

## THE THREE WISE GUYS

High on a cliff by the railroad tracks above a deserted stretch of Trestles Beach, binoculars poised, the stargazer focused on the horizon. Anticipating celestial events always made Elijah consider his own place in the universe, and his unknown future. Pulled like the tide, the cosmic dance of stars through the solar system ignited a yearning for adventure within him. A solitary cloud cast a silhouette on the ocean as the December solstice began. At sunset, the planet Mercury made an appearance at its greatest elongation, five degrees away from dazzling Venus.

“Awesome,” said Elijah.

His phone dinged.

A text from Uncle Baz the astronomer: *Are you seeing this evening's apparition?*

Elijah replied: *Affirmative!*

Uncle Baz: *I miss you, kid. Everything good?*

Elijah: *I'm on Christmas break and thinking of heading your way.*

Uncle Baz: *Wonderful! Come for the Meteor Shower.*

Elijah tapped the thumbs-up emoji, thrilled at the prospect of an escape from his ordinary existence. Baz was one of the few solid connections Elijah made while living on military bases. They became friends when Elijah's father was stationed in Louisiana. Baz was not really an uncle, but Elijah had known him for most of his seventeen years on the planet. Baz inspired him to follow the stars. Elijah would make a journey from Oceanside, California to New Orleans, and beyond. He ran a hand over his short mohawk and gazed up at Venus in the constellation of Sagittarius the Archer, the centaur holding a bow and arrow and taking aim at the heart of Scorpius. His phone dinged again. His heart skipped a beat.

A text from Mitzi: *At my grandmother's house. Saw Mercury and thought of you.*

Elijah replied: *I'm over the moon that you did.*

Mitzi was born into a wealthy family. She was one of the popular blonde girls. The fact that she was not the least bit pretentious had surprised Elijah. She volunteered at the food bank where they ended up working side by side filling hunger bags for the holidays. Mitzi cared about families with food insecurity, whereas Elijah helped out to avoid detention for missing classes. Aside from math and science, and Mitzi sightings, Elijah had little interest in school. He had trouble blending in. He was a loner, but Mitzi captured his interest. She brought him out of his shell that day at the food bank. Mitzi gave him a different perspective. Elijah stared at his phone, hoping for a reply, or a heart emoji. When none came, he sighed, and headed for home.

Elijah lived with his parents and his dog, Donky, at the San Onofre military housing area, a cluster of matching beige homes in neat rows on a hillside. As usual, Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs were working; Elijah's mother at the base and his father deployed. He was accustomed to taking care of himself. The night was quiet, except for the drone of a nearby freeway and gunfire from nearby military training exercises. Elijah was used to it, but the blasts disturbed Donky. Elijah scratched the scruffy mutt behind his ears.

"You're in charge while I'm gone," he said.

Elijah booked a last-minute flight. He prepared his own hamburger dinner and shared it with Donky. The boy and his dog slept in bunk beds, Elijah on top and Donky on the bottom. Elijah said the Lord's Prayer that night. When he got to the lead-us-not-into-temptation part, he felt a prickle of apprehension.

*God will protect me*, he thought, as he drifted off.

Early the next morning, Elijah packed a few things. He wore a variation of the same outfit every day, and he was in black cargo pants and black t-shirt mode. He put on his warmest trench coat. Everything else he needed fit into a cross-body bag. His phone dinged.

A text from his mom, Mari: *Safe travels, dear. I have some time off after the holiday and we'll celebrate then. A Christmas present for you in our hiding place.*

Elijah replied: *Love you*

Mari: *Love you!*

Elijah discovered a small wrapped box in a secret cupboard and the gift went into his inside coat pocket. It was still dark when he left the familiar behind, and set out on his quest into the unknown.



Elijah enjoyed flying above the clouds and closer to the rest of the universe. He settled back in his window seat and dozed until the city of New Orleans came into view, nestled along the banks of the Mississippi River.

“The Big Easy,” said Elijah.

Uncle Baz was waiting for him at Louis Armstrong airport. The astronomer was impossible to miss among the throng of festive people arriving for the holidays. Tall and handsome, Baz wore a heavy goatee beard. His gold-trimmed yellow robe stood out against his black skin. He greeted Elijah with a mile-wide smile that reached his large, kind eyes.

