

CHAPTER
ONE

*A persuasion existed among the majority
that some ancient priestly writings contained the
prophecy that this was the very time
when an eastern power would prevail,
and men proceeding from Judea
would obtain dominion.*

—TACITUS

On the backwater of the Diyala River, a lone rider eased his horse from the protective cover of trees toward the edge of the channel. Light from the stars reflected on the smooth surface of the water while the animal stood ankle-deep to drink. As the man peered across the drift, he could not tell where the clear, moonless sky ended and the dark horizon began.

The horse raised its head, and the rider began to work his way upstream to a narrow trail used by wild game to reach the riverbank. He followed the path upward a mile into the forest to a large outcropping of rocks on the side of a hill. In the shadow of the woods he halted his mount and waited.

The man fingered the sweat on his thick, black beard, and then rubbed the back of his sore neck. His face was dirty and scratched after many hours in the woods. The long white robe that flowed from his broad shoulders was ripped at the hem and spotted with mud.

The horse grunted and began to shift its feet back and forth. "Silence, Shelyuk, old girl," the rider whispered as he patted her head. Eyes wide open in the darkness, he listened intently. What had begun as a crowded hunt in the predawn hours had led the man to this isolated place alone after sundown. The others had all returned to the city, Ramates knew; no doubt the banquet had already started and his companions had noticed his absence.

With one hand he steadied the reins and balanced his weapon; with the other he fumbled the bowstring. In this wild paradise the daytime hunter could quickly become the nighttime hunted. With two fingers tightly wrapped around the arrow's shaft, he pulled the others lightly against the tendon, ready to make a split-second shot.

The creature Ramates sought was a prize white leopard. The great cat had been snared in the Zagros highlands and released on the king's hunting preserve for the pleasure of his kinsmen. On this day the Parthian nobleman who slew the white leopard would be awarded gold and a champion stallion from the royal stable.

Ramates had tracked the cat all day, refusing to take easy shots at several deer that crossed his path as they tried in vain to escape the other hunters. His interest in

the rare animal did not lie in the reward, for he was wealthy and already owned several superior horses. But finishing the hunt empty-handed was not his custom. Ramates was the best hunter in Ctesiphon, but there were many who vowed to unseat him. Nothing—not even royal horses or Parthian gold—was as important as the admiration of his countrymen.

Ramates released his grip on the arrow long enough to lift a water skin to his mouth. He glanced up through the trees to get his bearings. Recognizing the constellation Virgo, the hunter concluded he was headed toward the interior of the hunting preserve.

Just then something unusual captured his attention. A light was shining in the sky at a place where Ramates had not seen one before.

“What wonder is this?” he said out loud, then quickly put his hand over his mouth, concerned the sound might flush his prey. He scratched his beard and stared at the beacon.

A strange sensation overcame Ramates as a scene from his childhood drifted into his consciousness: himself as child, younger than age five because he had yet to be given over to his father for training, being comforted by his mother as she held him in her lap. Gazing skyward, he wondered what brought her to mind now.

Ramates scanned the surrounding stars for a familiar configuration. He easily located Al Caid, the star at the tip of the Great Bear’s prominent tail. As in the game

children play, he used the curve of the tail as a pointer to Arcturus, the bright light of Boötes. From there it was but a handbreadth to Al Murredin, which the Parthians called the right hand of the Virgin. Ramates stretched out his fingers and found it quickly.

So the strange light was surrounded by those three notable asterisms—the Great Bear, Boötes, and the Virgin. Ramates thought for a moment and concluded that the luminary was coming directly from the area of sky known as Comah.

“I must be wrong,” he said, again aloud, but softly. That his talents at stargazing did not come close to matching his hunting prowess had long been a source of embarrassment to him. He looked up. The entire mazzaloth of Comah was made up of dim stars visible on only the darkest nights. He could see their faint glow surrounding this unusual light in the sky. Ramates repeated his identification of the constellations to verify that the light was indeed coming from Comah.

Was it a new star? Discovering a new star was practically impossible for even the best astrologers. A generation had passed since the last record of such an occurrence, during the reign of Orodes.

Ramates breathed faster, his heart pounding. What honor it would bring if he were credited with discovering a new star! At last the older men would take his opinions seriously. He would be given the finest tables at

hunting banquets and could lavish such feasts of his own upon his friends. And Statira's father—

He looked again. It occurred to him that his great discovery might merely be a planet, possibly Jupiter. Reporting Jupiter as a new star would be a debacle that he would never live down at the temple.

