

THE GIFTS OF THE MAGUS

a story from the world of
the SERAPH



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On the eleventh day of Christmas, just before the dinner rush, Baron Saturday locks the doors to his restaurant, having sent the staff home with cash bonuses in hand. It's an unusual thing to do, as the restaurant is open until two in the morning, seven days a week, without fail. Some of the staff had been tempted to ask why, and some had been grumbling about the amount of tips they'd be losing out on. That is, until the envelopes made the rounds.

No one argues with cash. That's why Saturday hands it out.

There's a locked vault on the far end of Saturday's wine cellar, where one might presume he keeps his most valuable bottles. And one would be mostly right. The particular wine stored there is priceless beyond measure, and there is just one bottle of it. He's carried it with him for nearly two thousand years.

Upstairs, Saturday sets a table with three wooden goblets, carved by hand from olive wood. The cups are even older than the wine that he pours into them.

Host's duties carried out, Saturday returns to the bar and sets to washing pint glasses and highballs. He hums an ancient tune to

himself as he works, his back to the door. His guests don't arrive if he's watching.

"Would it kill you to make me a whiskey sour?"

"You don't have the tastebuds anymore to appreciate one," says Saturday, keeping his back to his first guest. "And I make a great one. So, yes, I'd die a little inside wasting good liquor that way."

"Is he bitching about cocktails again?"

This time, Saturday turns around, his party now arrived in full. He nods his welcome and joins them at the table.

"A toast," he says, lifting his cup. "To the wisdom of the spheres."

"To the guidance of the heavens," says one, following suit.

"And to the idiots who follow directions from literal gas balls."

The three chuckle at the old inside joke and drain their cups.

"God," says Saturday, "it's tastes better every time."

"Makes the hundred year wait worth it. It's good to see you, Balthazar," says the first of the two spirits.

"Don't you start," says Saturday. He rolls his eyes, but his smile betrays the show of attitude. "I thought we agreed we wouldn't accept the names *they* gave us."

"That was your hang-up," says the second spirit.

"So it's fine if I call you Caspar?"

“The Magi Ghost! Have at it,” Caspar says, waggling his cup for a refill.

“And you, Melchior?” says Saturday as he pours another round.

“Call me what you want as long as you’re still pouring. Balthazar.”

“Don’t get too deep into your cups, you two. There’s still the business at hand.”

“Relax!” says Melchior. “It’s Joshua’s miracle wedding wine. All the pleasant buzz, none of the double vision, toilet hugging, or morning regrets.”

“Besides,” says Caspar, “it’s the only thing we can still taste. Or swallow.”

“Noted,” says Saturday as he puts the bottle down in front of them.

“But he’s right. There is still business.”

Melchior reaches an ectoplasmic hand into the ether and draws out a small parchment scroll.

“Your charge,” says the spirit.

Saturday unrolls the message and reads it with a smirk.

“A local job? The committee’s gone soft.”

“Thought we’d give you a milk run this time,” says Caspar.
“Celebrate twenty giftings.”

“It is quite the milestone,” says Melchior.

“It is at that,” says Saturday.

The three magi lift their glasses in toast and drain them once again.

“What are we giving the kid this time?” asks Saturday, once contented sighs over good wine subside.

“Same as last time,” says Caspar.

“It really is much easier,” says Melchior.

“And much less muggable loot for me to haul around,” says Saturday.

“As if anyone would even attempt to mug you.” Melchior shakes his head.

Saturday pours the wine one last time.

“All right,” he says. “Hand them over.”

The two spirits drink, but this time leave a drop or two in their cups. Each one in turn hold their hands over the dregs as they speak a few words even older than Saturday. He watches as a bit of their ghostly energy drops into their cups, blending with the last drops of their Canaanite wine. He picks up their cups and drains each into his own, adding his own ancient incantation to theirs.

The spirits of his old comrades watch as he downs their essence with the wine.

For a moment, Saturday keeps his eyes shut and sorts through the temporary additions to his soul. He smiles.

“Nice to see you keeping up with the times,” he says to Melchior. “And Caspar...”

“...the old wisdom never really goes out of style.” Caspar looks over at Melchior with a look of mock disdain.

“And what will you give?”

“I’m considering my options,” says Saturday. “Quite a bit has changed in the last century. It’s difficult to decide on the ideal thing.”

“Don’t dither too much longer,” says Melchior. “The hour nears, and the competition will already be out looking to deliver their own gift.”

“They’ll be dropping in to see me first,” says Saturday. “Tradition is tradition.”

“And yet...”

“I’ll have it figured out by the time I get there,” says Saturday, shutting down the conversation.

“Then you’d best stow that wine away,” says Caspar.

Saturday nods and returns the cups to the bar.

