

WE THREE SPIES OF PARTHIA ARE

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The royal palace in Ctesiphon is breathtaking to behold, especially when seen in the dazzling sunlight of a clear spring day. The sheer height and length of its famous mudbrick arch seems to defy the pull of Earth, as though it were suspended from the heavens by an invisible cord. I have heard visitors say that the hand of Ahura Mazda holds it aloft from above, and I have heard unscrupulous tour guides claim that once, centuries ago, the great God had momentarily frozen the two great spirits in place as they wrestled for the souls of humanity, and that none other than Zarathustra himself had built the structure upon their backs. Such stories are recent fabrications, idle imaginings and nothing more. For those of us less inclined to think about a building in mythical terms, we are struck instead by the architectural skill that is on display, the genius that planned its construction and the skill of the workers who brought that vision to fruition. The arch proclaims to one and all the collective greatness of our kingdom and its people, our abilities that extend from feats of engineering and military prowess to astrology and art. Ultimately, I suppose it doesn't really matter which view of this marvel one prefers. Either God teaches our rulers and builders what he does not teach to people in other lands, or else the very hand or power of God supports the city's legendary archway, just as he supports the city itself which in turn governs and maintains the entire kingdom. Either way, it makes its impression and communicates its message. Once one finally lowers one's gaze from the breathtaking vault overhead, one is confronted with the painted reliefs that adorn the corridors of the palace, beginning from the grandiose entranceway. In vivid colors they tell the heroic and inspiring stories of the one God and his messengers, of our kings and the mighty heroes who have served them valiantly.

That is what one sees by day. A spy, however, is expected to arrive by cover of night, when the magnificent arch is transformed into a threatening scimitar, raised to strike down enemies, a dangerous cover that blocks the moon's light and veils the palace entrance in a shroud of darkness. The impression conveyed when one arrives at night has always seemed to me more appropriate. Friend and foe alike do well to approach with reverence and fear, since it was as perilous to visit a wrathful king as it was to stand beneath the flaming sword of a capricious deity. Beauty strikes awe into the heart, but it

also extends a welcome. At night, however, the carved figures that adorn the walls are transformed from stunning narrations of inspiring stories to fleeting figures who are glimpsed only to disappear suddenly from view. When passing torchlight brings a painted figure into view, it seems to glare with suspicious eyes, its menacing gaze appearing to follow one's stealthy progression towards the royal throne room. There are also guards in the shadows, hidden from view in alcoves, but always alert. From these beings of flesh and blood like mine I have nothing to fear. Unlike the mythical heroes that adorn the walls, some of whom were known to have been capricious and unpredictable, most of the king's retinue knows my faithful service and that, if I and my fellows have been called to converge on this place at this hour, and the king awaits us, it is for a mission of the utmost importance. The soldiers do not move as we pass, and yet while the static gazes of the faces carved into the walls seem to follow us despite their being unable to do so, the living guardians of the palace do not budge in the slightest, yet we know our every move is carefully tracked and scrutinized by their unwavering eyes.

The throne room itself contains a far greater number of torches and other sources of light, to ensure that the king's plans, which often involve writing letters or outlining strategy on a wax tablet, can be prepared and enacted unhindered. Although we arrived separately, the three of us who now assembled before the throne knew one another well. Usually we worked separately, a lone individual being capable of far more stealth than any larger group. Sometimes our separate missions might overlap, and we would exchange the briefest of knowing glances as we spotted one another in a lonely street or crowded marketplace in a city in a foreign land. If we have been assembled together at one time in this way, it will surely be for a highly unusual mission, and thus a significant one.

"Our struggles against Herod are not proving as successful as they must!" boomed the voice of king Arsaces from his throne. His voice was a commanding one in its own right, and his family's royal pedigree, combined with his own successful reign thus far, lent further weight to all of his pronouncements. "His tiny kingdom would not stand against us, were it not for his alliance with Rome, and Rome would not behave so arrogantly towards us were Herod's kingdom not a buffer between us and them. A frontal military assault will only lead to extended war that would drain our resources. But I have a plan for how to undermine Herod by stealthier means."

We three spies stood at attention, transfixed. The king was a capable military strategist, and he had excellent advisors. He might call his spies to

consult on a plan, but only after he had taken counsel with his wisest generals and magi about whatever the plan might be. Other kings must discuss matters of espionage in whispers behind locked doors, even within their own palaces. King Arsaces knew that he could trust every man present and had no need to fear that enemies would spread abroad the things spoken here, however deadly their secrets might be.

“How much do you know about the kingdom of Israel?” The king asked us.

We looked at one another. Israel was a longstanding enemy, ever since the region had been wrested from our control by the Greeks. Now it was in the hands of the Romans, for all intents and purposes, with yet another puppet king on the throne.

“We have learned a great deal about them and their ways, sire, as we have undertaken your missions there in the past,” I answered. “What is it your pleasure to know about them? We will surely find it out for you, if we do not already know it.”

The king looked amused at my cautious answer, deferring to him while also claiming competence, and as a result really saying nothing at all. “Do you know their superstitions?” the king asked me. “Do you know the history of their kings?”

It was Balthazar who answered before I managed to. “We know that the current king is not well liked, despite the prosperity that his reign has brought about,” he said. “Some look back to a golden age when another family sat on the throne, and hope that the kingdom will one day be returned to those hands.”

The king laughed heartily. “Very good! That is indeed the case. And that is the wedge that we shall use to split Herod’s kingdom and splinter it.”

