



I wriggled closer to Ammon, my young master. His blanket was small and threadbare, but it was big enough for me to find a place to snuggle against him as he sat inside the Gate of Benjamin. His ever-present crutch lay on his other side, within easy reach. I was thankful that my boy could love me even though I was a cripple, too. I tucked my bad leg under me and sighed.

There was a stir at the gate. Three richly dressed men on camels came through. Their servants were few, and they didn't have the burdens one would expect for a trader or merchant. I wondered who they could be.

On command, the camels knelt, allowing the three magi to dismount. They stretched as if they had been on a long journey and looked around. One of them spoke with the gateman, who pointed towards the palace. "Herod's palace is on the west side, beyond the temple," he directed.

The tall man stood stiffly by the camels, but the third, a dark-skinned man, walked over to where I sat with my young master. He eyed the boy with his crutch and looked back at me. I sat straighter and lifted my deformed paw. He raised an eyebrow. "A crippled beggar with a crippled dog?"

"Your highness, yes. He sort of attached himself to me. Nobody wanted him, just like nobody wants me with my deformed leg. I call him Shachia."

"Shachia: Protection of the Lord. Interesting name. Is he your protection?"

"He earns his keep," the boy stammered. "He watches over me, and...and... he's my friend."

"Friends are important," the man said. "My name is Balthazar. My friend over there is Gaspar: he's from India and still struggles with your language. Melchior is the older one; He is from Persia. We are astrologers who come from the east. Have you seen the new star?"

Ammon nodded. "A new star means a king is born."

"Yes, we are looking for him. He must be destined to be a great leader from what the stars indicate. But though we have followed it this far, now we don't see the star anymore and don't know where the new king might be found."

"So, you've come to ask King Herod." It was a statement, not a question.

Balthazar smiled. "You are a wise child."

The other magi were ready to go and called to Balthazar. He frowned and reached into his bag, pulling out a handful of coins. "Here. This will get you some food. And see if you can find some fresh clothes. Perhaps we can see you again before we leave."

My boy sat there stunned. "Look at all this money!" he whispered. "Shachia, we can get a real meal – enough for both of us! For the entire month!" He reached over and gave me a hug.

The next day, my boy went to the market and bought fresh clothes and a simple collar for me. He tied me up with an apology. "I need to go to the temple to thank Adonai, but they won't allow dogs there. You'll have to wait here for me." I wagged my tail and lay down to wait. Ammon often spoke of his powerful God; it was important to thank him.

A few days later, we returned to our spot by the gate. We had enough money left for many more days, but Ammon wanted to be sure to thank the great man for his generosity and show that he had used the money as directed.

Balthazar was alone when he found us. Ammon pulled himself upright excitedly. "Your highness, kind sir, Thank you for your generosity. I have done as you asked. But I have a favor to beg of you."

Balthazar raised an eyebrow. "And what would that be?"

Ammon took a deep breath. "Take me with you. The scrolls say the new king is the Messiah, born in the city of Bethlehem. I would come with you so I can worship him, too."

Balthazar smiled. "Blessed are you, Ammon. I believe we can find a place for a small boy like you."

"And my dog, kind sir? Can Shachia come too? I wouldn't want to leave him behind."

"The dog, too. He will be a welcome friend and protector on the remainder of our journey."

The journey to Bethlehem, the City of David, took several days, but we finally found where the newborn Messiah lay. The baby's mother, Mary, gave Ammon permission to come closer. I stayed close as he hobbled to the baby.

"He is so...perfect!" Ammon exclaimed. He reached a hesitant hand towards the baby but quickly drew it back again. "I'm sorry," He apologized.

A strong hand grasped his shoulder. "Have no fear, boy." Ammon looked quickly at Joseph, who smiled gently. "This is our Lord reaching out to us. He doesn't want you to be afraid to draw close to him."

Ammon stared at Joseph in disbelief. Joseph nodded again. "Go ahead. Touch him. He has been born for every one of us," he said.

Ammon reached carefully to the baby again. I placed my nose against the bedding and whined, partly in fear, partly in joy.

The warm glow that surrounded the baby grew brighter as Ammon knelt. I lay beside them, letting the new warmth soak through me. "My Lord," Ammon whispered. "I shall be honored to serve you, forever." I wagged my tail in agreement, and I'm sure the little one looked at me and smiled at both my boy and me. As Ammon stepped away again, I sighed, but our hearts continued to sing praise to the God who had brought us here.

May the Love and Joy of Christ be your gift this Christmas and always.