

VISITORS

“Once there was a potter who lived by a river. On the first day of each week he would go out and dig clay from the river bank. The next day he would wash the clay. The day after that he would form his pots, and then the next day he would fire them in his kiln. The following day he would paint the pieces, and the next day he would load them on his donkey to take them to market. The next day he would rest with his family before beginning again the following morning.

“The potter did this for years, training his son in the potter’s craft. He kept the same schedule, dug the same clay, and even followed the same road from his house into town. But by the road stood a large tree. One day as the potter was passing beneath the tree, a great branch cracked and fell, scattering and breaking the pottery and killing the potter.

“His wife and son buried the potter and sang the dirges and offered the sacred meal and mourned him for the prescribed period. Then his son went out and dug the clay, washed it, formed it, fired it, painted it, and loaded the pots on his donkey to take to market, following the same road his father had.”

The captain fell silent, and the guard looked at him as if expecting more. But the captain had finished. Eventually the guard asked, “That’s—that’s it?”

“Yes, Araxis, that’s it,” the captain answered. “It’s called the Parable of the Potter. When I asked the master for a wise story, that’s what he told me.”

“But...” Araxis stammered. “What does it *mean*?”

The captain smiled. “That’s what I asked him.”

“What did he say?”

“He just smiled at me and said, ‘When you figure it out, let me know.’”

Araxis pulled a face and sputtered. “But...but...how is that supposed to be wisdom? It doesn’t even make any sense! I mean, I can understand it, but where’s the mystical meaning?”

The captain stood up and clapped the guard on the shoulder. “When you figure it out, let me know.”

“Captain Tigranes! Captain Tigranes!” A voice called, and the captain turned to see one of the slave boys come running.

“What is it, lad?”

“Lookout tower reports mounted party coming up the river road, sir,” the boy gasped. “At least four, all armed and riding hard!”

“Four armed horsemen?” The captain asked, ruffling the boy’s hair.

“And riding hard, sir!” The lad confirmed breathlessly.

“Well, then, let’s take a look, shall we?” The captain said, heading for the watchtower. “Araxis, go join the guard at the gate, but don’t panic.”

Captain Tigranes headed along the inside of the estate wall toward the watchtower, the slave lad panting along behind. Again Tigranes blessed in his heart the architect of this estate house, who had combined elegance and beauty with serviceable practicality. The walls reached out from the cliff against which the manor nestled, sweeping in a smooth arc out to where the main gate opened onto the road, and then back to the tan cliffs again. The walls looked light and graceful, and only a trained eye could spot that they were wide enough for defenders to man the tops, and planted solidly in the rock to deny miners and sappers any advantage. The estate’s towers soared gracefully above the gardens, catching cooling breezes from the mountains

and river—and enabling the watchmen atop them to see far down the valley. The well-tended gardens grew as many edible plants as flowers, and the stables could hold many more cattle and goats in a pinch. The main gate was thick wood banded with iron, and had watchtowers above it. The estate might not be able to withstand a real siege by an actual army, but it would hold out against a band of brigands, which was the most likely threat here in the hills.

Tigranes mounted the watchtower, the slave lad following, not wanting to miss a moment of the excitement. Reaching the lookout platform, they found a guard peering attentively down the valley. The view was beautiful, with the Eulaeus river dancing down the slope to the valley floor with the river road running along its bank. Tigranes shaded his eyes to get a better look.

“So, what have we got here, Hymeas?” Tigranes asked the guard.

“Four horsemen, one clearly leading. Looks like a lord and his retainers. You can just see them coming clear of the bend now,” Hymeas replied.

“Coming clear of the bend? You spotted them beyond the bend? Good work, man.”

“Well, that was Baba here,” Hymeas gestured to the slave boy. “He called my attention to them when they were just clearing the valley floor.”

“Did you, now?” Tigranes clapped Baba on the shoulder. “Well done, lad.”

Baba glowed at the praise. “And they’re armed, sir! See their lances?”