“My lord,” I said, “there may be descendants of that more ancient line of kings that still live. Shall we find them for you, so that you can support them against Herod?”

“Oh, we need not do anything as obvious or as crass as that,” the king replied. “All that needs to happen is for Herod to *believe* that a king is emerging from elsewhere. We have seen his paranoia at work, and know that even his wives and children are not safe when he becomes suspicious. All we need to do is feed that suspicion, so that a cancerous distrust will grow within him. It will

sap his strength and divide his mind as well as his family, and ultimately his kingdom.”

The king proceeded to outline his plan to us. It was even more brilliant than I had expected. We were to go to Jerusalem – all three of us together – bearing gifts and claiming to be magi who have seen in the stars that a new king has been born who will rule over Israel. Herod will become distressed. His family and servants will whisper and plot. Their doom will emerge mostly from within, and then when Parthia knocks on the door, it may simply open to us, to settle the chaos that has been resulting from Herod’s mania. But at the very least, Rome’s border region will be unsettled and our own border will be more secure as a result. It was a brilliant plan, and as a strategist I felt rather ashamed to not have thought of something like it myself. I wondered which of the king’s advisors had come up with it, or whether it was his own cunning that had devised it. Either way, the risks to the kingdom were few even if they should fail, although obviously if Herod saw through the plan, our own individual lives and those of anyone else on the mission with us would be forfeit. And the reward should they succeed was almost unfathomable.

The king provided us with lavish clothing of the sort the most esteemed and influential of the magi wear. He also provided us with gold, frankincense, and myrrh to bring as gifts. And of course, travel papers. As spies we were used to traveling to Judaea via the more direct and dangerous caravan route that runs through the desert. It follows a gorge that spans almost the entire distance of the journey, and which flows with water during the rainy season. We can usually take that most of the way, veering off only a half a day’s journey or so before we reach the border, in order to avoid the outpost situated at the point at which the route crosses from Parthian territory into that of Rome’s vassal. Not this time. This time the whole point of our journey is that we be seen, that we make our entry into Jerusalem a cause of commotion. It made for a welcome change, to be honest. I rarely had the opportunity to travel in such luxury. Seldom did my role as spy involve impersonating or pretending to be a dignitary or someone of means. While the king ensured that I was well-paid and had ample funds for any mission I went on, the travel itself usually involved neglected byways, desert detours, and wading through unpatrolled segments of rivers under cover of night. Now I was making my way by camel, with a retinue of a sufficient number of the king’s servants acting as my own so as to make my false identity and that of my two colleagues seem plausible to all whom we encounter – including, most crucially, Herod himself.

Our route took us northwards along the Euphrates via Dura Europos. The changes in climate as well as in political realities were noticeable as we drew near to the border crossing into Roman Syria. When the Roman soldiers asked our business, we answered honestly: we have come to honor the king in Jerusalem, bringing gifts of tribute from the East. The soldiers viewed us with some suspicion, looking closely at our papers. Having searched us for weapons and found none other than what one would expect servants of dignitaries to carry in order to defend them from robbers on the road, we were allowed to pass – but only with an escort, which would ensure that we journeyed on safely to Herod’s palace in Jerusalem. Two soldiers from the cohort accompanied us as far as Pania in the northern part of Herod’s Kingdom. They made a point of steering our route so that we got a good look at the Augusteum that Herod had built there in honor of the emperor and gods of Rome. I would happily show them Ctesiphon and see if they could remain so misguidedly proud! But such architectural propaganda abounds in every kingdom, and I knew it was my duty to gaze at it with feigned awe, resisting the strong temptation to sneer contemptuously. From there, we would be taken by soldiers belonging to Herod’s vassal kingdom. The way this all unfolded was a real godsend as far as our mission was concerned. Even if we had made it no further than this point, word would spread of our arrival up the Roman chain of command. Why would the Parthians be communicating with Herod and sending gifts to him? To lure him away from faithful allegiance to Rome? Might they be successful? Herod was bound to find himself under close scrutiny as a result of our arrival alone, whatever else might transpire in the remainder of our journey.

Although the Greek spoken by the Roman soldiers had been intelligible, the Aramaic of Herod’s men, despite their accent, was much easier to understand. Neither language was as beautiful or logical as Persian, but the Babylonian language and writing system remains in wide use even today in much of our empire, much as is true of Greek in most of the eastern part of Rome’s empire. The Herodian escort was of real benefit to our mission, just as the Roman one had been. As we proceeded southwards towards Jerusalem, their presence conveyed the impression to all who saw us that this was indeed a delegation of emissaries from Parthia to the king. What could this mean? Would fighting take place again between the Romans and the Parthians, with Israel caught in between? Would Herod switch sides? Should the people entrust their fate to Herod or express loyalty directly to Rome, so that any Roman displeasure that might ensue would be taken out only on Herod and not on them? Far from seeking to remain silent in the face of

questions or dismissing inquiries from passersby as inappropriate, Herod's men spoke and speculated openly with people they met in various towns we passed through along our way, most of whom we gathered were previously known to our escorts.

Jerusalem did not come into view fully until we were surprisingly close to it. While other citadels sit on the highest hilltop anywhere in sight, visible from miles away, the topography seemed to obscure Jerusalem so that we first caught fleeting glimpses of it, as though the city were aware of our plan and taunting us, daring us to find it. And then suddenly it was upon us, as though it had crept up on us like an enemy, to leap out and subdue us before we could ready ourselves in defense. Even with having been to the city before more than once, the effect of its location in relation to the landscape remained disconcerting.