“Bonjour!” exclaimed Baz, clapping Elijah on the shoulders. “You’re at least a foot taller since I last saw you. You have grown into a fine young man.”

Elijah beamed. Baz steered him toward the airport’s Café du Monde for beignets. They sat at a bistro table listening to the strains of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” wafting from a gift shop. Elijah bit into the deep-fried pastry and dusted himself with powdered sugar.

“We can stay in my bayou cabin if you like,” said Baz. “We still might not see much of the meteor shower if the skies aren’t clear. I have one free night before attending to some urgent business in the city. It will be an adventure.”

“I’m up for it,” said Elijah, taking a sip of chicory coffee.

In Baz’s Land Rover, they drove from New Orleans to the peaceful backcountry, with late afternoon sunshine dancing through moss-hung Cypress trees, palmettos and live oaks.

Baz was a rich man. He kept a Cajun log cabin with a corrugated steel roof, attached to a short dock reaching over the slow-moving waters of the Louisiana swamp. Two rocking chairs invited them to relax on the front porch. A water tank stood in a clearing between the cabin and the surrounding wild landscape. Elijah regarded a wooden outhouse marked with a moon carved into its door.

“Wanting more is like chasing the wind,” said Baz.

“This is fun,” laughed Elijah.

“I brought us supper.” Baz unpacked a jambalaya of spicy Andouille sausage. “Dessert too.” He held up a bag of marshmallows. “The gators love these.”

Elijah kept watch on the swamp for any sign of reptilian eyes.

“Not many out in the winter,” said Baz.

They wrapped in soft wool blankets against the chill. Baz played an old steel guitar and the twang of Delta blues floated through the trees. Elijah tossed a marshmallow as far into the swamp as he could and an enormous alligator sprang out of the water to snap up the treat.

“Whoa,” said Elijah, falling back in surprise at the sight of the gator’s barbed fangs. “I thought the savages were hibernating.”

“Being aware of your surroundings will serve you well on your solo expedition,” said Baz. “You will always face danger. Trust your intuition and watch the company you keep.”

Elijah put the marshmallows away. “That scared me,” he said.

“Fear is your ally.”

“I’ll remember that.”

The night grew dense under a faint waning crescent moon. Baz brought out a telescope.

“You know that the Ursids Meteor Shower is in the constellation Ursa Minor?” asked Baz.

“Created by dust from the Comet Tuttle,” replied Elijah.

“Yes. I’m impressed by your interest in astronomy. I wonder where your exploration will lead you. Look to the north.”

“I see Polaris.”

In the early morning hours, a green fireball illuminated the darkness. The meteor radiated from the Little Dipper star Kolchab.

“It’s a sign,” said Baz.

Baz disappeared into the cabin, and returned with a jeweled chalice. He reached into the goblet and wet a finger with myrrh oil. He touched it to Elijah’s forehead.

“Venture forth in search of hope and purpose,” said Baz.

Another Ursid outburst passed through the Earth’s atmosphere, scorching the sky with a purple streak of light and producing a sonic boom. Elijah made a decision.

“I will head north,” he said.

“Traveling revives the soul,” said Baz. “I will send you to see a dear friend of mine in Chicago. A good man, Casper is a scholar.”



Elijah boarded a flight to the windy city, flying first class, thanks to Baz. He stretched out his long legs. An exotically beautiful woman in dark glasses sitting across the aisle nodded to him. Elijah smiled, pulled up his hoodie and closed his eyes. Tired after the night of stargazing, he slept.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have begun our descent into Chicago,” announced a flight attendant.

Elijah awoke. The woman across the aisle tapped him on the shoulder and held up a pack of playing cards with odd markings. She shuffled the deck and splayed the cards out like a fan.

“Pick a card, any card,” she said, accentuating every word.

Elijah hesitated, and then chose a card. The woman flipped the deck into her other hand and then back again.

“Keep it to yourself, and put it back face down,” she said.

“I know this trick.” Elijah returned the card.