“I do, just barely,” Tigranes replied. “But notice that the lances are strapped to their saddles, not in their hands. Not what you’d expect from a hostile party. But let’s go see. Baba, would you like to come?”

“Me? Yes, sir!” came the excited reply.

They made their way down to the main gate, Baba working to check his scurrying feet so he didn't run faster than the captain's unhurried strides. At the gate they found Araxis and the gate guard watching the horsemen, who could now be seen from ground level.

"Spears and shields, Captain?" the gate guard asked.

"Yes, but no armor," Tigranes replied. "And leave the gate standing open. I don't think our visitors are hostile—in fact, I'm beginning to have my suspicions about the leader."

The two guards ducked into the nearby arms locker, emerging with spears and shields and taking station on either side of the gate. Tigranes waved Baba back to a spot just inside the gates from which he could observe safely, but stayed directly in front himself, his hand on the hilt of his sword, watching the approaching party. The horsemen were coming on at a canter, and as they grew closer a smile slowly spread across Tigranes' face. When the riders were a furlong off and slowing to a walk, Tigranes beckoned Baba forward.

"Yes, sir?" Baba asked, nervously eying the oncoming riders.

"Take a message to the master, Baba."

"The master?" Baba asked in awe. Typically slaves didn't bring messages to the master himself.

"Yes. You were the first to spot them, so you can bear the good news. Tell the master that an old friend has arrived, one whom he may wish to come welcome."

"Old friend...come welcome..." Baba muttered as he dashed off. The riders were now within hailing distance, and the leader was holding up his right hand, palm outward.

"Guards, attention!" Tigranes called, drawing his sword and saluting sharply. They held that position until the riders pulled up before the gate. The leader, a trim but muscular man in dusty travel leathers, dismounted with practiced ease. He was a little shorter than most, but carried himself with easy grace. His hair

and beard were closely trimmed, as if to fit easily within a battle helmet, and his skin was dark even by Parthian standards.

“Well, well, full martial honors,” the man said, approaching with a broad grin.

“No less than your due, Lord Gudpharasa,” Tigranes replied, grinning in return as he snapped down his salute.

“I hope I’m also due a handclasp,” the lord replied, gripping the captain’s forearm. “It is good to see you again, old friend.”

“It has been too many years since you’ve graced these gates, my lord. I’ve sent word to the master, and I expect he will come to greet you personally. But can I make your retinue welcome?”

“Thank you. Gentlemen, may I present Captain Tigranes, chief of my Lord Melchior’s guard. Captain, this is Gordias, Keos, and Tetius Caesius, my companions in arms.”

The three men bowed deeply, and Tigranes saluted in return. “Any friends of Lord Gudpharasa are welcome in this house.”

“Oh, Tigranes, for their sake use the shortened form. I go by Gaspar mostly these days, their poor Greek and Latin tongues struggling as they do with all those syllables.”

“Very well, my lord. You’re warmly welcome no matter what name you come under. But let us get out of the sun. Men, tend to our guests’ horses.”

The guards took the reins as the men removed their riding gloves and caps, slapping the road dust from their sleeves. As they passed through the gate, the three retainers looked in wonder at the well-tended groves and neat paths lacing the estate grounds.

“As always, a place of peace and gentle silence,” Gaspar said. “We wanted so much to come up last night, but we made it into Seleucia late, and our poor horses needed the rest. We started as soon as we could this morning.”

“Gudpharasa!” came a cry, and they looked up to see an older man scurrying down the path toward them, Baba close at his heels. Gaspar ran ahead and embraced the man warmly.

“And to think he was wondering if he’d be remembered,” said Gordias with a smile.

“Lord Guda—Gaspar? Oh, certainly,” Tigranes answered. “Master Melchior has had many students over the years, and remembers them all. But a handful were very close, almost like sons. Lord Gaspar was one of those.” Up ahead, Gaspar and Melchior were walking toward the main house, heads together, engrossed in conversation and oblivious to all else.

