



Scene 1 : A Parthian observatory at twilight.

[Artaban looks to the sky.]

Artaban:       Soon stars will shine. Soon stars will shine:  
                  the sun retires, no more to cast its blinding light upon the fabric of the sky  
                  and through that loose wove veil that separates us from the eternal  
                  a little light peaks through  
                  and shimmers with the passing of the wind

                  Soon stars will shine  
                  each point a distant window, too far to see through clearly,  
                  yet viewed as one the shape of heaven dances on our minds like a song  
                  and we can almost feel  
                  the brightness of the city of the Lord  
                  and trace the outward shape of its mansions.

                  Soon stars will shine  
                  perhaps a new window will open tonight  
                  and shining shake its light upon a sleeping world  
                  bathing us in hope  
                  bathing us in expectation,  
                  bathing us in hope:  
                  Soon stars will shine . . .

Artaban:       Welcome! Welcome!

Rhodaspes:   [entering with Abdus & Tigranes] Peace be with you!

Artaban:       Welcome! Welcome!

Abdus:        May peace shine upon you!

Artaban:       Welcome! Abdus, come within and rest you!  
                  Here Rhodaspes, come Tigranes, here you'll better see the stars.

Abdus:        The Stars are the thoughts of the Eternal;

Rhodaspes:   They are the mirror of His will;

Abdus:        They map the infinite and timeless.

Rhodaspes:   Could man but chart their course and see their plan . . .

Abdus:        See clear the mirror of our world . . .

Tigranes:     . . . but they are numberless and strange.

Artaban: Welcome! Welcome!

Abgarus: Peace be with you!

Artaban: Welcome! Father!

Abgarus: May peace shine upon you!

Artaban: Abgarus has come!  
Here Rhodaspes, come Tigranes, help our father to his seat of honor.

[The men help Abgarus to his place, but he does not sit. Instead he motions for them to gather round the alter of flame. Abgarus leads the company in a hymn to Ahura Mazda (Lord Wisdom) while Artaban waves a bundle of tamarisk branches above the fire and feeds it with pine sticks and fragrant oils. The hymn is followed by a creed.]

Abgarus

& Company: O Ahura! Lord of Wisdom!  
O Holiness and Truth, look down and bless us!  
O Ahura! O ye Good Mind!  
O Mazda might thy flame of truth confess us!  
    Arise in me, Ahura!  
    Arise in me, Ahura!  
    Arise in me, Ahura Mazda!  
O Ahura! Lord of Wisdom!  
Consume my pride within thy fiery ocean,  
Strip bare my heart of all but true devotion,  
Thy Righteousness refine and stay corrosion,  
    Grant me a keener sight,  
    That I might teach the people by thy Light.  
O Ahura! Lord of Wisdom!  
O Holiness and Truth, look down and bless us!  
O Ahura! O ye Good Mind!  
O Mazda might thy flame of truth confess us!  
    Arise in me, Ahura!  
    Arise in me . . .  
    Arise . . . arise . . . arise!

All: You have come tonight to rekindle your faith in the God of Purity even as this fire has been rekindled upon the altar. We do not worship the flame, but Him who it represents. It speaks to us of one who is all light and truth! The enlightened lift the veil of form. New light and truth are coming to them continually through the old symbols.

Artaban: Hear me, then, my father, my friends, while I tell you of the new light and truth. They have come to me through ancient of signs. O hear me, then, my father, my

friends.

Tigranes: Artaban, there are important matters to discuss. These require this councils attention. Do we really have time to discuss obscure signs?

Abgarus: There must always be a time to discuss matters of the spirit.

Tigranes: But plans must be made for the new . . .

Abgarus: How can we be guides if we refuse to see? Artaban, tell us of this sign.

Artaban: We have searched the secrets of nature together, studied long the healing power of water, fire and plants, but the greatest form of wisdom is the knowledge of the stars: they hold the keys mystery of life!

Tigranes: Long have we listened to you speak of the virtues of the stars. The stars are the infinite thoughts of the Good Mind, but the thoughts of man may be counted. There is much we do not understand; are there not many stars beyond our horizon: stars known only to the dwellers of Ophir and Punt?

Rhodaspes: This is true.

Tigranes: How can we lead our people with this half-knowledge?

Artaban: Wisdom relies on faith as much as on knowledge.