Concentrate! the man told himself. For several minutes he glanced away and looked back, finally deciding that the planet was a little too bright and small to be Jupiter. Venus?

Ramates recapped the water skin and patted Shelyuk, who shuffled in the silence. Eerie shadows cast by starlight played on the rocks while his fingers found the bowstring once again. The leopard was still out there, he knew, but he could not keep his eyes off the unusual glow overhead.

He was quite familiar with Venus, and even the bright disk of that wanderer was nothing like this light. Tonight, the nearest planet to Virgo was bloodred Mars, situated low on the horizon in Scorpio. So he was indeed looking at a star, a fact confirmed by its brilliance and scintillation.

His chest trembling, he smiled in triumph. Finally, he thought, he would surpass his late father's reputation. No more mockery about his parentage—how he could not possibly be the offspring of the great stargazer Ophernez. But there was no time to waste. A fellow priest could be recording the new star at that very

moment. As Ramates knew, the council would recognize only a sighting witnessed at the temple.

He quickly turned his mount, and as he did, he caught the blurred image of a large object hurtling toward his head. Instinctively the hunter raised his bow, but it was too late. He ducked and felt the creature brush past him. Spooked, Shelyuk reared up and nearly threw her rider, but Ramates grabbed the reins with his arrow hand in time to catch himself. He saw that it was not the leopard but a large bird of prey returning from the direction of the river.

Shelyuk bolted down the wooded hillside in a panicked gallop. The seasoned rider took advantage of her fright, lying low in the saddle and urging her to greater and greater speeds as he dodged branches and ripped through briar bushes.

Suddenly he passed a flash of brilliant white beside the road on his right. The leopard! Ramates expertly gripped his bow and turned in the saddle. But there was no need to shoot. He reined in Shelyuk and turned. The leopard lay dead in the short brush, an arrow in its side. Ramates jumped down and pulled the arrow out, noticing as he did its distinctive markings.

“Sithobates,” he muttered in disgust. Angrily, he tossed the arrow into the trees and reached for the reins, then paused and looked again at the leopard. “This beautiful animal,” he murmured, “killed for nothing due to the laziness and stupidity of that inferior hunter.” It was against Parthian custom to abandon a kill.

He slung the dead cat over Shelyuk's shoulders and galloped down the mountain and onto the plain that lay before the city of Ctesiphon. Torches from the first watch lined the tops of its round walls. The road narrowed as it led down through the earthen mound and broad ditch that encircled the fortification. Ramates streaked past other riders making their way toward the gate, and dismounted quickly at the steps of the sacred edifice.

"Come!" he shouted to a nearby guard. "Watch my horse until I return!" Dismounting, he tossed the reins to the sentinel and ran up the steps toward the massive doors of the sanctuary. The sentinel waited until Ramates had disappeared into the temple before forcing back the lip of the leopard to examine its teeth. A small crowd gathered around the dead cat, whispering, nodding, and staring at it in awe.

Inside, Ramates gagged on the thick odor of burning incense as he ran past the altar. The strong ashen flavor indicated that a fresh block had been lit by one of the attendants. When the hunter found no priests, he hurried through the sanctuary to the stairway. His white robe flowed over stone steps worn smooth with time, tracing the footsteps of his ancestors, as he pressed on toward the charting rooms and balconies beyond.

At the top Ramates, filthy and sweaty, stepped through the curtain and found a shocked student priest just sitting down to enjoy some bread and wine. The young man stood immediately to extend to Ramates the

customary reverence due a temple priest. The bottle fell over, and the student nearly choked on his bread while blotting the liquid off some old charts on the table.

“Do not be alarmed,” Ramates assured him. “Are you alone?”

“Yes, my lord.”

The young man followed as the priest hurried out to the balcony railing. Ramates’ eyes quickly found Comah and her bright new star.

“Who is your master?” Ramates asked.

“Patizes,” answered the student. He was certain that he was in trouble.

“Where is he?”

“At the banquet, Lord Ramates. I thought all the magi were there.”

That is why he had felt it safe to indulge while on duty. Ramates returned to the chart room with the student trailing behind.

“What is your name?” the magus inquired. He knew the boy was nervous. He was a young student once.

“I am Naberes.” The young man bowed his head. “The son of Xathrites, chief magus of Tapé.”