“My apologies,” Tigranes continued. “Usually my master welcomes all his guests in person, but as you can see, the delightful surprise of your master’s arrival has preoccupied him. Permit me to welcome you in his name, and offer you all comfort. If you wish, you may supervise the stabling of your mounts, but be assured our grooms are skilled and treat all beasts as their own.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Keos said. “If your stables are run in half the good order that the rest of the estate seems to be, our horses are in the finest hands.”

“Then let us see to your stabling,” Tigranes replied. “Baba, run ahead and tell the chamberlain to prepare four rooms for our guests—and run baths as well.”

“Rooms?” gasped Gordias. “Captain, we can barrack with your men, I’m sure—we’re just common soldiers.”

“If you are companions of Lord Gaspar, you are guests of the household, and that means rooms. Yours will be small ones, about the size of mine. Your lord will get the guest suite.”

“The hospitality of Persia is legendary,” said Gordias with another bow.

The sun was westering as the two old friends relaxed on the airy balcony overlooking the estate’s garden.

“Your garden is magnificent as always, Melchior,” Gaspar said. “I never appreciated how clever the channeling was, to divert water from the river down here into the estate.”

“I have to give the prior owner credit for that,” Melchior admitted. “His efforts made the estate self-sufficient for water. The channels not only feed the pools and fountains, but the kitchens and stables as well. We use the outflow to wash waste away into a ravine. Very well thought out.”

“Yes, a few campaigns with the Romans teaches one the value of even such messy matters. They’re scrupulous about their latrine arrangements,” Gaspar confirmed.

“Ah, so you have ridden with the Romans. I suspected as much. You’ve been reticent to speak of what you’ve been up to, and I haven’t wanted to press the point,” Melchior said.

“I’ve been enjoying your hospitality and resting from our road-weariness,” Gaspar explained. “It takes old campaigners like us a while to adjust to even being in a home, where ordinary people live out their ordinary lives.”

Melchior laughed. “Only a blind man would call you an old campaigner. You’re just twenty-five, aren’t you? You have to be, because you’ve only been gone seven years, and you were eighteen when you left.”

Gaspar sighed, and the shadows across his face in the fading daylight made him look twice his years. “Some ages cannot be measured by months. Yes, I’ve ridden far. I’ve seen the plains of Hispania and the forests of Gaul. I’ve ridden across Africa from Alexandria to the Gates of Hercules, and seen the shores of Britannia. I’ve seen Damascus and Ephesus and Athens and, of course, Rome. I’ve strategized with generals and advised proconsuls and served kings. I’ve seen deeds of nobility and heroism, and I’ve seen acts of unspeakable savagery done in the name of power and glory. Indeed, it seems like much longer than seven years.”

“So you followed through on your plans, then?” Melchior asked.

“To the degree I could,” Gaspar admitted with a shrug. “Your education was a fine base. You taught me how to think

and observe and articulate. Your library on the campaigns of Alexander is one of the finest east of Alexandria itself. When I left here I sought out the best libraries and the most experienced campaigners. The Romans are nothing if not diligent about writing things down. I studied the campaigns of Gaius Marius, of Sulla, of Caesar. The field experiences of retired legionaries could be heard for the cost of some pitchers of wine in taverns across the empire. I learned whatever I could, however I could. I thought I'd made the right choice. The whole world seems caught up in conquest and expansion—who should be in more demand than an expert strategist who has studied centuries of military history?" He sighed deeply and took a sip of his wine.

"But?" Melchior invited him to continue.

"But I didn't realize the importance of other factors. Rome and its army are the power in the west, and both are brimming with ambitious young Romans eager to make a name for themselves. For them, military success is the avenue to both financial security and political power, and they're not going to yield an inch of advantage to some foreigner, no matter how well educated."

"You'd think they'd listen to a son of the only people to ever defeat Alexander," Melchior observed.