Tigranes: Wisdom? Where and how can one find wisdom?  
Should we seek it in the stars?  
Or should we dig for it in earth where we can touch and feel it?

Wisdom, sought by every king and prophet  
Casting eyes up to the sky,  
Or casting glances to the pit where darkness groans and hides it,  
Never guessing where to find it.

This is wisdom, this is strength,  
Admit you know nothing, the breadth or the length.  
Keep men searching for hope in the night,  
But always remember that the dark is equal to the light.

Wisdom, here and only here lies wisdom,  
Know the war will never end;  
Make both light and dark your friend.

Artaban: This does not satisfy. The sun will rise at the appointed time. Is it not prophesied that men will see the brightness of a great light?

Company: "In that day the Victorious shall rise in the east and around him shall shine a mighty brightness. He shall make life everlasting, incorruptible and immortal, and the dead shall rise again."

Tigranes: This is a dark saying, it may be that we never understand it. Why should we look for one who might be a stranger to whom we must resign our power.

Artaban: My father, I have kept this prophecy in the secret place of my soul and I have read other words which foretell the rising of his brightness.

Tigranes: You speak of Balaam, the son of Beor, who prophesied of Judah, but Judah was a captive by the waters of Babylon. The sons of Jacob were in bondage to our kings. The tribes of Israel are scattered like lost sheep, and from the remnant that dwells under Rome: neither star nor scepter shall rise!

Artaban: The Hebrew Daniel searched the secrets of dreams. He served a counselor to Darius our kings. He earned the trust of our people for he truly served God. Hear, my friends, he excellent word: "Know, therefore, and understand that the time from the going forth of the commandment to restore Jerusalem until the coming of the prince, the Messiah, shall be seven and threescore and two weeks."

Abgarus: But, my son, these are mystical numbers. Who can interpret, or who can find their key.

Artaban: The Temple at Jerusalem has been rebuilt. Tonight the sky will see a new wonder, for the time has come! Our three brothers in Borsippa are watching for the sign. When the new star shines they will wait for us seven days.

Tigranes: They will wait for us?

Artaban: Yes! From Borsippa we can set out together for Jerusalem, to see and worship the one born King of Israel. I have sold my possessions, and bought these three jewels to offer as a tribute to the King.

Tigranes: This is a vain dream. It comes from too much looking upon the stars and brooding on lofty thoughts.

Artaban: Watch with me. Come with me, that we may have joy together in finding the Prince who is worthy to be served.

Tigranes: This would be wisdom: use our time to spread our power, gathering money for the new fire-temple at Chala, for there will be no king to rise from the broken race of Israel! He who seeks this chases shadows.

Rhodaspes: I know nothing of these things you speak of.

Tigranes: There will never be an end to the war between darkness and light! [exits]

Abdus: I am ill and unfit for hardship!

Artaban: Wait the time is near!

Rhodaspes: In my house there sleeps a new bride; I cannot leave her. This quest is not for me. Farewell. [exits]

Abdus: Oh, I am ill, but take this child from among my servants. Send me word of how you fare. Farewell.

Vasda: But master! [exits]

Abdus: Farewell. [exits]

Abgarus: My son, it may be that the light of truth is in this sign. If so, it will lead you to the Prince and the mighty brightness, but if it is only a shadow as Tigranes suggests, he who follows it will have a long pilgrimage and a fruitless search. I had hoped that with men like Tigranes rising to power, that in time, a man of faith would take my place.

Artaban: My father, I have faith in this sign. I have faith I will the Bright One. I believe I will see his face, for this my heart burns; shall I not go?

Abgarus: I am too old for this journey, but those who would see great things must often travel alone. My heart will be the companion of your pilgrimage.

Abgarus: It is better to follow the shadow of the best than to remain content with the worst. Go in peace. [exits]

Artaban: Soon stars will shine. Soon stars will shine: a little light peaks through and shimmers with the passing of the wind.

Soon stars will . . . bathing us in hope  
bathing us in expectation, bathing us in hope

Soon . . . stars will shine.

Interlude: [see Isa 35:1-2, 51:3]

O comfort Zion,  
Make her wilderness like Eden,  
Make her desert like the garden of the Lord.

Let her blossom as the rose,  
With the majesty of Sharon,  
Let her see the glory of the Lord.