When at last we reached the city walls, we proceeded through one of the gates that led to a relatively straight street, full of sellers of goods ranging from fruits and vegetables to wooden tools and utensils. The temple and Herod's palace towered above all other structures, on opposite ends of the city, proclaiming to all that Herod believed himself to bear an authority like that of a god, or perhaps, the authority of his god. Our course towards the king's abode was guided by the tall towers of the palace, much as we would tell others that our journey to Jerusalem had been guided by a bright star. Once we entered the palace, we were asked to wait in a lavish antechamber where attendants washed our feet, provided food and drink, and made us comfortable. Others who had arrived before us to seek an audience with the king were already there in that room, and so we anticipated that we might have to wait for some time. It was not long at all, however, before the king's servant re-entered the room, his brow crinkled with evident concern, and told us that the king wished to speak to us next.

Herod's throne room conveyed as much about him as the palace's elevation, towers, and other aspects of its external appearance did. Everyone has heard stories of Herod's fortress at Masada, which has enabled him to weather challenges to his power. It is impenetrable in every meaningful sense of the word. Believe me, I know someone who tried to infiltrate it. Knew someone, that is. Perhaps precisely because of its inaccessibility, perched atop sheer cliffs near the Dead Sea, members of Herod's retinue seemed to feel no need to keep secrets about what could be found inside. Enormous cisterns of water. An ornately decorated hot bath and steam room. Of course, they could all be made-up stories, propaganda intended to impress and mislead. But such

stories had reached me from multiple sources, and they had always struck me as believable, even before I had entered Herod's palace here in Jerusalem and seen the same combination of fortification and luxury. The ornamental frescoes matched the descriptions I had heard about Masada. And set into the ornate walls were alcoves in which soldiers could be glimpsed in the shadows, ready to respond at a moment's notice. If spies penetrated into the king's presence through deceit as we had, and sought to seize the opportunity to attack him with concealed weapons, they would be dead before they reached the first step leading up to the elevated platform where Herod's throne stood. The platform itself offered some protection, putting the would-be attacker at a disadvantage, while elevating the king in much the same way the raised platform situated the palace itself above the city. My lord, the king of Parthia, was wise to assign us a different sort of mission than that.

"I am told that you have come with gifts for me!" Herod bellowed from his throne. His voice was higher pitched than I would have imagined, given his stocky build, a result of his life experience combining battle experience in earlier years and opulent self-indulgence more recently. Yet the resonant echo in the large hall added depth and richness to the voice. Such expansive throne rooms are typical in any palace across a wide array of different kingdoms. And yet one got the distinct impression that Herod might have thought consciously about the space, about how his voice sounded in it, about the need to convey a commanding presence that elicited awe and obedience on an instinctive level even from those who entered with hostile intent or indifference. My throat felt drier than I would have liked, and seeing my hesitation Melchior spoke courageously the words that had been scripted for us, rehearsed for this moment.

"Your majesty, I fear there may have been a misunderstanding," Melchior said. "We respect your greatness and pay you tribute. But our mission was in response to the sign that we saw in the sky, a star that we recognize as heralding the birth of a new king. We assumed that you had had a son born to one of your wives..."

The whispers among the attendants began almost immediately. They were as discreet as they could be, since even the quietest speech carried further than one might wish in that echoing chamber. I expected the king to become enraged and demand silence, but he simply turned an angry gaze around the room and all chatter quickly ceased. From the shadows, I saw a man step forward whom I soon recognized as Antipater, Herod's son, as soon as he drew near enough to the torch on the nearby wall, which had until this

point enabled him to remain hidden in the shadow cast by the closest pillar to it. Antipater was Herod's firstborn, but his status as heir was not a given. He and his mother had been exiled when Herod took another wife, and so the possibility that his father had another son who might supplant him would unsettle him. I was glad that the words Melchior uttered were heard by Antipater with his own ears, rather than having to reach him as gossip and hearsay, even though even mere rumors about this would be certain to unsettle him. We must proceed cautiously. Our lives might already be forfeit. But if we have planted just the right seeds of discord, we might escape with our lives, as well as leaving the land of Judaea in turmoil.

Herod's eyes locked with Antipater's for the briefest of moments, then he gestured towards him as he returned his gaze towards us and addressed us. "My son is here, but this is a very belated present for his birthday, if that is what you intended."

"Your majesty," I began, feeling that I must take the lead in, and the responsibility for, what happened next. "If it is your wish, we shall present him the gifts we have brought. However, that is not our mission, and our lord the king of Parthia shall be displeased with us. The star's appearance leaves us in no doubt as to its significance. It signals that a king has been born at the time of its rising."

"When did that occur?" Herod asked us.

"Almost two years ago," Balthazar responded. We had determined that was a good time frame, not so recent as to sound implausible, but not far enough in the past that it could denote one of Herod's own sons. Herod motioned to one of his attendants to approach, whom he then commanded to run some errand. We waited for several minutes in awkward silence, before the arrival of several men who carried scrolls and appeared to be scholars.

"Scribes, I have a question for you about the Law. I know the answer, but I seek your confirmation. Where will the anointed one, the son of David, be born?"

The scribes looked at one another nervously, not because they did not know the answer immediately, but because they feared this was somehow a trick question, a test of their loyalty.

