards him – Celsorious sweating and puffing, old Telfima walking easily with a small smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“Isn’t it wonderful!” Celsorious said as he came up to Numbidian, putting his stubby arm around Numbidian’s shoulder.

“I wish...” Numbidian started to say.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, “ Celsorious interrupted. “Look, here comes everyone else.” Around the corner and into the square came more animals and several servants leading them. “Now we’re ready. What a grand procession, don’t you think?”

And before Numbidian had a chance to say anything more, Celsorious had set the animals in order, put himself and Telfima at the head, and nudged Numbidian in beside them. “Now,” he shouted, “off we go. Quick before they close the gate!”

As they walked through the gate, Numbidian realized that everyone else had stopped talking and shouting and even moving. The children were still. The guards on the walls stopped their pacing and were leaning on their spears looking down. Everything was absolutely still. He took a deep breath and followed his friends out into the gathering night as a cool breeze came across the surrounding desert and brushed lightly against his face. Overhead the stars began to come out, and as he looked into the west he saw one star brighter than all the others – a hint no longer, more like a shout.

He took a deep breath and followed his friends. With a great creak and clang the city gates shut behind them. For everyone inside the walls, day was ending. For the small band trudging over the sand and stones of the desert, the day was beginning.

Long days and long nights followed. The journey was slow, but the way was sure. They spent most of the time in silence, even voluble Celsorious whose brash certainty had, it seemed to Numbidian, pushed them out of the city and far from home, was content to rest in the shade in the heat of the day and look peacefully up at the stars at night as their journey continued.

Where they went and what they found make up a part of the story that you already know. But on the night when the star which Numbidian had first glimpsed from a rooftop long ago shone its very brightest; on the night when their journey came to its end in that unlikeliest of places; Celsorious found his voice once again.

Numbidian was standing outside the stable, lost in thought. Celsorious came up beside him and spoke, quietly. "I was right. I rather thought you were, with your caution and your careful pondering. But I was."

"Are you surprised?" replied Numbidian. "You believed in all this. Who knows, you might even have helped it all to come about. You believed; and it happened. And here we are to see it, to be part of the story. So that's what a king looks like when God has a hand in it. I wonder..." He gazed off into the indeterminate distance.

"You wonder what, my friend?" asked Celsorious.

"I wonder if he'll ever have a story that people will remember. And I wonder if we'll be a part of it – long after we've gone all the way back home, I mean. Who will remember?"

Celsorious smiled. "This God you just spoke about – this God will remember, and so I imagine that we'll be in the story somewhere. Look. It's the dawn breaking. If we're going to keep from starting home in the heat of the day, we'd better begin now."

A short time later, the small procession walked slowly eastward, in the direction of the rising sun.