Teach us to sing;  
Temper our voice with joy and gladness,  
And with thanksgiving we will praise.

O comfort Zion,  
Make her wilderness like Eden,  
Make her desert like the garden of the Lord.

Scene 2 : The Wilderness.

[Joshua lies silent upon the way, wrapped in a dirty chocolate cloak and black turban; he might be mistaken for a burnt log. Vasda and Artaban are heard approaching in the distance.]

Vasda: Master, must we hurry so!

Artaban: The caravan may leave without us . . .

Vasda: But master, the wind, the cold, my feet . . .

Artaban: . . . must keep up with mine.

Vasda: But master, I am so tired . . .

Artaban: We can not afford to rest now.

Vasda: [falling to his knees] Oh master, I can't.

Artaban: Our appointment is at midnight, it is almost midnight now. We have many miles left to traverse. If you do not get up now, you will have to travel back alone.

Vasda: I will try.

[They start afresh, but Vasda stumbles over Joshua.]

Vasda: Master, just a moment.

Artaban: Please, Vasda, we must keep the pace now . . .

Vasda: But master, look here, I tripped, I thought . . .

Artaban: There is no time for this!

Vasda: But master, look, it breathes.

Artaban: O God of truth and purity, direct me in the holy path, the way of wisdom which is only known by Thee.

[He raises his eyes and moves to Joshua's side. He kneels to examine him and checks Joshua's pulse. He places his ear between Joshua's nose and chest and listens intently.]

Vasda: Master, your appointment?

Artaban: This man is very ill.

Vasda: But master?

Artaban: If we do not help him he is sure to die.

Vasda: O master! I was startled, please forgive me! I am so sorry!

Artaban: You are not to be faulted for possessing the curious eye of youth. I am sure this man will appreciate your keen eye, and your clumsy feet.

Vasda: Are you sure?

Artaban: Make a fire.

Vasda: You said they can't afford to wait long.

Artaban: I must make a tea of herbs.

Vasda: You said they can't afford to wait long.

Artaban: It is true my friends may think I have given up this journey. In that case they will follow the star without me.

Vasda: I should have kept my eyes on the road.  
I should have focused on my task.  
If you are kept from seeing your king it will be my fault!

Oh, master come now, please, let's go.  
I promise I can keep up.

We still can make the caravan.  
Master, I can run! Master I can run!

Artaban: Vasda, we must help him.

Vasda: What is this man that we should help him?  
We owe him nothing, please, we should go!  
Surely, to lay your gifts before the King of Light  
is more important than to save a beggar like this?

Oh, master come now, please, let's go.  
I promise I can keep up.  
We can still make the caravan.  
Master, I can run! Master, I can run!  
Master, I can run! Master, I will run!

Artaban: Perhaps it may be foolishness, but I do not have the strength to leave this man to die when I can save him. Please, make a fire.

[Vasda quickly gathers fuel and gets a fire started. Artaban loosens and removes the man's turban as he begins to sing a hymn of praise to God.]

Artaban: This service, these vows and my thanksgiving;  
for thou hast laid the foundation of life everlasting,  
and marked the path to thy land of endless light.  
This service, these vows, my adoration I consecrate to thee!

Vasda: Master, I must know, how can you be sure that this is the right choice?

Artaban: Sometimes a rustle stirs deep my heart;  
Sounding so softly, so simply, so pure,  
Ringing, resounding so steadfast and strong,  
'til I know that my pathway is sure.

Other times I am surrounded with doubt,  
Fog thick around me obscuring my view.  
Pathways divide but I can't see the ends,  
I'm uncertain of all I once knew.

[heavenward] Seeking to follow thy pathway of truth,  
Seeking to follow thy voice;  
Hoping to hear as you whisper, my Lord,  
Hoping I've made the right choice.  
I step into darkness, I can't see the way  
Bring me, my Lord, from the night to the day.

Vasda: But master, is it not clear that it is better to serve the King of Light?

Artaban: Life's hardest trials lay not in extremes,  
Choosing between paths of virtue and vice.  
No, we are bound to weigh good against good,  
For time rolls we all pay its price.

Minutes are counted, and moments all fly,  
Stepping beyond us, transcribed in the sky.  
Options abound, many call for our best;  
We must choose, this is part of our test.