"In Bethlehem, sire," one of the scribes said, finally finding his voice.

"Very good," Herod said. "We can send these visitors forth to deliver their gifts there. Then they shall return to me and tell whether they found the

newborn king they are seeking. After they do, they must return here with details of where he is located, so that I too may pay him homage.”

Bethlehem? This was most unexpected. I vaguely knew the place, had heard tell of it, might have passed that way without stopping while on some mission. It was a small town, uninteresting and unimportant. Were we really to journey there? Was this a ruse on Herod’s part? If we headed back to Parthia now, Herod would be able to discern that we had been insincere, willing to leave our purported mission unfulfilled. We must go to Bethlehem. But what should we do once we get there? We can find a home in which there is a young child, pay him homage, and then bring Herod word – or perhaps depart thence for Parthia, lucky to escape with our lives?

The journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem was not a long one. It took us only a couple of hours to reach the small town. Our approach caused quite a stir, as no dignitaries had any reason to visit such a place. Yet here we were, three foreigners with an entourage, heading towards the tiny town, thoroughly unexpected. They had every right to be suspicious, to run to and fro as they spotted us in the distance, to shelter their women and station a select group of men to meet us at the edge of the habitation. We were so very clearly out of place. Was this why Herod had sent us here, to humiliate us? Was he laughing as he sent us on a fool’s errand, having seen through our ruse? No, Herod might appreciate comedy, but he was not so merciful. He surely had people in Bethlehem who were loyal to him, and this too was a concern for us. We had seen no one on the road behind us whom we believed to be following us, but it was a road with a fair amount of foot traffic throughout the day and so we could not be sure. Whether it be among those who awaited us or those who would come after, or indeed both, there were surely some who would bring Herod a report. If they had not been sent expressly by him on such a mission, they would still run to tell what they had seen in exchange for a small sum of money, or in exchange for their lives being spared if they were threatened. We would have to play our parts until the end of this show, even as the script seemed increasingly bizarre.

“Welcome, honored guests!” said a man who stood in the road with a number of other townspeople, blocking our tiny caravan from proceeding further even as he extended his greeting. He spoke Aramaic with the distinctive lilt of Judaea, pleasant to listen to and easy to understand even for those who interacted mostly with speakers in Syria or the Babylonian heartland. “What is your business in Bethlehem?” he continued. “How may we assist you?” A wise and diplomatic individual if ever there was one. And a

brave one, too. No breach of hospitality, yet using the very act of welcome to find out what he could, all the while standing between us and the neighbors and friends that he wished to protect. A man worthy of our respect, even as we continue our charade.

“We have come seeking a child who was born here, no more than two years before now,” Balthazar said to him, our Parthian accents noticeable, not that anyone seeing our clothing would not already know that we had come from some such faraway place. “We have seen a sign that a king has been born in the land of Israel,” I added, “and we have come to honor him.”

The stirring and anxiety in the group of men was palpable. They had already been made uneasy by our approach. Now they could well have panicked. Their spokesman, however, took counsel with them. While the birth of children in a town this size would be common knowledge, there could be many or few, and it would be easy to neglect to mention someone. But what would the implications be of telling us what we wanted to know? Once again the man showed himself to be remarkably shrewd. He could legitimately give the appearance of merely trying to provide the information we requested, even as he discussed what they should do in this unusual circumstance. If the opportunity arises, I will recruit this man to serve as my informant here.

“There are too many families with children in the town that age for us to know whom you are referring to,” he eventually replied. “But there is one family that hosts strangers from out of town, who came here around the time you mentioned, and are still here. The woman was already expecting a child when she arrived, and gave birth soon after. Perhaps they are the ones you are looking for?”

A wise man indeed. Sacrifice the stranger, the newcomer in their midst, if there is to be trouble. And well he might be concerned. I had been so determined to play my role in this ruse faithfully, to serve my king and harm his enemies, that I had not thought until now about the implications for innocents who might get caught up in it. What will happen to this little town of Bethlehem, to the family and child that shall soon become the recipients of our gifts? Will Herod seek them out? Will they be slaughtered? Despite having carried out assassinations often, I still felt sickened to my stomach at the thought that I might cost a young child and his hapless innocent family their lives. Whole villages could be burned, children massacred, women raped as an army moved through an area in a time of war. I had always thought of the role of a spy as being to prevent such things, offering targeted assaults that avoided innocent victims to the extent that international intrigue ever could. The way

of espionage and assassination is much more humane and moral than outright war. But what of this plan that has led us in an unexpected direction? What will the cost be to these townspeople? A shiver ran up my spine, even though the early evening air was warm and dry.

We nodded our thanks to the townsfolk for their assistance, and made our way to the house they had referred to. We called out a greeting and waited only briefly before trying the door to see if anyone was inside. Within, in the lower chamber of the home, animals belonging to the family had already been brought inside for the evening – a number of goats, a couple of sheep, and two donkeys. In their midst, two young boys were playing. They both looked to be around two years old, although one might perhaps be slightly older than the other. On the raised main floor of the home, two women sat sewing, watching the children. From where they sat, they would have been unable to hear our call of greeting over the sounds in the home. But they saw us now that the door was open, and I watched as fear gripped them. They hesitated, conflicted whether to rush forward in an attempt to grab the children, or to run directly to another room or the courtyard where their husbands were to be found. I spoke quickly to try to defuse the situation and set their minds at rest.