Gaspar chuckled darkly. "You'd think, wouldn't you? But to most Romans, anything east of Dalmatia is 'Greek', and anything east of the Euphrates is 'Parthian', and that's where their interest ends. The names Mithradates and Carrhae still loom too large in the Roman mind. Even trying to get them to understand about lands further east is futile."

"Do you think your youth worked against you?"

Gaspar shrugged. "Alexander had conquered Persia when he was younger than I am now. I may not be an Alexander, but I'm more able than many of the men I saw in command of legions."

"So, you had no success?" Melchior asked.

“Oh, I had some. A senior tribune I met in Hispania engaged me to help plan his campaign against some guerrillas. He was so pleased with my work that he commended me to a prefect in Gaul. I helped the prefect overhaul the dispositions of his entire force, enabling him to cover more territory with fewer men. But when the commendation arrived from Rome, my contribution went unacknowledged, though I know the prefect had mentioned me warmly in his reports. I was paid well, and given helpful letters of introduction, but it was becoming clear: I would never be more than a useful foreigner, excluded from the inner circles of power.”

“That must have been disappointing,” Melchior said sympathetically.

“Somewhat,” Gaspar shrugged. “But not so much as I’d thought. After a few years inside their operations, I’d become a bit disillusioned with Rome. Given my choice of fields, it was the sensible path for me to take, but the reality didn’t match the image.”

“How so?”

Gaspar pondered a bit before responding. “It’s hard to explain. To the Romans, everything’s about Rome—an understandable attitude, given what they’ve achieved. So long as the peace holds so the revenues keep flowing, they worry about nothing else. But those of us who have studied other times and places and peoples can see that the iron might of Rome is not so strong as the Romans believe. Oh, it’s plenty strong in Italy, and Gaul, and Hispania, and Africa. But in Anatolia and the Levant, and even Egypt—wherever they’ve subscribed to Antony’s strategy of using client kings—the quality of the iron degrades. Petty kings are happy to use the legions to secure their thrones, and will rally to the Eagles if called, but they aren’t interested in aggrandizing Rome. They may swear the oaths and honor any visiting Roman dignitaries, but in their own courts they point out that the Roman military learned at the feet of the

Greek, and that the greatest Roman general would be no match for Alexander. In private, the name Mithradates is held more in honor than in contempt.”

“It sounds like you speak from personal experience,” Melchior observed.

“In this case, yes. Despairing of achieving my goals among the Romans, I drifted east. I found a position assisting the general of one of the kingdoms of Asia. Despite the fact that the king wouldn’t properly fund or equip his army, I helped the general plan and execute a campaign to drive back an aggressive neighbor who’d been harassing the kingdom for generations. The defeat cost the neighboring king his throne, and his successor was willing to negotiate a settlement to the longstanding disagreements. Resolving that problem earned the general an estate and a welcome retirement. He recommended to his successor that I be retained as a strategic advisor, but the successor was a young court noble who wanted one of his drinking buddies to have the job. So I was decorated, paid off, and shown the borders.”

“Is that where you picked up your retainers?” Melchior asked.

“A couple of them. Gordias and Keos decided to try their luck with me instead of staying under the new general. Tetius has been with me since Gaul.” Gaspar sighed heavily and took another drink. “I just hope they haven’t bet on the wrong horse.”

“What are your plans now?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? With Rome a dead end for me, I could bounce around from one petty Greek kingdom to another. Or I could look to Parthia, the second largest empire in the world. Or I could go home, and try my luck with some raj or *kshatrapa* there. At the moment, I’m not certain what I’ll do.”

“So that’s what brought you here? You’re on the route home?”

“That, plus the fact that the summer is ending, so the Parthian Imperial court will soon return from Ecbatana in the mountains to Seleucia on Eulaeus down there in the valley. Perhaps I can make some contacts at court. But mostly it was the draw of this place, the hope that you were still alive and in residence. The years I spent here were the best of my life, and I was hoping that even a brief visit would enable me to recapture some of the peace and hope I knew when I dwelt here.”