[heavenward] Seeking to follow thy pathway of truth,  
Seeking to follow thy voice;  
Hoping to hear as you whisper, my Lord,  
Hoping I've made the right choice.  
One step, I'm closer yet farther away.  
Hoping I've followed the light of thy day.

[to the sleeping Vasda] Sleep as only the young do. Dream of the Prince. Dream that we may yet behold his face. [he continues to work on the herbs]

[heavenward] This service, these vows, my adoration. I consecrate to thee!

Joshua: Who are you?

Artaban: I am Artaban of Ecbatana. And you?

Joshua: I am Joshua, of Borsippa. How long?

Artaban: Most of the night, it is almost dawn.

Joshua: Why have you sought me here to bring back my life?

Artaban: My servant found you here, near unto death.

Joshua: But why stop when I am a Hebrew?

Artaban: God put you in my path, but I dare not tarry any longer; I am searching for the Deliverer born the King of the Jews. I'm afraid that the caravan for Jerusalem will leave without me.

Artaban: See, here is all I have left of bread and wine, and here is a tea I've brought of healing herbs.

Joshua: May the God of Abraham and Isaac bless you.

Artaban: Vasda, wake, it is time.

Joshua: I've naught to give you for your kindness, yet I can tell you where the Messiah must be sought, for our prophets have prophesied he shall be born in Bethlehem the city of David.

Artaban: I thank you for this news. Farewell. Vasda, we must be swift.

Joshua: May the Lord bring you in safety to that place because you have had mercy on the sick. May he grant you the desire of your heart.

Scene 3 : Bethlehem

Miriam: [soothing her child] Hush, hush, my dear little one. Now is time for sleeping.  
Lully, lulla, my little tiny child. By, by, lully, lulla.  
Lully, lulla, my tiny child. By, by lully, lulla.

[Miriam sways and dances a little with her child held close to her. She is interrupted.]

Vasda: Ishshah?

Miriam: Yes?

Artaban: Would you please share your water with a pair of weary travelers.

Miriam: Travelers?

Artaban: Yes, we have had little water for two days now.

Miriam: Oh! Excuse me, I thought, well, there was a rumor . . .

Vasda: A rumor?

Miriam: Perhaps I shouldn't speak of it; it's not important.

Vasda: But why, if it's not that important?

Miriam: You are strangers to me, strangers to this city, and yet . . . [she looks closely at Artaban]

Vasda: Ishshah, please! I will die of suspense.

Miriam: What?

Vasda: The rumor, Ishshah, a servant lives on rumors!

Artaban: Vasda, leave the poor woman alone.

Vasda: Oh Master, I have not had a tasty little rumor since we left Ecbatana. [to Miriam]  
These caravan folk, they are as silent as their desert.

Miriam: I'm afraid this tidbit won't satisfy your appetite, young one.

Vasda: Oh I tremble with anticipation! I thirst much more for your tidbit than the water in your well.

Miriam: You do look it. Hmm . . .

Vasda: Ishshah, please!

Miriam: Very well. My brother's wife overheard this soldier . . . [to Artaban, in an aside manner] This is a small town, they really should know better than to talk official business, openly, at the Inn.

Vasda: Official business? What did he say?

Miriam: Hmm. Let me remember.

Vasda: You're doing that on purpose, just to torture me!

Miriam: Have patience. He said that he had to travel to Jerusalem that night in order to deliver some documents to the main garrison, but that he must return to Bethlehem today, in order enforce the taxation. That is all.

Vasda: A tax?

Artaban: That explains the empty marketplace. I assume this king taxes harshly.

Miriam: Have you not heard of Herod?

Artaban: We are from Ecbatana, his fame has not yet reached us there.

Miriam: He is well enough hated here.

Vasda: Ishshah? Do you not respect and honor your king?

Miriam: Herod? [spits on the ground] He has murdered members of his own family! His wife and three of his sons! He has no honor in him. How can one honor the dishonorable?

Vasda: I've been taught that taxes are for the common good and defense of the people. To evade a tax is to cut one's own . . .

Miriam: We have just been taxed and counted by the Romans, they 'protect' the people, if you consider enslavement protection. Now Herod sends forth his tax collectors, practically on the heels of the Romans. Our children may as well starve for all this 'king' cares.