The woman leaned forward and waved the deck behind her back.

“It’s not about the trick, it’s the card you choose.”

She fanned the cards out on her tray table. His card was flipped. The Queen of Spades.

“A warning,” said the woman.

At O’Hare Airport, a valet in a turban was holding up a sign that said: *E. Jacobs*.

“That’s me,” said Elijah.

“I will take you to Mr. Casper,” said the valet.

Speeding to the city in a Town Car, they took a scenic route through frozen landscapes, past icy Lake Michigan, and down a street lined with trees and twinkling lights. The car pulled up in front of a baroque greystone townhouse. Elijah walked up the granite staircase to an antique door and rang the bell. A tuxedoed butler answered.

“Mr. Casper is waiting for you in the library,” he said.

The butler led Elijah across gleaming hardwood floors under high ceilings with intricate crown molding. In a paneled room, books decorated the walls and a heavy desk overflowed with more books. Curio cabinets held artifacts from centuries past. An imposing figure, Casper rose from an armchair by the fireplace.

“Welcome,” he said. “Your visit gives me extraordinary pleasure. Make yourself at home.”

“Thanks for having me.” Elijah sank into a leather sofa, and warmed his hands over the hearth. “Great place you’ve got here.”

Casper wore a purple robe-like garment with a shawl pulled down off his head. His reddish beard glistened in the firelight. Intelligent green eyes spoke of grace. Smoke from burning incense snaked through the room and rose like the faithful to heaven.

“Smells good,” said Elijah. “What is it?”

“Frankincense, made of resin collected from the frankincense tree. It is a symbol of divinity. What is it that you seek on your whirlwind of a journey?”

“A new perspective, I guess.” Elijah shrugged. “I’d like to be a better person and live a more meaningful life. I’m not sure where I’m going.”

“Like the new moon, you have room to grow. I look at you and I see good prospects. You are on the right track.”

“I hope to be more charitable.” Elijah thought of Mitzi and felt a warmth on his face. “Like... a girl I know.”

“Ah, a lady to impress. Seeing the world gives you a broader view.”

“I’m not sure I’m good enough for her.”

“Love yourself first and foremost. Push beyond your comfort zone and conquer fear.”

“I will be mindful.”

“A new beginning. Now you must try our famous Chicago deep dish pizza.”

A chef came in to slice and serve pizza, with salad and sparkling citrus soda. Elijah followed Casper’s lead and ate the crispy-crust pie with a fork and knife, savoring thick layers of mozzarella and chunky tomato sauce.

“Wow, you have everything here,” said Elijah.

“Riches come in many forms.” Casper held out his arms. “I have been tested, and faced perilous times, as will you.” Elijah sat up straighter, head held high and filled with determination. Casper nodded his approval. “Expect evil, and endure it. She will slander and sow distrust.”

“She?”

“Malevolence comes in many guises.”

Elijah shifted uncomfortably. “There was a woman on the plane. A magician.”

“Magic is misdirection,” said Casper. “Resist, and evil will flee.”

“Where do I go from here? Who should I meet?” asked Elijah, confused by the scholar’s cryptic adages.

“I know a guy in the Big Apple,” replied Casper. “Upper west side.”

“New York City? I’ve never been there. That would be sweet.”

“Mel is a king of Persia. A Christmas spent with him will be enlightening. Shall I book you a flight?”

“Absolutely,” replied Elijah. “I accept your generous offer.”

“I have a gift for you, a memento of our visit.” Casper presented Elijah with a gold watch. “Decide what it is that you want. When the time is right, make it happen. Do not give up on yourself and, most importantly, enjoy the ride.”

That night, tucked under the covers of a four-poster bed in an elegant bedroom looking out over a back garden, doubt crept in. Elijah turned to the sliver of a moon peeking through the window and was reminded of the wonders of the world. He focused on having faith, and drifted off to join the girl of his dreams.



A weather delay at the airport led to hours spent on the tarmac in a stuffy plane. In flight, Elijah was overcome with airsickness, his stomach queasy, his skin clammy. Turbulence made him nauseous. He questioned his resolve.