Melchior noticed the bitter edge in Gaspar’s voice—an edge that had come far too early for such a young man. “You’re welcome for as long as you wish to stay, which I hope will be longer than a brief visit. It sounds like you need some rest.”

“Rest—yes,” Gaspar confirmed. “That would be welcome. But enough of me—how have you been? Am I correct in guessing that you’re no longer taking students?”

Melchior sighed. “You are. I sent my last student off four years ago. Part of me misses teaching, but part of me was growing weary of it. I certainly didn’t need the income any more. I’d put away enough for the rest of my life, and there are advantages to being a magus living just up the hill from the winter capital. Some noble or courtier is always wanting a horoscope cast or a dream interpreted, and is willing to pay for it. Other than that, I’ve mostly busied myself with managing the estate. That’s enough for me at this point in life.” Melchior sighed. “But some days I wonder if I didn’t stop teaching too early.”

Gaspar looked at his old friend and mentor with concern of his own. Melchior’s speech was tinged with dusty flatness, with weary resignation that hadn’t been there before. Gaspar remembered the verve and enthusiasm of years ago, the voice of a wise teacher excited to introduce his students to wisdom and knowledge. Little of that seemed to remain, and Gaspar wondered what had changed. “Why do you wonder that?” he asked.

Melchior sighed again. “Sometimes I think it might have been good for these old gray hairs to interact with youth and enthusiasm, if only to keep them youthful. Certainly it grew tiresome to go over the same lessons again and again, and to deal with the same discipline matters, but occasionally there came a student with such a teachable mind, with such love and appreciation of knowledge, that it was like getting a bit of my youth back. I could once again taste the hope, the excitement, the wonder of my younger years. You were such a student. Now all I have to look forward to is the steward’s reports on how much milk the goats are giving, or how the fruit harvest is shaping up.”

“But, don’t you have—”, Gaspar began, but they were interrupted by a messenger at the doorway.

“Pardon, my lords, but there is a visitor at the gate. He asked for admittance and the chance to see you. He claims to be an old student.”

“Ah,” said Melchior. “Is he alone?”

“No, my lord. He has a servant, and they were both mounted. He’s no beggar. We’ve invited him in and are hosting him in the guard house. We’ve attended to their horses, per your instructions.”

“Very well. An old student, eh? Perhaps a classmate of yours, Gaspar? We will come greet this visitor. Bid him welcome, and tell him to meet us in the garden. If he is an old student, he will remember the way.”

“As you wish, my lord,” the servant bowed and whisked away while the two men got to their feet and followed.

“Well,” said Melchior. “I wonder what fate would bring two of my former students to my door on the same day?”

“If it is indeed one of your former students,” Gaspar cautioned.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” Melchior replied. “I get many visitors at my gate for many reasons, and the guards know how

to deal with all types. The only ones who ever claim to be former students are the former students. The only question is whether it's a former student I wish to see."

By now they were entering the garden, which was glowing in the late afternoon light. They turned along the long pool and saw, approaching from the far end, a tall dark man dressed in the colorful draping robes of the hotter climes—Sheba, perhaps, or Nubia, thought Gaspar. The man broke into a broad grin and hurried his pace, while Melchior slowed almost to a stop.

"By the stars and planets," he whispered. "This is a day of good omen."

"Melchior!" boomed the man in a voice that rose from the bottom of his chest.

"Blessed be this day, whose sunrise brought me one old friend and whose sunset has brought me another!" cried Melchior, embracing the man warmly and kissing him in the Persian style. "It has been too many years!"

"Far too many," the man agreed, then turned to Gaspar. "But who is our friend?"

"Another old student, though one who followed you by many years," Melchior explained. "May I present Gudpharasa? My old friend and student Bithisarea."

The men bowed deeply to one another. "In deference to local pronunciation abilities, I normally go by Gaspar."

"Ah," the man smiled. "For similar reasons, in these lands I go by Balthazar."