“Fear not! We apologize for startling you. We mean you no harm. We have come on a mission of glad tidings and celebration. Please, are your husbands at home?” The two women hesitated, then one arose and, having made sure her companion was keeping her gaze fixed on us, moved cautiously to the rear door and looked out. After a few moments she shouted, “Zechariah! Joseph! Come quickly!” Looking out for a few moments longer, she returned to face us. We made no move to enter, knowing it would be improper to do so before the men arrived. This respect for propriety on our part seemed to relax the women significantly. The two husbands appeared in the rear doorway soon, clearly having been interrupted in the middle of some strenuous task, sweat still glistening on their brows.

Melchior spoke this time as we began to play out our script once more. “We bring you greetings from our brethren, the guild of astrologers in the East.” Melchior wisely didn’t specify that we had come from Parthia, knowing that mentioning this detail might frighten them and cause them to chase us away immediately. Any of Herod’s subjects would naturally fear being reported as traitors merely for receiving Parthian guests.

“What has your astrology to do with us?” one of the men asked. He was stocky, and seemed rougher in both appearance and temperament than the other, whose robe seemed slightly finer and less worn, although both their

faces reflected some way of life that took them in and out of the sun. They were neither as dark-skinned as shepherds and farmers nor as fair as princes.

Balthazar answered the question. “We saw a sign in the sky, a star giving indication that a new king had been born. It led us here. We come bearing gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Tell us please, which of you is the master of this house, and whose are the children?”

The two men looked at one another, nodded, and then the man who had spoken first moved forward towards the guests. “Our apologies for keeping you standing in the doorway. We expected no guests. Mary, Elizabeth, kindly bring some food.” These last words were addressed to the women, who moved to set about the task immediately. As they disappeared out into the courtyard, the same man motioned our entire party to come into the house. Melchior asked if the servants might not take the animals to the town well to give them water first. The second of the two husbands came to the front door and, stepping outside, explained to our servants the way to the well. By the time he had come back inside, Balthazar, Melchior, and I were being seated in the house’s main room by the man who now told us that his name was Joseph.

“You asked which of us is the master of the house, and that is a complicated question,” Joseph explained. “It is my family home, but I have not been living here. I had moved up north temporarily, to work as a mason in building projects in Sepphoris in Galilee. There, I met the woman who would become my wife, and so I was in no hurry to return here. Meanwhile, my wife’s cousin married a priest, Zechariah, and this house in Bethlehem was closer to Jerusalem than where they had been living. So they moved in. And then there was a census to register property owners, and so I needed to return here to maintain my claim to the land. As you can see, we are still here. Nonetheless, at the moment, my wife and I are in this house as guests.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Joseph,” Zechariah interjected. “This is your home.”

“It is *our* home, for the moment,” Joseph replied. “Both our families. All of us.”

“And the children are yours?” I asked.

“We each have one son here. Mine is called Joshua. His is called John.” He motioned with his hand in the direction of each of the boys in turn as he mentioned their names. Both of the children had already stopped their playing to stare with intense curiosity at the strangers that had appeared in their midst. Neither seemed inclined to come closer, despite their evident interest.

I could tell now that they must indeed be quite close in age. Which of them would be the one that ended up drawn into this increasingly complicated ruse? And what effect might it have on the boy?

“Which of them is the eldest?” I asked, hoping that might make what came next somewhat simpler.

“They are close in age to one another, as you can see,” Zechariah replied. “John is older, but only by a few months. But – did you say you believe that a new *king* is in our midst? Surely you cannot mean one of our boys?”

“We believe that to be so,” Balthazar told them. “The stars do not lie. We were led here to this place, by a star whose ascent we traced starting about two years ago. Would that not coincide with the time that your children were born?”

“Can you tell us the day that the star appeared?” Joseph asked. I quickly interjected, “We can, but we have no reason to believe that the star marked the very day of the new king’s birth. Would that it were so simple! The stars do not communicate that way. The star will have ascended before him, announcing his appearance soon to follow.” Melchior’s puzzled glance in my direction only lasted a moment, then I saw his expression brighten as he realized I had avoided what could have been an awkward moment. If we offered a date that did not correspond to that of one of the boys’ births, the fathers might have concluded that we were in the wrong place and sent us on our way, lengthening our quest.

“Then how are we to know which of the boys is the one you seek?” Zechariah asked us.

“That is for you to deduce, as the stars may guide you. We were led here to you. We will bestow our gifts on this home and those who dwell in it. The rest is up to you.”

The two women had returned from the courtyard with bread, olives, and salt, which they set in our midst. It was unlikely either of them had overheard much if anything of our conversation thus far. Joseph stopped the two women before they could retreat back to the courtyard, and recounted to them what we had shared with them thus far. Both women looked astonished, as they stared first at us, then at one another, then at their children, then at their husbands. Soon all four of the adults of the house were engaged in a debate, insisting that one or the other of the boys was more likely to be the one we should honor. None of them seemed to be taking the matter all that seriously, and each seemed determined to conclude that it was the child that

was not their own that we sought. Joseph emphasized that John was slightly older, while Zechariah reminded Joseph that his ancestors supposedly included none other than king David himself. While that detail made my heart race with excitement, Joseph brushed the suggestion aside dismissively. “So many people tell stories of their illustrious ancestors. How many of them do you think are true? I know several families that also say they come from the line of David, yet none of them claims to be related to me!”