What luck! The reputation of Naberes as an astrologer was first-rate, even for a student. If Ramates were wrong about the star, Naberes would tell him. And keep silent.

“I know your father,” he told the youth. “I have bought several horses from his stables. Tell me, Naberes, has anything unusual happened this evening?”

“No, my lord. Just the noise below of the hunters returning.”

“Have you charted anything tonight?”

“No, my lord. There has not been sufficient time since my watch began.”

Ramates smiled. “Time enough for food and drink, but not for the task at hand?” he asked. He lifted the stained charts from the table to inspect the damage. Red liquid dripped from the edge of the vellum and onto a hissing candle.

“I am sorry, my lord. You have spoken truth.” Naberex execrated himself silently. His father would be displeased to learn of this.

Ramates handed the old document to Naberex. “Dab this stain with vinegar and the wine will disappear. No one will be the wiser,” he advised.

The young man looked up. “I will. Thank you.”

“Follow me.” The magus walked back to the balcony with Naberex close behind. He stared at his star for several moments. The student watched him intently, peeking overhead occasionally in an attempt to discern where Ramates was looking. Finally Ramates turned and leaned his back against the railing.

“Naberex, look at Comah and tell me what you see.”

“Comah?”

“Yes.”

Naberex thought for a moment, then looked right at the constellation. Ramates had been correct about the

skills of the student. As the son of a chief magus, the youth had long understood the decans of the mazzaloth.

“What do you see?” he asked again.

The young man nervously held out his hands. He did not know how to respond. He wondered what kind of test this was.

“I—,” Naberres began.

Ramates whirled around and grabbed his shoulder.

“Do you not see a new star?” he demanded.

Naberres looked again. He cocked his head. Then he saw it. “That is a star? It looks like a planet.” Almost before the words were out of his mouth, Naberres regretted them. He had just questioned a temple priest.

“Really?” Ramates asked, determined not to belie his shaky confidence. “Which planet is it? Jupiter is not in The Virgin at this time.” He reached deep inside his tunic and handed Naberres a key. “Go get the book and let us see if this great light is a planet.”

The key seemed heavy in the hands of the student. The Book of Mazzalah, of which Ramates spoke, contained the motions of the planets. Naberres continued to stare at the light as he backed slowly away from the railing, and then turned to run to the archives room.

“And bring a lamp, too!” Ramates called after him.

Alone, the priest turned and gazed down the street toward the illuminated palace. It was imperative that he join the party and inform the other magi of the star

before someone else saw it and disputed his claim. Within moments, Naberis returned with a scroll.

Ramates stretched out his arms and held up the unrolled paper, almost over his head, so that Comah would be in view just off its edge. Naberis held up the oil lamp. Together, master and student studied the drawings. Their eyes met, and then they both looked up at their subject.

“You are right, my lord,” whispered Naberis excitedly. “It is a star! You have found a new star!”

“Come,” replied the elated Ramates, wasting no time. “You shall help me chart it.”

“Me?” asked the student in disbelief.

“Yes. Come!” Inside the archives chamber, a small treasure room with dusty scrolls and old, rotting shelves, Ramates picked up a wooden box that contained pieces of jewelry found at the temple over the years. Under the box was a special book just for recording new stars. Ramates had memorized every entry, especially those made by his father.

He sat down to write the details of his discovery into the chronicle. Naberis brought him a sharpened reed, which the magus moistened, then dipped onto the ink cake. According to Parthian custom, Ramates wrote that the star had been found on the twelfth day of Nisan in the thirty-third year of the reign of King Phraates. Beneath his own name the priest recorded the watch on which the star was sighted.

Ramates next drew a simple chart of the star showing its proximity to Virgo and its place among the faint jewels of Comah. His hand shook as he pushed the reed across the papyrus. The charter asked Naberes to make his mark next to his entries, after which the priest sealed the notations with his ring.

Naberes attended in silence. Being asked to witness such a discovery by a temple magus was an honor, and he wondered why Ramates had chosen him, a mere student. The city was full of magi, several of whom would be coming to the temple for the second watch, if Ramates had only waited. Naberes marveled at the priest's impatience but made his mark quickly, thrilled at the chance to experience a part of history many of his peers would never enjoy.

Ramates smiled, and his breathing finally slowed. The star was charted. Reforms in the magistene council had created the system of temple witnesses in response to envious magi taking credit for others' discoveries. His own father, Ophernez, had told Ramates of the times he reported his findings to the chief magus, who in return for gold would then offer the honor of the sighting to the highest bidder. Ramates knew he would be criticized for his student witness, but it was worth the risk. The discovery of the star was going to be his, and his alone.