*I can't handle all this traveling. I guess I'm not as tough as I thought. Why did I decide to go so far?*

There was nothing Elijah could do to change the situation in mid-air. Another hardship arose in the form of a diversion to Newark, New Jersey late on Christmas Eve. When the aircraft finally banked for a landing and bounced onto the runway, the novelty of first-class jet-setting had worn off.

“I am so over this,” said Elijah. “It’s like fate is working against me.”

Transportation to the city was suspended, and rescheduled for early in the morning. A shuttle took passengers to a nearby motel. In the freezing cold, the bleak, two-story building looked as exhausted as Elijah.

*Going back to California would be so much easier than continuing on, he thought. It's warm there at Christmas. I could be decorating a palm tree and hanging out with Donky and going to the beach.*



Elijah could see the New York City skyline from the balcony of the motel. He stood in front of the door to his room staring at the distant glow of the city, torn. A familiar voice made him jump.

“What you desire is readily obtainable, my little lamb.”

Elijah’s instincts told him that he was in danger, all alone in that strange place on Christmas Eve. He whirled around. The magician woman from the flight to Chicago stood in front of the room next door. Elijah’s heart pounded a warning. The woman wore a black cape and a top hat. She removed the hat and showed it to Elijah from all sides.

“The astronomer, the scholar, and the so-called king of Persia cannot give you what you wish for,” she said. “Only I can make you such a deal.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Haralda.”

Her eyes held darkness, but she smiled, white teeth gleaming in the night. She reached into the hat and pulled out a rabbit.

“I know that trick too,” said Elijah, struggling to keep his voice from rising with fear. “False bottom.”

“You have pride,” said Haralda.

“How did you find me?”

“Magic.”

Haralda put the rabbit back in the hat and pulled out a single red poppy. She moved closer to Elijah, waving the flower like a wand. She put the poppy in his hand.

“Don’t you want to live an easy life?” she asked. “Look up and see the conjunction of the Moon and Venus. Venus signifies desires and comforts. Bow to me, and I will give you pleasures.”

“No,” Elijah replied, although the feeling of temptation was overwhelming.

“Yes,” Haralda cooed.

Suddenly tired beyond reason, Elijah turned to open the door to his room. He felt himself submitting to the magician's enchantment.

Haralda winked. "Think about it," she said.

Elijah stumbled into the room and shut the door tight. He locked himself in and secured the chain. He leaned against the door to keep Haralda out. He closed his eyes and prayed for strength. His phone dinged.

A text from Mitzi: *I came home early. Some of us are going to the Oceanside pier. Meet me there?*

Elijah let out a small, anguished cry. He had never been invited to do anything with the cool kids before. He stared at the phone, riddled with indecision. He did not reply. He dropped the poppy, fell onto the bed, and slept a deep, dreamless sleep.

Elijah awoke too late. He had missed the shuttle to the city. He ran to Haralda's room and pounded on the door. It swung open. The room was empty. For a moment, he thought that he had imagined her. A cab pulled up in the parking lot below and the driver called out to him. "Taxi to Newark Liberty?"

Elijah thought about home. It was Christmas Day. Mitzi was probably celebrating with her family and friends. He remembered that he had never answered her text. Reaching into his pocket, he discovered that his phone was gone. In its place was a one-way plane ticket from Newark to San Diego. He approached the cab, wavering.

"You know what? No. I'm not going to the airport," said Elijah. "I'm moving forward. Could you take me to the city instead?"

"At a price," said the driver.

Elijah took out his wallet. All of his money was gone. After a moment of panic, he took a deep breath and summoned his determination.

"I can't go back yet," he said. "Somehow I just know that I can't."

He looked at his watch, the gold timepiece that Casper had given him. He heard Casper's words in his head.

*When the time is right, make it happen.*

He took off the watch and held it up. The driver's eyes widened.

“Will this cover it?”

“Get in,” said the driver.



Snow blanketed the city in white, and the sun was shining. Store windows trimmed in garlands held miniature holiday scenes. Towering buildings enclosed the world, offering brief glimpses of sky.

“Here we are,” said the driver. “This is the heart of the city.”

Elijah passed the driver his watch. “I think you were meant to have this,” he said.