The three of us who were guests ate mostly in silence as our hosts did most of the talking, continuing in this same manner. When the servants returned, we seized the moment of interruption to present our gifts to the two families. At this, they fell silent and the mood turned sober. Perhaps they had not taken the matter entirely seriously until the gold and other valuable items were set before them. While these families did not appear to be nearly as poor as the majority of people living in the town, they were clearly not used to seeing anything like such riches as those we had brought, never mind receiving them as gifts.

Norms of hospitality required them to offer us shelter for the night, and it was indeed getting late. Yet I felt we must refuse, in the interest of our own safety as well as theirs. Had anyone followed us? Would Herod’s troops surround the home before morning and kill all inside? Would the townspeople already be gossiping to such an extent that even without spies or soldiers making inquiries, our words and actions here would be known in Jerusalem within a matter of hours? I had been surrounded more than once in my life by enemy soldiers determined to kill me, and yet I had never before felt such an urgent need to flee as I did now. As my eyes met those of the children, still watching us intently, I felt deep sorrow at the thought that I may have ended their lives prematurely by coming here into their home. I had thought Arsaces’ plan brilliant, an inexpensive one that promised to bring so much benefit to Parthia. But it now seemed that the cost might be far greater than I envisaged. I realized, however, that I might be able to save their lives, without undermining the plan’s aim.

“Alas, we cannot stay,” I said to them. “We are expected back in Jerusalem before nightfall, and even if we leave now, I fear that darkness shall catch us before we arrive. But we dare not keep King Herod waiting.” I had chosen my words carefully, and I could see that they were having the desired effect. As I had anticipated, Joseph and Zechariah looked nervously at one another, then at their wives and children. “Herod knows that you have come here?” Joseph asked us.

“He practically sent us. We arrived in Jerusalem first, since we expected to find a newborn king there, as I am sure you can understand. He told us to come to Bethlehem, expressing an eagerness to receive a report from us once we found this king, so that he too might offer his homage.” I did not attempt to conceal the irony in my voice. If Herod came looking for a child that might ascend to the throne, his ‘gift’ for the child would be a sword, raised to strike a fatal blow, indeed to mercilessly hack the helpless infant to pieces in a horrifying fashion. Herod was well-known not only for his lavish tastes and his architectural achievements, but for the merciless cruelty with which he dealt with anyone who dared to cross him. I could see that all the adults present understood the warning that I was subtly delivering. What was being left unsaid up until that point now began to be spoken plainly.

“We cannot set out on a journey tonight,” Zechariah said. “It is too late to be on the road with women and children. If we tried to reach even a city as near as Jericho, our bodies would be found along the road tomorrow, robbed and slaughtered.”

“If we do not return tonight to Jerusalem, Herod may be suspicious, but will consider the possibility that we accepted your hospitality, or were delayed, or are in fact ourselves setting a trap of some sort for him. He will not rush to send troops here before morning. If you leave at the first light of dawn you will not have much of a head start, but I hope it will be enough. We will set out tonight towards the Jordan River. You should follow after us as soon as you can. You will eventually catch up with us on the way if we travel slowly once we are safely out of Herod’s domain. You can seek refuge with us in Parthia. Those whom Herod despises and considers a threat will be welcome among us.”

“No, I do not think fleeing to Parthia is the answer,” Joseph opined. “There are Jews throughout Babylonia, to be sure, and we could settle amongst our scattered people there. But I have known many who have left the land of Israel for there, and few who have returned. Our home is here, and if we must flee, it will be to a place from which we can return as soon as the danger has passed.”

“It is better for our party that we not return to Jerusalem at all,” agreed Balthazar, not giving away to those who did not already know it the true nature of our mission here in Herod’s land. But he made his meaning clear to us. “Herod would most likely simply kill us, after tormenting us and our servants to find out where we had been and whom we had visited. He would then seek you out and kill you here, if you remained, and would consider the

matter concluded. That is not good for any of us. If you cannot travel with us tonight, we could wait for you somewhere beyond the Jordan. If you are still certain that you will not proceed with us back to Ctesiphon, so be it. We can depart thence, while you can take the King's Highway south towards Egypt and safety there. The trade routes between Egypt and your home are much more frequently traveled and are well maintained. It would be a safer and faster journey for you, with your women and children and whatever belongings you think you can take with you."

Joseph frowned, thinking deeply. "Egypt? Yes, there are many Jews there as well, and we could surely find a community that would receive us. But you should not wait for us. We will not join you to travel together as far as the King's Highway, to part ways there. There is no reason to slow your own journey and put yourselves at risk. We have another option. If we flee, Herod will expect us to journey together towards the east. Our presence would slow you down. We do not have horses or camels of our own, and you do not have enough for us. All our lives might be forfeit if you keep pace with us traveling on foot. I cannot bring this upon you if it can be avoided. There is another way. You travel that way on your own. If Herod does pursue you and catch you, you can say that you were frightened to return to him because you realized that the king you sought at first in Herod's court was in fact one he would perceive as a rival, and you were certain this would have made him angry. He might accept this excuse and allow you to leave unharmed. Meanwhile, we can travel towards the coast on country roads. I have done this once or twice before. These byways will not cause us to cross paths with soldiers from Jerusalem traveling via the main roads. We will eventually reach the Via Maris, which will take us to Egypt, and will do so more directly than the King's Highway. Even if Herod's troops realize that we have done this after first pursuing us eastward, even with their horses and their superior speed, they will be unlikely to overtake us before we make it to safety."