Artaban: Vasda is young. He has not lived to see men's cruelty. Forgive him.

Miriam: Herod is not even our true king, he is an Idumaeen, appointed by Rome. He sought to buy our loyalty by rebuilding the temple at Jerusalem, but we look for another . . . someone to rescue us from our captivity . . .

We look for a son of David, a deliverer, a Moses;  
We hope in the words of prophets that he soon will come.  
We look for a son of David, to lift us, to lead us,  
To throw off our yoke and to make us as one.

All we, like sheep, have gone astray,  
The children of promise have lost their way;  
Divided, derided, depleted, defeated,  
We cling to the hope of the dawn of his day.

We look for a son of David, a deliverer, a savior;  
We hope for the restoration of peace that will come.  
We look for a son of David, to lift us, to lead us,  
To throw off our yoke and to make us as one.

Vasda: Ishshah?

Miriam: You may call me Miriam. Come to the shelter of the porch. Come, have some water.

Vasda: Miriam?

Miriam: Yes.

Vasda: Where are all the men? I have seen none since we entered the city?

Miriam: Your master knows.

Artaban: They have taken their flocks into the hills to avoid the taxation.

Miriam: You are of the Magi, are you not?

Artaban: You have seen men wearing this circlet before?

Miriam: Yes, but only recently. A week ago three men, it was the strangest thing, they said they'd followed a star.

Artaban: Yes?

Miriam: But it was so silly . . . and frightening. The star shone a light on this lowly hovel.

Artaban: What was it like?

Miriam: Like nothing I've seen.

Vasda: What happened next?

Miriam: When they went to the shed they showered the young child there with many gifts and bowed low before him. I will never forget it.

Artaban: I was to be part of their company, but circumstance delayed me. Tell me, dear woman, where can I find this child? He is your Prince as well as mine. I too would bow down before Him and offer my gifts.

Miriam: They are gone, they came to be taxed and left. It's been whispered that they went into Egypt.

Artaban: [touching the cheek of the Miriam's child] Why might not this child have been the promised Prince? Kings have been born in lowlier houses than this.

A Woman: [screams in the distance]

Captain: Stop that woman!

A Woman: They've killed my child!

Captain: Stop her I say!

Artaban: Go inside quickly! Vasda, watch over Miriam, hide the child!

[Miriam, gripped with terror, claps her child to her bosom and crouches motionless in a dark corner, covering him with the folds of her robe. Vasda stands between her and the door. Artaban stands between the doorposts. A Captain, bearing a bloody sword, enters the street]

Captain: Up that street, check every room. There's no resistance, I knew the fools would flee if they heard another tax collector was coming!

[The captain sees Artaban for the first time. He is startled momentarily, but then moves forward with a determination to thrust him aside. Artaban does not stir.]

Captain: Stand aside.

Artaban: I am all alone in this place.

Captain: Stand aside, I said!

Artaban: I am all alone here.

Captain: Stand aside, or I will run you through!

Artaban: I am all alone in this place, and I am waiting to give this precious ruby to the prudent captain who has the wisdom to leave me in peace.

[A baby's cry is heard from within the home. The captain steps back and pulls away from Artaban's grasp. He raises his sword as if to make a thrust, but then outstretches his empty left hand. Artaban places the gem in his hand and the Captain, looking at it, smiles. He then closes his hand on the jewel and hearing a noise behind him, quickly turns about.]

Captain: [to unseen soldiers] March on! There is no child here. This house is empty. [exits]

Artaban: God of Truth, forgive my sin!  
Forgive for I have lied, and  
have traded thy gift for the life  
of this child. I've spent for man  
what was meant for God! Will I  
ever be worthy to see the face  
of my King? O, God of Truth,  
forgive! O, God of Truth,  
forgive my sin!

Miriam: May the Lord bless thee and  
keep thee; the Lord make his  
face to shine upon thee and be  
gracious unto thee; the Lord lift  
up his countenance upon thee  
and give thee peace.

Scene 4 : Egypt.

[Artaban stands alone overlooking the Sphinx (unseen behind the audience), in deep thought. Vasda lies sleeping by a small campfire. After a few moments a very old man, bent with age, approaches and studies Artaban and then looks at the Sphinx.]

Rabbi: You find this idol of the Egyptians impressive?

Artaban: I have traveled far to see it.