The driver accepted the payment and bid him farewell.

Out of the cab, Elijah was overwhelmed by the number of people, and all of the lights, bright even in the daytime. He looked up and the world seemed to swell around him and swallow him up.

“How will I ever find the king of Persia in this concrete jungle?” he asked. “I’m lost.”

Fast-walking people pushed past him. No one paid him any mind. He wandered, in a daze. Times Square was humming. Horns honked. A cacophony of sounds enveloped him. His breath came out in jagged clouds.

“Get it together,” he said to himself.

He stomped his feet to warm them up and shoved his frozen hands in his pockets. He started walking. After several long blocks, a cab pulled up beside him. His cab. The driver leaned out.

“I couldn’t just leave you here,” he said. “You have helped my family by giving me more than I earned. I will drive you around until we find who you seek.”

Elijah looked at the man. Honest eyes peered out from under a decorated head scarf.

“It’s weird how life plays out when you go with a purpose, the things you do and the people you meet,” said Elijah, getting back in the cab.

He breathed a sigh of relief and let the city wash over him, just being in the moment. He began to see the beauty of the metropolis. An aura of history appeared on every block and a story around every corner. Buildings of brick and stone, mansions, full-block apartments, pubs and pizzerias slid by. The sweet scent of roasting chestnuts triggered his memory.

“The king of Persia lives on the upper west side,” he said.

The cabbie drove up Central Park West to 77<sup>th</sup> street, into Central Park and back again, and up Columbus Avenue to 88<sup>th</sup> street. An old man in a shimmering orange robe stood on the corner, his fur collar pulled up against the cold, his green cape fluttering in the wind.

“That’s got to be him,” said Elijah. “Mel!”

The man heard him and waved. The cab driver pulled over. Elijah jumped out.

“Blessings to you on your holiday,” said the driver.

Mel was regal, with white hair and a long beard. He wore a hollow crown and held a gold box. He put the box under one arm to take both of Elijah’s hands. The boy felt a surge of joy at Mel’s touch.

“You found me,” said Elijah.

“God gives us obstacles to overcome on the path to spiritual growth. You persevered. How do you feel?”

“For the first time in my life, I feel like I am truly living.”

“Let us break bread together,” said Mel.

The doors of the Italian restaurant in front of them opened for the king of Persia. Over fettuccine primavera and eggplant parmesan Elijah told Mel about his self-discovery mission.

“You must call your mother,” said Mel, handing Elijah his mobile phone.

“I’ll try. She’s working today.”

Elijah's mom answered on the first ring.

"I've been worried about you," she said.

Elijah choked up at the sound of his mother's voice, so far away. "I lost my phone, but I'm fine," he assured her. "I'll see you soon. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, son."

Outside, light snow began to fall. Elijah and Mel shared dessert and coffee. The table was cleared and all that remained was the gold box.

"I have to ask," said Elijah. "What is in the box?"

"Nothing," Mel replied.

"Why do you carry it?"

"It is the box itself that I honor."

Elijah nodded, pretending to understand. "Are you going to give me some words of wisdom, like Baz and Casper? I'm still not sure about my destiny." He leaned forward, anxious to hear what a king of Persia had to say.

"No," replied Mel.

"But I came all this way to find my purpose," said Elijah.

"Some lessons must be learned through the trials of life." Mel leaned back and smiled. "I am merely enjoying your company," he said. "You have made an old man happy on this blessed day."

"You are a king, though."

"Even kings are ordinary people," said Mel.

"You don't live in a castle?"

"I'm afraid not. I have registered you at a hotel. Stay for as long as you like, and then I'll see that you get back to California when you're ready."

"Thank you," said Elijah.

The Excelsior Hotel was closed and being renovated into apartments, but the door was unlocked. A stunning red-haired girl greeted Elijah at the front desk.

“You must be E. Jacobs,” she said, handing him a room key.

Elijah wondered how she knew. The girl smelled like apple perfume and the scent had an intoxicating effect on him.

“I’m E. Jacobs,” he stammered. “Elijah.”