"I will return later," he informed Naberes. "Have the servants prepare food and drink. We will be here for quite some time."

“Yes, Lord Ramates.”

“If there is time, send someone to my house with word that I have been detained with business at the temple.”

The crowd of temple guards was still gathered around the carcass of the dead leopard.

“There he is,” said one, as Ramates appeared in the doorway. The men stepped back to let the hunter mount his horse. Each guard had taken his turn in the Parthian infantry but was still impressed with their lord’s skill at the hunt.

“Hail, Orion,” he overheard one snicker as he began to hurry toward the palace. It was a name his friends called him in jest because of his prowess in the field, but one he knew his rivals also used secretly, because of his arrogance.

The priest trotted through the dimly lit streets of Ctesiphon. He looked up to find the star leading directly toward his destination. He passed Seven Halls and arrived quickly at the royal compound, where servants took Shelyuk and led her toward the stable. One offered to carry the leopard for Ramates, but he refused.

Inside there was music and loud laughter coming from the great banquet hall. Carrying the leopard draped across his shoulders, Ramates stepped through the curtain quickly, startling the sentries just inside the doorway.

Artymes, chief magus of Ctesiphon, rose from his place near the front of the room. “Ramates, you have done well,” he greeted him. “There is no better archer in all of Ctesiphon.” The crowd broke into applause.

“In all of Parthia!” called out Ramates’ friend Parmisus. In the corner, Ramates saw Sithobates, sprawled drunk as usual, watching this exchange with glassy-eyed interest. He flipped the dead leopard onto his table, its muddy paws landing in Sithobates’ plate. Ramates turned to announce how he had found the cat, but Sithobates spoke first.

“Yes! Hail, Ramates,” he yelled, slurring the words as he raised his cup. “Hail the mighty Orion! There’s no greater hunter in all Ctesiphon—the king himself will agree! Go forward, Orion, and claim your rightful reward!” Ramates glared at the man with hatred. These drunken nights, he knew, meant a subsequent beating for Sithobates’ wife. Once, when such an event had taken place in public, Ramates himself had been forced to intervene.

“It is true, Ramates, leave your weapon and let us go before the king,” said Artymes, forcing him toward the head table. “Parmisus—come too.”

King Phraates held out his palm to the young man seated beside him as the three magi approached his table. “You lose your bet,” the king whispered to the youth. “I warned you that the best bowmen lived in this province.” The stoic younger man dropped ten gold darics into the king’s wiggling fingers. King Phraates inspected them closely until Ramates and his friends prostrated themselves before him.

“Well done, Ramates of Ctesiphon,” he declared. “On this night you are named champion in a room occupied by the finest hunters in Parthia.”

Ramates rose to his knees. "Great King, I wish to say . . ." began the priest, but again he was interrupted.

"Hear, hear!" shouted Sithobates. "To triumphant Orion! Will you shun the approbation of the king himself?" He tried to stand for his own toast but fell backwards, his cup crashing against the stone floor.

"Remove our friend from the hall," murmured the king to a sentry. "See that he is escorted home."

Three guards moved toward the prone Sithobates.

"This is my son, Prince Phraataces," said the king. "It is in his honor that this feast is given. He has been living at the court in Rome so that we may learn more about the barbarians."

Ramates saw the boy smile secretly at his father's words. The Romans, Ramates knew, considered the Parthians barbarians. Doubtless, like many young men, Phraataces considered himself a man of the world and his aging father hopelessly provincial. A new beard had been growing on the prince's face for about six weeks. But Ramates smiled inwardly too. The Roman sandals the prince wore looked out of place beneath the regal Parthian robes.

"Why have you not taken the coins?" asked the king suddenly, with some annoyance. "My hand tires." He pushed the coins into Ramates' palm.

Ramates decided to accept the coins as retribution for Sithobates' insults. The fool did not know his own arrow had killed the leopard, and a lesser hunter did not deserve the king's reward.

"In the morning you shall come to my stables and choose a stallion from among my best horses," Phraates told him. The king clapped his hands sharply and the music and dancing resumed. The men had been dismissed.

"You have displeased the king," scolded Lord Artymes. "He sensed you were not paying him full attention."