Rabbi: Really? I see by your dress you are a healer and scholar, have the Magi become idolaters that you should travel so far from your homeland to see it?

Artaban: It was not my goal, but now that I stand before it, it seems to be telling me to go home.

Rabbi: A pile of brick and stone? It has talent.

Artaban: A trace, a sign, a word, a hope brought me to the banks of the Nile, yet like a footprint on the sandy shore my hopes have washed away; and now this lion mocks me. He crouches here calm-eyed and smirks and whispers of my vanity.

Rabbi: Young man, what makes you think that?

Artaban: He grins at my defeat, for I have chased the shadow of the light and have not to show for it but “a long pilgrimage and a fruitless search.”

Rabbi: Perhaps, but then again, perhaps the Sphinx does not mock you. Perhaps there is a touch of encouragement in his smile . . . a promise that even the defeated will attain a victory; for it is better to follow the shadow of the best than to remain contented with the worst.

Artaban: My father said those same words to me, it seems so long ago though the time is but three years.

Rabbi: Young man, what is it that you seek?

Artaban: A star and a scepter arising from the house of Israel.

Rabbi: You seek the Messiah?

Artaban: He that shall make life everlasting, incorruptible, and immortal. He who will raise up the dead and bring hope to the living. I have witnessed the sign of his birth, but arrived too late to give my tribute to the child. I was told he was brought to Egypt, I have sought him, but I've failed.

Rabbi: If the time has truly come, if what you say is true, this may help you.

Artaban: Any scrap of hope you can give me, I will see it through.

Rabbi: Isaiah said: "He shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, no beauty that we should desire him. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried all our sorrows . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities."

The King you seek will not be found in a palace, for His light will rise up from triumphant suffering. Seek amongst the poor and the lowly, amongst the dying and oppressed.

Artaban: All you've said, my heart burns within me, all you've said, oh, how can I thank you?

Rabbi: Thank He that shall make life everlasting, incorruptible and immortal.

Both: He who will raise up the dead and bring hope to the living.

Artaban: May God bless you and keep you.

Rabbi: And you. [exits]

Artaban: Vasda! Awake.

Vasda: Is it morning already?

Artaban: Today you head for home.

Vasda: Master? But we've not yet found the king of light.

Artaban: You must take what little money's left and head back to Ecbatana.

Vasda: Without you? Alone?

Artaban: You must report to Rhodaspes, your master, and tell him what has happened.

Vasda: He told me to go with you to the end.

Artaban: It is important that you tell him I have not given up, I still have faith.

Vasda: My quest is not over until you have found your King.

Artaban: I will seek out children of dispersion.

Vasda: Please do not send me from you.

Artaban: I will pass through countries where plague and famine lays heavy on the land.

Vasda: I am not afraid.

Artaban: I cannot take a child into slave markets, galleys, or prisons!

Vasda: Please don't send me from you! I know I have no gift to bring him, but after Bethlehem I have dreamed of kneeling down before him at your side. Oh, please do not send me away!

Interlude: [see Gen 1:14 & Ps 90:4]

Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night;

Let them be for signs and seasons,

Let them be for days, and years.

For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past;

A thousand years in thy sight are as a watch in the night.

Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night;

Let them be for signs and seasons,

Let them be for days, and years.

### Scene 5 : The Damascus Gate

[Vasda, now a grown man, leads the aging, white haired Artaban along the path toward the gate. Vasda helps his master to a boulder by the gate where he sits down.]

Vasda: Rest, my master. I fear you are getting too old for this business.

Artaban: Hush.

Vasda: But will your old bones bear you on these journeys much longer?

Artaban: Hush.

Vasda: If you were to really fall and break something . . .

Artaban: Hush .

Vasda: . . . what good will you be to the poor with a broken leg?

Artaban: Vasda, please, I am not so fragile. Like this pouch I wear I may be threadbare and worn, but there's still something bright within me. Watch, the stitching's still strong. [Artaban tugs at the pouch, the cord breaks and the pearl falls to the ground, Vasda retrieves the pearl and places it in Artaban's hand.]

Vasda: This pouch is replaceable, you are not! I have watched you travel through lands of sorrow, from prisons to galley-ships to markets of slaves, I have watched you search out the countryside for famine and plague and not content to see, you have sought to heal, to comfort, to feed.

