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The Magi
...they saw the star at dawn
based on Matthew 2:1-13
by Ralph Milton
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"I don't feel well."

"Breathe deeply, Caspar, and keep your eye on the horizon. You'll feel better." There was a hint of impatience in the old man's voice. This conversation had been repeated every day for a month.

"It's all right for you, Melchior," the younger Caspar moaned. "You're used to these ghastly beasts. Why aren't we riding horses? They don't sway like camels and they don't stink like camels."

"Stop complaining," Balthasar joined the conversation. "Get down and walk for awhile, if you must. We're on a journey to find God's chosen one, and you can't talk about anything except your queasy insides."

Caspar was silenced but he wasn't convinced. He was the junior member of the trio of Magi, on a long journey of faith from their comfortable home in Persia to...Caspar had no idea where to.

Months before, he had stood with the older astrologers in the clear night of the desert, gazing at the stars, studying their movements, until one day they all agreed, there was a sign.

"Do you see it," Melchior said breathlessly. "Messori, or Sirius, the dog star is rising with the sun. Do you see its brilliance?"

"Messori!" Caspar said the words with excitement. "The name means 'birth of a prince.'"

"It is said by the wise ones of many nations that a king will be born in Judea."

"Then we must go and search for this king," said Balthasar. "We must go now and pay homage to this king of all kings."

So here they were, trekking across the desert on camels that gave Caspar motion sickness. They had been underway for a month now, and it seemed to Caspar that the only thing that kept them going was grim determination.

Caspar would have turned and headed home long ago, but he didn't know the way back. Besides, alone in the wilderness, he would soon have been robbed and killed by a passing brigand. So Caspar commanded his camel to kneel, got off, and walked for awhile. It helped a little, but Caspar could think of a thousand things he would rather be doing.

Melchior's annoyance had melted into indulgent concern. "Patience, young Caspar," he said. "Tomorrow we will be in Jerusalem. There we will ask their sages for advice on where to search."

"I'm not looking forward to Jerusalem," said Balthasar. "We must be wary of King Herod. He is a sick and jealous tyrant. I have heard that in his jealousy, Herod killed two of his wives and three of his sons."

"Caesar Augustus of Rome has said that it is safer to be Herod's pig than to be Herod's son." A disgusted smile crossed Melchior's face. Caspar shuddered a little, partly from the cold evening air, partly in anticipation of the visit to Jerusalem.

Oozing charm, Herod had entertained the astrologers lavishly, brought in his best astrologers as consultants, and determined that this new and great king was to be born in the city of David.

"Great David's greater son is to be born in Bethlehem, the least of the cities of Judah," one of the Jewish astrologers pronounced, after much consultation and searching of ancient texts.

"But there are no noble families in Bethlehem from which a king might be born," Herod protested.

"Some of the ancients have written that God's chosen one will be of humble birth," one of the sages replied.

Herod harumphed a few times. "Well, sages have been mistaken before and may well be mistaken again."

Herod was being elaborately indulgent. "So for tonight, rest awhile, and tomorrow go and find this young child that is born. And if...*when* you find the child, come and tell me so that I may also go and worship him."

A servant led the three astrologers to their quarters. As soon as the door was closed, Melchior whispered with fear and urgency. "We must go now. Tonight! We will wait until deep in the night. Then we will go so that we reach Bethlehem at dawn."

"Why?" Caspar asked.

"Bethlehem is only one or two hours from here. We must go and find the child before Herod does." Caspar saw the fear and concern in the two older men. They had not been fooled by Herod's pretense.

It was several hours past midnight when they left Jerusalem--pushing, whipping their reluctant camels. "There must be many newborn children in Bethlehem," said Caspar. "How will we know which is God's chosen one?"

"Look!" Balthasar's whisper was almost a shout. A star had arisen in the east just as the first red glow of the sun brightened the sky. "And it's right over that house. There. That one on the hillside. Do you see it? It is Mesori leading us to the prince. To God's chosen one."

A few more whips against the camels flank and they were there. "Is anyone home?" Caspar called as he knocked on the door.

A frightened and somewhat pale man appeared at the door. "We have come in search of God's chosen one," said Melchior. "The sages and God's star have led us here."

"A child has been born here," Joseph said cautiously. "He is a child like any child. But you may come and see him."

There was a long, full, silence as the wise and wealthy astrologers looked at the child that was any child and all children, at the mother who was any mother and all mothers, at Joseph who was any man and all men.

Caspar was the first to kneel. Before the child he placed a small bag of gold. "The gift of gold is for thee, O infant king."

Balthasar knelt beside him. "I bring thee frankincense, a sweet perfume, for thou art God's high priest."

Old Melchior was the last to kneel. His eyes filled with tears as he said, "And I must bring thee myrrh, to prepare thy body for burial. Because thou art chosen of God, many who fear and hate thee will seek to kill thee."

The look of fear crossed Joseph's face again. Melchior motioned him to follow. "Farewell and God be with you," he said to Mary.

Outside the old man whispered urgently to Joseph, who then moved quickly back into the house. Balthasar was already on his mount. "On your camel, Caspar," Melchior commanded. "We must leave quickly."

"Couldn't we stay, just for an hour or so? I hardly got a look at the baby, and besides, I'm tired."

"Evil is strong, Caspar!" Melchior spoke with sadness. "Evil is strong and when God sends such a gift of love into the world, evil will try hard to destroy it. Evil lives in the hearts of the Herods and all like him who put their trust in wealth and power. Evil cannot live in the presence of love, and will always seek to destroy it."

"But we have seen the face of God's love," said young Caspar. "I saw it in the face of that child. That child is God's chosen one."

The old man smiled broadly through his fear. He reached out and gave the younger man a gentle hug.

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