"Never mind the leopard," Ramates said quickly, dismissing the subject with a wave of his hand. "I must speak to you privately. It is of the greatest importance. Please come with me to the garden, both of you."

The priests walked past the sentinels and out into the large portico that overlooked the vineyard.

"While stalking the leopard, I spotted a great light in the sky," Ramates began. Instinctively, both men looked straight overhead. "At first I thought it was a planet, but it is not. It is a new star."

"A new star?" asked Artymes skeptically. "You have triumphed tonight, but your skill is with the bow, not as a stargazer. Will you allow your pride to turn victory into failure? You know how angry you become when the others laugh at you." The old man shook his head in pity. For years he had tried to nurture Ramates along, but to no

avail. Instead of being a good hunter and a good priest, he had become the greatest of hunters and a marginal priest. The compromise did not please the chief magus.

“Show us this star,” laughed Parmisus.

Ramates led the two down the steps past the pool and into the courtyard. “Look there,” he said, pointing up and slightly eastward.

“What am I supposed to see?” Artymes asked after a few moments.

“Right there.” Ramates pointed again to the light source.

“You rediscovered Jupiter, Ramates!” Now Parmisus was really laughing.

Even Artymes could not help chuckling. “But that light glimmers too brightly to be Jupiter,” corrected the old chief priest. “We are looking at Venus, I think.”

“No, Lord Artymes,” asserted Ramates. “Venus is low in Taurus and Jupiter has already set tonight. I thought exactly as you did at first, but that is not a planet.”

Artymes stared for a moment. His smile faltered. “We must consult the Book,” he said finally.

“I already have.”

The three men looked at the light again.

“It is a new star,” insisted Ramates.

The pair of awestruck priests looked on with amazement. The three men were quiet for a moment.

“What is that? The Virgin?” asked Parmisus, who was still looking skyward, trying to identify a familiar asterism.

“Yes,” related Ramates. “The star is in Comah.”

Artymes clutched his chest. “Oh, Ramates, what have you found?” He sat down.

“So you have been to the temple already?” Parmisus pressed.

“Yes. I wanted to verify my findings and get them charted.”

“Who witnessed your seal?”

“Naberes of Tapé,” admitted Ramates.

“A student?” asked Artymes sharply.

Parmisus grabbed Ramates by the arm. “Why did you not ask me?”

“You were not there, friend.”

“You could have sent for me,” he argued.

“You could have stayed with me on the hunt and not returned to fill your belly!”

The noise from their exchange got the attention of Queen Thea Musa, who had wandered onto her balcony above. Looking down, the mother of Prince Phraataces saw that the arguing men were magi, those who would be instrumental in her son’s accession to the throne. She stood back, out of their line of sight.

Artymes held up a hand to the bickering friends. “Not so loud. The important thing is that with all the temple priests here at the banquet, no one should be able to dispute your observations.”

“We must tell the king at once!” suggested Parmisus eagerly. “All Ctesiphon will want to hear this news.” He started back toward the great hall.

“No.”

Parmisus stopped. “No? Why, Lord Artymes?”

“Let us choose our time wisely. I will speak to the king privately, after the banquet.”

“This is a new star in the constellation of Comah,” Parmisus persisted. “In *Comah!* Why wait?”

Artymes stood, held the young magus by the shoulders, and looked up into his eyes. “It is because the star is in sacred Comah that we should be cautious,” he explained.

Ramates listened with growing excitement. Apparently this new star could be a bigger discovery than he first imagined.

Artymes motioned the two closer. “I know that deceptive Mardauxes would attempt to usurp Ramates’ discovery.” Mardauxes, the king’s Rab Mag, was no friend of the local magi. Ramates tried to hide his reaction to Artymes’ warning. Not even the imperial high priest was going to steal his glory.

“Mardauxes is the biggest snake in that viper pit called the court,” Artymes continued. “But the king likes me, and he will see me. I will show him the star and promise a timely interpretation. He will be pleased.”

“We must be discrete about this meeting, Lord Artymes,” warned Ramates. “We do not want all those liver diviners in our sanctuary.”

The magi of the local temple of Ahura had long ago abandoned the black art of fortune-telling by interpreting the spots on goat livers, known as divination and still performed in many Parthian cults. Ramates was concerned that diviners might come to the temple to see the star, and thereby profane their sanctuary.

“Yes,” agreed Artymes. Then, looking skyward, he felt compelled to utter what the other two were already thinking.

“For all we know, this is the Star of Prophecy.”