Artaban: Hush .

Vasda: I say you have fed the hungry and clothed the naked, healed the sick and comforted the captive; now what more can you do? There is a time to serve and a time to be served. You have earned your rest.

Artaban: My search is incomplete, my gift remains ungiven.

Vasda: You may be able to continue the quest, I hope and pray for it every day, but I tell you that you will not last much longer unless you let me buy you a donkey.

Artaban: Vasda!

Vasda: Think of all the time we'll save, we will be able to travel much faster!

Artaban: I like to walk . . .

Vasda: Think of all the time we'll save!

Artaban: . . . walking keeps me young.

Vasda: Walking will put you in your grave!

Artaban: [reluctantly] Very well, when we leave Jerusalem.

Vasda: Jerusalem, how many times have we been here? What do we hope to find?

Artaban: Jerusalem, once more, Jerusalem I come.

Vasda: Not once in our many visits have we found a trace of the King.

Artaban: Yet to Jerusalem I feel once more I must come. Something whispers in my heart we at last may succeed.

Crowd: Crucify him! Crucify him!

[The Parthian enters, intent on following the crowd.]

Artaban: Young man! What is this chant, this crowd, where do they go and who is condemned?

Parthian: We are going to Golgotha, outside the city wall. Have you not heard?

Vasda: We arrived this very hour.

Parthian: Two robbers will be crucified, and with them a man who has done many wonders among the people. They say he has raised the dead.

Vasda: But, why will they crucify him?

Parthian: The elders say that he must die because he claimed to be the Son of God. Pilate has sent him to the cross because he said he was a king. [exits]

Artaban: The ways of God are stranger than the thoughts of men; shall I find my King, at last, in the hands of his enemies? Shall I come in time to offer my pearl for a ransom before he dies. We must be swift.

[He turns toward Golgotha, but stumbles after a few steps, and falls to the ground.]

Vasda: Master!

Artaban: You must take *our* pearl before the King.

Vasda: No, master, please!

Artaban: I feel a rip in the stitching, dear son.

Vasda: No, master, come!

Artaban: That I had listened to you.

Vasda: [calling out] Oh! Help us!

Artaban: To be stopped by my own stubborn pride, so close to my goal, what a fool I am.

Vasda: You have loved much, my master, you have loved much.

Artaban: What good if I have failed my Lord. Twice I have given his gifts for man! I am not fit to stand before him. Vasda run! It may not be too late! Offer this ransom for his life!

Vasda: No! I will carry you.

[A Creditor enters, heading for Jerusalem, dragging a struggling young woman behind him.]

Shibyah: Let go of me! Please! I can work to pay my father's debt. Please, do not sell me. I beg you, please! Oh please do not sell me! [noticing Artaban] Oh, please have pity on me, for the sake of the God of Purity!

Artaban: Child, I cannot help you.

Shibyah: Oh holy one, I am a daughter of the true religion taught by the Magi.

Vasda: Let go!

Artaban: Truly child I cannot help you.

Shibyah: I am seized for my grandfather's debts to be sold as a slave . . .

Creditor: The debt is very great.

Shibyah: . . . please help me! I will be dishonored! For the sake of the God of Purity!

Vasda: But master, this pearl may ransom the Prince!

Artaban: Here is your ransom. It is the last of the treasures I had kept for my King. Take it, and be free!

[He places the pearl in her hand. The sound of a rumbling earthquake is heard. A voice is heard crying in the distance.]

Voice: It is finished! Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

[Lightning strikes and thunder follows immediately. The sky darkens and a cloud of dust and smoke fills the air. The Creditor flees in terror, reeling like a drunken man. Artaban stumbles and strikes his head on a rock. Vasda and Shibyah rush to his side. Vasda pulls water and a clothe from his pack and sponges away the blood from Artaban's face. Artaban looks up.]

Artaban: Not so, my Lord! When have I fed thee? Or when have I given thee drink? Not so, my Lord! When have I clothed thee or comforted thee in prison. When saw I thee a stranger and took thee in? My King, three and thirty years have I sought thee, in all those years when have I served thee Lord? or brought my gifts before thy face?

[A calm radiance of wonder and joy lights on the face of Artaban. A long breath of relief exhales gently from his lips and his body relaxes as he passes away.]

The End.