All of us looked at him, wondering what inspiration might have seized him, for him to have come up with this solution. It seemed far superior to what we, experts in stealth and subterfuge, had proposed. It was indeed a worthy plan, and we told him so, without revealing that it was the insight of long careers spent as spies that gave us this assurance. We attributed it to the stars, and before we left, I discreetly pointed to one that I told him would guide him towards the coast and the road to Egypt. It would indeed do this, but so equally would any other in that general direction. He did not need the star to find his way, but it seemed fitting to play our roles as astrologers to the end.

We set out towards our own land, the townspeople of Bethlehem still watching us with suspicion as we left. They could see that we were not returning by the route that had brought us into town. What would they make of this? Would any of them feel loyalty towards Herod and rush to send word? It would not matter. Once we were out of sight of the town we could quicken our pace, dropping all pretense of being foreign dignitaries. If we felt the need, we could steal some local clothing, separate from one another, and blend in among other travelers. But that shouldn't be necessary. We had an ample head start. This was as good a conclusion to our mission as we could have dared to hope for. Herod had been unsettled, and talk of this would spread in his family, and of course among his retainers and servants. From there it would leak into the general populace, and undoubtedly reach his enemies. With luck, he would not even know to seek the families of Joseph and Zechariah, but if he did discover which home we had visited, his men would hopefully find it empty. Even if he managed to kill them, niggling doubts would continue to plague him. And to top it all off, we had escaped with our lives. If we can make it to the crossing into Parthia, we will be safe, and once we reach Ctesiphon, we will be received with honor for having exceeded all expectations that any – even our lord the king – could reasonably have had when we set out. The undertaking had been brilliant, but it had also been risky, and whatever happened next in Israel after our departure, it would have been worth it for the trouble it brought upon Rome and its allies.

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As it happened, at no point in our journey did we ever catch sight of troops pursuing us on the road. The journey back was so uneventful that it is hard to think of it as the epilogue to such a tale as ours. Truth be told, this was often how it felt when a mission of espionage concluded successfully. It was profoundly anticlimactic. It was the inept spy or assassin who barely escaped by the skin of their teeth. Their mission might have been accomplished, but at the cost of becoming known to their enemies and pursued by them. However odd the diminishing anxiety always felt after the suspense and danger that preceded, it was a testament to our skill at our profession.

We were indeed congratulated on our mission, once we reached the palace and gave our report to the king. It took some time for additional details to reach us about events that unfolded in Israel after we left, but which we

could confidently attribute to results of our actions there. Herod had indeed sent troops to Bethlehem, and slaughtered every child born in the time period after we had said the star appeared. It was tragic, to be sure, but there were bound to have been only a tiny handful of children that age in so small a town. With any luck, the two of them we had met, John and Joshua, had escaped to safety. The number of Parthian children who died any time battles were fought with the Romans was always greater than the entire population of Bethlehem's children could have been. For the briefest of moments, I nonetheless felt a pang of guilt as I thought of the children I had glimpsed in the village, eyeing us with the same curiosity on the streets as young John and Joshua had when they were in their home. As I thought of the tiny infants that must have been needlessly torn from their mothers' arms and slaughtered. But I reassured myself that it was worth it. The spy's surgical approach, even in unusual cases like this one, was still more humane than full-scale war.

Later that same year, the news reached us that Herod's son Antipater had been executed. According to the report we heard, Varus, the Roman general who was now governing Syria, had Antipater brought before him, his loyalty to his father and to Rome having been called into question. I was curious enough that I sent word to my informants in Syria to find out more. As we suspected, Antipater had taken our talk of a sign as possibly referring to himself, heralding him as destined to ascend to the throne ahead of the expected time. He had been certain that, at the very least, the star had been a portent of doom for his father, and he was sure that his father's troops' atrocities in Bethlehem would cost him the loyalty of the people. He had thus plotted against him, hoping that whatever the correct interpretation of the sign in the heavens, his actions might appease the fates and secure his transition to the throne. His father Herod, however, had gotten wind of this. Why did he not just slaughter him on the spot? Why hand him over to the Romans? Clearly Herod was feeling hemmed in and constrained by both circumstances and Roman authority, while the Romans were at the same time losing their confidence in him. Our plan was working!

It was nearly two years later when Herod finally died. By then, I had been sent on another mission, to Armenia. That was another territory where Rome and Parthia each sought control, an uneasy truce on the surface hiding intrigue and subterfuge involving agents like myself. I managed to stay abreast of the story in Israel as it continued to unfold. Herod's son Archelaus ascended the throne after his father's death, but the people were unhappy. The Romans deposed him, and put down a popular rebellion that took place in response. Eventually they transferred Judaea to direct Roman rule, apportioning other

fragments of Herod's kingdom among his sons. What a success! What had been cohesive was now divided, and where there had once been a buffer, now the domain of Rome itself lay right at Parthia's doorstep. There was no need to be a strategist like myself to easily see that this meant Rome's grip was weakening.

The struggle with the Romans continued throughout the remainder of my life. When I could no longer serve usefully as an active agent for my lord Arsaces, I asked for permission to remain in Armenia as an informant. I had rarely had the chance to spend a long time in one place since I had first entered the king's service as a soldier, when I was barely a grown man. No other place felt like home, and none provided me with a compelling rationale to return. If I relocated to Ctesiphon or Nisa, I would be an outsider, however much my reputation had remained known due to all my faithful service and accomplishments. Plus, there was squabbling over the throne, and I could easily find myself allied wrongly and wind up executed. Here I could simply be a distant but loyal servant of whoever happened to be on the throne, neither entangled in nor endangered by court intrigue.