When he turns around again, he finds the spirits have departed.

“See you next century,” he says to the air.

He replaces the old cups with a couple of rocks glasses and places a bottle of bourbon between them. Jim Beam. What passes for bottom shelf at Saturday’s place.

“Next guy doesn’t get the good stuff,” he thinks as he picks up the wine bottle. It is, miraculously, still full.

When he returns from the wine cellar, someone outside is pounding on the glass doors.

“Closed!” says Saturday as he goes back to cleaning up the bar.

The someone continues knocking. Saturday stops and looks this time. A man – presumably – stands outside, nose to the door peering in. He knocks again, more tentatively this time.

“Since when do you fellows knock?” asks Saturday. “Just walk on through.”

“I can’t do that, sir.”

“And since when do you show deference to me? Or anyone? Sir?”

“Please just let me in.” Saturday marvels at how pathetic he sounds. He shakes his head and walks to the door, waving a hand as he does. The lock bows to his unspoken command and releases as he pushes the door open.

“What are you?” he asks as the stranger rushes in from the chill outside. “Junior grade imp? A minor devil’s intern?”

“I’m an attorney,” he answers as he plops a briefcase down on the table, making the bottle and glasses jump. “Morton Caldwell. Denton, Cass & Stratton.”

Saturday looks at the proffered hand. He’s about to snub the handshake but thinks better, instead grasping the lawyer’s hand firmly between both of his. His breath catches for a moment as he does.

“My god,” he says. “You’re human.”

“All my life, sir.”

“And probably actually an attorney.”

Morton holds out a business card.

“I’m here,” he says, “on behalf of my client, Morningstar Consolidated.”

Saturday lets go of his other hand. “Oh, that is precious,” he says. “Downright twee on their part.”

“Sir?”

“Don’t play dumb. You know quite well who your client really is. Otherwise there would be no force behind their threat. And they threatened you.”

Morton shudders. “Yes, sir.” His voice sounds tiny, terrified.

Saturday’s blood rushes, a momentary surge of rage that he tamps down for the sake of his guest.

“I’m sorry they put you in this position, Mr. Caldwell. Make the offer, and I’ll see if we can’t get you to the end of the evening with your heart still beating and your skin still attached to your body.”

Morton gulps audibly, then reaches for the briefcase, withdrawing a small scroll. It’s made from old sheepskin vellum and sealed with the red mark of the Adversary.

“My...client is prepared to offer you the following if you’ll agree to step away from your duties this evening. This offer is for your eyes only. You’ll note the wax seal is still in place.”

“That’s not wax,” says Saturday. Morton shrinks a little more.

Saturday whispers something at the seal, which fades into the vellum, and unrolls the message.

“Something wrong?” asks Morton as he watches the smirk cross Saturday’s face.

“Just amazed at how little some things change over the millennia,” he says. “The standard ‘power, wealth, and pleasure’ package. Again.”

“Then that’s a no?” Morton’s voice shakes.

“An emphatic no.”

Morton Caldwell begins to weep, heaving sobs, his head in his hands.

“You need to learn to handle rejection a little better,” says Saturday.

“I’m a dead man.” Morton whimpers.

“Not yet, you’re not. I believe we start act two, now.”

Morton Caldwell looks up and stares a question.

Saturday sighs. “Once every century, we do the same dance, your client and I. They offer me the universe to get me to give up my midnight visit. I refuse. They follow me all the way to the nursery trying to convince me I’ve made a terrible mistake. We show up, give the kid our competing gifts. We toss back a shot or two and then get ready for next century.”

“Century?”

“Not the most important detail in that story, but yes. Yes, we’ve been doing this for a very long time.”

“Centuries.”

“Again, yes, but not what I was trying to tell you.”

“But that’s a fairly large detail.”

“Yes. And. The part of that story that’s going to possibly save your life is what I need you to focus on here. You offer. I refuse. And..?”

“And I ... follow you and try to convince you to take the deal?”

Saturday touches his finger to his nose. “There he is.”

He pours a couple of fingers of the bourbon into each glass.

“Here’s what I propose this time,” he says. “We’re going to have a little drink, and then we’re going to ride over together. No need to chase me, begging.”

“I’m not certain my client would appreciate us... fraternizing.”

“Nonsense,” says Saturday. “It’s the fine sort of ‘fuck you’ prank your client loves.”

“I don’t think my client has a sense of humor.”

“True, they’re not usually on the receiving end.” Saturday picks up the glasses and bottle and takes them back to the bar. “I guess we’ll find out how they take it soon enough. Come with me.”



Saturday drives his Bentley like a shark cutting through the chum of downtown traffic. Morton almost relaxes for a moment, the contours of the heated leather seat caressing him.