“I’m Eva,” said the girl. “I like your mohawk. Do you want to take me out while you’re here?” She had a desirable innocence about her. “The Met Museum is free. We could walk through the park.”

Elijah felt himself being tempted again. His eyes searched the lobby for any possible distraction. A Christmas tree decorated in white lights and blue ornaments brought him to his senses.

“I’ll be going home tomorrow,” he managed to say.

A nearby elevator opened with a whoosh. Elijah walked toward it. The apple perfume followed. Elijah stumbled into the lift.

“Goodnight,” he said.

Elijah’s hotel room looked out over the Museum of Natural History, with the Manhattan skyline as a backdrop. His jet lag caught up with him and he went straight to bed, thinking of Mitzi back home. He tossed and turned, and then decided to go outside in the middle of the night. Soft snow was falling. When Haralda the lady magician appeared, he was not surprised, almost like he was expecting her. It took a monumental effort, but he looked her in the eyes.

“I am not afraid of you, false prophet,” said Elijah.

He felt a rush of empowerment and a weight off his shoulders. Haralda pulled out a magician’s wand and waved it in the air.

“Check your pocket,” she said. “And know that God allows me to tempt you.”

Elijah reached into his jacket and his hand touched his cell phone. It felt frozen. He checked the home screen and saw one notification.

A text from Mitzi: *I believe in you.*

When he looked up, Haralda was gone. High in the sky, between buildings, impossibly blazing in spite of the city lights, Elijah saw one glorious star. A new star in the heavens, burning bright. He remembered the counsel of his three wise mentors. Each encounter had unveiled new lessons. The astronomer Baz taught him that there was magic in the skies if you dared to look for it. Casper the scholar encouraged him to live in the present, and appreciate the journey itself. He had dined with Mel, a king of Persia. His Christmas message was that riches are found in the heart.

“I think I understand now,” said Elijah, looking up at the constant star, surrounded by a celestial glow. “If I had given up, I wouldn’t have found out what I can do in the face of adversity. I can be anything I want to be. I can do whatever I put my mind to. I came up with a plan, and if I didn’t see it through, I wouldn’t have known this city where dreams are made of.”

A church bell rang. Joyful, Elijah turned to God and said a prayer of thanks for a new outlook on life, and for his family. Tucked in the inside pocket of his trench coat, he found the gift his mother had left for him.

“I forgot all about this,” he said, ripping it open.

The box held a simple gold band that fit perfectly on his forefinger. The inside of the ring was engraved with the words: *REACH FOR THE STARS*



A new year began with hope. Back on the cliff above the Pacific Ocean, Elijah celebrated the end of his star-following journey with Mitzi by his side. The setting sun cast long wavelengths of light through clouds threatening to block the emergence of the Moon and Saturn. He took Mitzi’s hand in his, and gazed out at the vast expanse of water and sky coming together on the horizon.

“Happy Three Kings’ Day,” said Elijah.

“The Epiphany,” said Mitzi. “I missed you at Christmas, but I’m glad you pursued your dreams.”

The pretty girl made Elijah nervous, but he recalled something Baz once told him. *Give the gift of your true self, something no one else can bestow.* He committed to do just that.

“Did you make any New Year’s resolutions?” asked Elijah.

“One or two,” replied Mitzi. “You inspired me to look beyond what I know.”

“That’s one resolution.”

“I’m doing another right now.”

“Taking time to contemplate the cosmos?”

“No.”

“Spending more time with me?” Elijah dared to ask.

“You’re getting warmer.” Mitzi’s blue eyes sparkled. “I am listening to my heart.”

A salty onshore breeze brushed their faces. They sat in comfortable silence, searching the marine layer.

“It’s getting dark,” said Mitzi.

Elijah squeezed her hand. “That’s when the stars come out.”

The clouds parted, and the Moon and Saturn appeared, for one brief moment, and then went back into hiding.

“They look good together,” said Elijah.

At peace, Elijah thought back on the series of heavenly moments he experienced; watching meteors in New Orleans, seeing the optimistic new moon through the window in Chicago and, most miraculous of all, witnessing one single Christmas star blazing among the lights of New York City. He marveled at the roundabout way God had shown him that home was where he needed to be.