Yet life beyond the most active forms of service to the empire left me with too much time to think. I had never married, and while the freedom had seemed welcome in my youth, now when companionship was a greater desire than sex, loneliness found me. So too did some guilt for things I had done. I still justified my actions as for the greater good. But when I slept, I sometimes dreamt of Bethlehem. At other times, I could not sleep because of my thoughts about it. When one is hungry for forgiveness, one may clutch at any offer. But I was not really like that. Other spies drank themselves into a stupor in their old age, as much from boredom as from guilt, I suspect. I still believed in what I had done. If I mourned the deaths of children in Bethlehem, my biggest regret was that I had not brought a fuller victory to my people. The struggle with Rome continued.

It was thus not because of any conscious religious longing that I opened the door to strangers who called out to me from the street. It was because, from their accents, they seemed to be Greeks from somewhere in the eastern provinces of Rome's empire, from someplace I knew I had been but couldn't quite place. Asia Minor, perhaps? They could be Roman agents, or ordinary folk with useful information that I could send back to my king. It was certainly worth my time to hear what they had to say. They said they had come to Aramosata bringing glad tidings. This introduction was odd, and yet they stirred my memories. This must have been how we sounded when we showed

up in Herod's court all those years ago. Amused and intrigued, I indicated my willingness to listen, even though I perceived that these were peddlers of some sort of religious philosophy, the kind of thing that seemed more and more common these days. They said that the story they came to share could change my life, bringing me forgiveness and peace. I was unimpressed. However, when they said their message was about Israel's anointed one, my eyes grew wide and I stared at them incredulously. My curiosity was definitely piqued, but then my thoughts took an unsettling turn. This could not be a coincidence, surely! Perhaps they were Roman agents after all. I excused myself on the pretense of bringing them food, and while out of their sight, strapped my dagger to my leg. Had they managed to get the truth about our mission from someone who had been in our party? Who else knew the details, and might have divulged them? If they were here to mock me, they were surely also here to kill me. There are two of them and they are both younger than I, so they might succeed in taking my life. But I will not make it easy for them.

I returned to my guests with some food: flat breads, roasted eggplant, and cheese. They had apparently sensed that they had managed to grab my interest, and that I was unusually eager to hear what they had to say. They thus asked if they could start the story from the beginning, and I agreed. I was astonished by what I heard. They began, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod, Magi from the East showed up in Jerusalem asking, 'Where is the king of the Jews who has been born? We have seen his star and have come to worship him...'" If this was mockery, it was unnecessarily elaborate. No, as strange as this turn of events was, it must be explained otherwise. Surely this meant that the child Joshua had survived, and that when he was older, his parents had told him the story of our visit. I interrupted to ask them about the name, and they confirmed that "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Jewish name Joshua. I resisted the temptation to interrupt them immediately with further questions, to ask about Joshua's parents, and his cousin John and his parents, and what became of them all. As they continued, some of my lingering questions were answered, while others remained with me, and of course many new questions now raced through my mind. I was shocked to learn that Herod Antipas, another of the sons of Herod the Great (as he had come to be known), had executed John (surely the John in their story must be the older boy I had met), and then the Romans did likewise with Joshua. It was odd to think that the two young boys had survived beyond childhood despite the danger we had placed them in, and yet when they had died later it was still due to our scheme. So much to think about, and much to regret. Perhaps if Parthia had remained in contact with one or both of them,

we could have lent them our aid, and things might have unfolded differently, for them and for us.

The story my guests told me ended with the incredible claim that Joshua's tragic fate was not the end, that God had brought him back to life after his execution. They asked me to believe these things and become his follower. I told them that this was a lot to process, and that I needed time to think about what they had told me. This was the absolute truth. After they departed, I sat back down and remained transfixed, unable to move, my mind racing. Could it really be a coincidence that these men came here and completed this unfinished tale from my own life? Should I tell them my own version of the story and crush their faith? Would they even believe me if I told them what I know? Should I feign belief simply to find out more? If I did so it would provide opportunities to satisfy my own curiosity, if nothing else. But their growing network of contacts throughout the Roman Empire might also provide me with useful tidbits of information which I could pass on to my lord the king of Parthia.

These strangers have certainly given me much to think about. I hoped to change history, but only in the realm of politics. How could I have helped to start a new religion, much less one that I do not and would never adhere to? Even if I told the truth about my role in this, would anyone believe me? Will their story, mine, or both continue to be heard by future generations? Might the stories I grew up hearing about Zoroaster have come about in the same way? Or could some higher power have moved my lord the king of Parthia to initiate this mission and bring these things to pass? Perhaps all human beings are mere pawns in some celestial intrigue more complex and unfathomable than we ever know. After all, so few people in the whole world know about the machinations that led to my mission to Judaea all those years ago. Perhaps fewer still, or none at all, discern the plots and subterfuges that spirits benevolent and malign play out with us as their instruments.

I can think of only one thing to do that might help me make sense of all this. There is only one other person in the whole world that I can talk to about this. I learned some years ago that Melchior had met his end while on a mission. But last I heard Balthazar still lives. I will seek him out and tell him what these strangers have told me. I wonder what he will make of all this...

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