“Why are you being so chill about this whole situation?” the lawyer asks.

Saturday grins, keeping his eyes on the road.

“It’s tradition at this point,” he says. “Twenty centuries of playing the one wise man, your client and I have fallen into a comfortable pattern – which is the thing that makes rituals so repeatable.”

“You’re comfortable sparring with .. with...” Morton points his head toward the floor of the car.

“With the Morningstar?”

Morton nods.

“They need the ritual of it all as much as I do. Gives them something to look forward to. And as long as nothing changes about how the ritual plays out, the more content they’ll be.”

“Content?”

“Not even immortals like having the rules changed on them mid-play.”

“You talk like this is a game.”

“It is a game.”

“We’re talking about gifting the next savior of humanity. Sounds a little more serious to me.”

Saturday chuckles softly. “Just stay with me to the end of the night. You’ll see.”

He parks the car in the visitor lot of Good Samaritan hospital, and whispers a few old words. Morton feels his scalp tingle and has a moment of dissociation.

“What did you just do?” he asks once he starts breathing again.

“A little stealth spell,” says Saturday. “Hospital staff doesn’t look kindly on strangers waltzing into the maternity ward.”

And so the two walk right through the hospital without a single person challenging them, and into a birthing suite. Morton stops short at the sight of it.

“How is this nicer than my hotel room?”

“Money opens all kinds of interesting doors,” says Saturday.

“I thought messiahs came from lowlier stock.”

“Doesn’t have to be. Fifteenth century, I brought the magi gifts to a minor noble of Luxembourg.”

Saturday turns to Morton and signals for quiet. The newborn lies awake, but quiet, in one of the hospital’s plexiglass bassinets.

Morton hovers just behind Saturday’s shoulder.

“Can he see us?”

“She. Yes she can see us. Infants have a way of seeing right through magic.”

“But she’s not crying.”

“Of course not. She recognizes a transcendent moment is happening. We should follow her lead.”

Morton chokes back more questions. Saturday watches the clock on the wall, its second hand sweeping smoothly about the face. When it crosses XII, he turns back to the child. Blocks away, a church bell tolls midnight.

“Twelfth night,” says Saturday. “Feast of the Epiphany.”

When the bell stops sounding, an absolute stillness passes over the room. Morton becomes aware he can hear the sounds of three hearts beating – his own, Saturday’s, and the child’s. He watches as Saturday leans over the bassinette and starts to whisper – barely – into the baby’s ear. He wants to step in closer to hear what Saturday is saying, but something inside won’t let him. Instead, he remains a respectful distance back and finds himself bowing his head, overwhelmed by a sense of reverence.

Finished with his gifting, Saturday kissed the child on the forehead and spends another moment looking down at the savior-to-be.

Finally, he steps away.

“You see what I mean by the moment?”

Morton can only nod.

“Pull it together,” says Saturday. “It’s your turn.”

Morton looks as if he’s about to cry.

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

“The ritual needs to play out,” says Saturday. “Don’t worry. You’re going to be all right.”

Morton picks up his briefcase and holds it out in front of him like it's a feral cat. He stands five feet away from the bassinette. In his mind, the floor between him and the child is a bottomless chasm. He can almost feel the scorch of hellfire rising from its depths.

"I don't want to go out like this."

Saturday gives him a look of pity tinged with regret.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"For what?"

Saturday pushes him toward the baby's cradle.

Morton's eyes lock on to the infant's, and for a heartbeat he feels the peace of innocence and pure silence. He opens the briefcase.

And then something shoves his brain out of the way.

The something leans his head toward the baby, and a voice – his and yet not his – speaks into her ear. Morton cannot understand the ancient language spilling off his tongue, but he does not need to. The Morningstar sees fit to drop images whole cloth into his head as he whispers. He sees the infant, grown, standing astride oceans, the people of the world crushed under her feet.

And just as suddenly, Morton is alone in his head, and he realizes he's been weeping for the last minute, nameless dread coursing through his veins. It makes him miss the simple existential terror he'd felt after the Adversary had threatened his mortal soul.

"I think I'm gonna throw up."

"Breathe deep," says Saturday. "This too shall pass."

Morton stares out a window for a long time.

“So that’s it?”

“Pretty much,” says Saturday. “It’s all over but the growing up.”

“I want to take it back.”

Morton jumps feeling Saturday’s hand on his shoulder.

“The thing is done,” he says. “Come back with me to the restaurant. We still need to get you sorted.”



Saturday’s pulled a bottle down from the top shelf. He and Morton sip their first two fingers in silence.

“Who won?” asks Morton after he’s drained his glass.

“Who can tell? The child has to grow up, then we’ll see what path she’s chosen.”

“I want to take it back. The gift. It’s horrible.”

“I understand the feeling. But you can’t. The ritual requires it.”

“I don’t think I can live with knowing I was part of it. I mean, what was the point of all that?”

“The messiahs are born. The wise men recognize them and gift them appropriately. The Morningstar tempts them with power wealth blabbity boo. Repeat as necessary.”

“That can’t be all.”

Saturday pours out another round.

“Remember how I said it’s a game?”

Morton shakes his head in frustration. “And that’s the other thing! The stakes seem awfully damn high for anyone to treat this like a game.”

“Ever played three card monte?”

“No, but I’ve watched.”

“It’s all about sleight of hand. Misdirection.”

“I’m aware.”

“My job was to keep you following me.”

Morton drops his head into his hands.

“That wasn’t the child?”

“Morton...”

“They’re going to kill me!”

“Morton! I don’t know if that child was the anointed one or not.”

“What? You left that kid with a gift of power and you don’t even know if she’s the right one. What happens to the right kid if they don’t get the gift?”

“It’s one of the things the old stories don’t tell you. Every child could be the savior, given the chance.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“The boys and I must have gifted a dozen possible saviors in the years when we were still alive and still kings. Joshua’s story was the only one written down.”

“Then why gift just the one now? And only once a century?”

Saturday smiles and sips his drink.

“Two reasons,” he says. “One – it keeps your client distracted. That’s the whole misdirection thing.”

“And I was your mark this time out.”

“Of a sort.”

“And the other reason?”

“Because it doesn’t matter who and how often the magi give their gifts. We’re not giving anyone anything they don’t already have.”

“Which is what?”

“Potential.”

Morton stares in disbelief, then downs his bourbon in one gulp.

“So why do it at all?” he asks.

“The old stories need to be refreshed from time to time. It’s like we’re singing their morals back into the universe as a reminder.”

Morton sighs.

“So it *is* just a game. I’m going to die because of a game.”

“About that,” says Saturday reaching across the table. Morton feels a finger tracing a pattern on his forehead. It burns like ice for a moment, and then just as quickly fades.

“What was that?”

“Consider it your ‘get out of hell free’ card,” says Saturday.

“You mean they won’t kill me? Torture my soul for all eternity?”

“They won’t even remember you exist.”

Morton lets out a sob and catches his breath.

“Thank you.”

Saturday nods. “Don’t waste this gift,” he says.

Morton plunks the briefcase down on the table as he rises from his chair.

“I need to get rid of this.”

“I may know a place or two to make it disappear,” says Saturday.

Morton can’t think of anything else to say and heads for the door.

“Morton?” He stops at the sound of Saturday’s voice and turns around. “Don’t you want to know what I gave her?”

“I don’t think that’s meant for me.”

“Nonsense. You were an infant once. You still have your whole life ahead of you.”

Morton touches the spot on his forehead where Saturday had touched.

“I guess I do,” he says.

Saturday stands and steps over to Morton in two strides, leaning down to speak in his ear.

Once again, Saturday whispers. Only this time it's a howling wind in Morton's ear.

Once again, Morton hears a language so old he can't understand it.

Once again, he does not need to. Because Morton sees.

Sees every pathway out of the grind that is defending the indefensible.

Sees the difference between power over and power with.

Sees the dry, dolorous lack-luster of a fool's gold.

Sees redemption held loosely in a single hand.

Sees the hand is not one, but many.

Sees his hands reaching out.

Sees a hand take his.

And feels it.

Morton stands on an open plain. The child, now a teenager, clasps his hands in hers. But her gaze is directed over his shoulder.

“This is why,” says Saturday, standing behind him. “This one is open to change, doesn’t flinch in the face of an unearned second chance. Hell, he might even welcome the gift.”

“But he’s just one,” says the girl.

“And if there’s one,” says Saturday, “then the world can still be saved. This is why we do it.”

She lets that sink in, then nods and lets go of Morton’s hand.

And then he’s back in the restaurant, still standing halfway to the door.

“Do you see, now?”

Morton nods, words having escaped him.

“Once you walk out that door, you have a choice to make,” says Saturday.

“I could still screw this up,” says Morton. “Disregard the gift.”

“Well that’s the fun part.” Saturday grins wide. “You can’t waste the gift. You get to decide every moment. The choice is always there. You’ve always had it. And you will for the rest of your life.”

Morton feels light, breathes freely, and cannot remember when he last felt this way.

“Now go choose,” says Saturday. “Our work here is finished.”

Morton nods again, and then walks out the door.

And Saturday raises his glass in a toast to Morton, to messiahs, and to magi. Then he goes about his own moments, choosing and choosing again until the next century passes, and the next.

Merry Christmas!

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