

## PROLOGUE

THE CITY OF Jerusalem was bustling as always in the days leading up to the Passover celebration. It was the third year of the glorious reign of the Emperor Nero, but apart from the prayers and sacrifices that were offered every day on his behalf at the holy temple, the rule of Rome seemed far away. Jerusalem was a city apart, the dwelling place of the one true God who ruled over all the nations. Why should its citizens be concerned about the power of Rome? The closest Roman officials were three days away at the port city of Caesarea on the northern coast of Israel, and they mostly left the running of Jerusalem to the priests. They did maintain a small garrison in the Antonia fortress to keep watch on the crowds around the temple, but the soldiers mostly kept to themselves unless trouble was brewing. They didn't like the Jews any more than the Jews liked them.

Unfortunately, trouble was always brewing in Jerusalem during the Passover season. The masses who thronged the city for the festival could hardly avoid thinking about Rome when they heard the age-old story of how their God had humbled another seemingly invincible nation, the Egyptians, who thought that they could oppress the people of Israel without consequences. Every few years some wandering preacher would come to Jerusalem announcing that God stood ready to support his people if they would only rise up and purge the evil from their land. These preachers knew better than to name the Romans explicitly, but everyone knew what they meant. Crowds would gather around them and cheer their message, but few were willing to act on what they heard. And with good reason—the Romans inevitably made short work of prophets who gained a popular following.

No one was more anxious during the Passover season than the priests and officials who managed the temple, since they were the ones whom the Romans would call to account if the peace was broken. They had hoped that the current procurator, Marcus Antonius Felix, might become more sympathetic to Jewish interests following his recent marriage to Drusilla, the daughter of the last Jewish king, Agrippa, but nothing that they had heard so far gave any substance to their hopes. According to their spies in Caesarea, he was still the same ruthless official who had brutally suppressed every Jewish preacher or bandit chief whom he perceived as a threat to Roman rule.

If the procurator had gained any wisdom from his Jewish wife, he would stay home in Caesarea until the festival was over. But the Romans were rarely wise when it came to managing Jewish affairs, and everyone knew that Felix would arrive soon at the head of a troop of reinforcements for the Jerusalem garrison, where they would be placed on high alert. That was the Roman way—intimidate the crowds with a show of force in order to forestall any disturbances before they began. And it generally worked: no one wanted to see Roman soldiers hacking into the crowds with those well-honed swords. Enough Jewish blood had been spilled in the past to make people respect what the Romans could do to them. Until their God arose to redeem them, they had no choice but to submit.

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The light in the alleyways of Jerusalem was fading as two men threaded their way through the bevy of carts ferrying goods from the day's market and entered a nondescript house that opened onto a narrow side-street. They were shown into a room where perhaps a dozen men were sitting in a circle engaged in lively conversation.

"It's about time you got here, Joseph," said one of the men as the two newcomers entered the circle and sat down. "We were beginning to wonder if you were coming."

"I apologize for my tardiness, brothers," said Joseph, sweeping the circle with his eyes. "A couple of customers came into my shop just when I was ready to close, and I had to run home after they left and pick up my cousin here to join me." He waved his hand toward the young man who sat next to him.

"He doesn't belong here," said a gruff voice from the end of the room. "How do we know that we can trust him? We're too far into this to be bringing in new people."

Several heads nodded in agreement.

"I understand your concern," replied Joseph. "But there's no reason to worry about him. His name is Judah, and he's from Galilee, where his family has led the effort to purify the land since the time of the first Herod—cursed be his name. Several of his relatives were slaughtered by the Romans in the uprising that followed Herod's death. He's also the nephew of those brave Galilean brothers Jacob and Simeon who were crucified a decade ago by that turncoat Jew Tiberius Alexander. He's in Jerusalem ostensibly to attend the festival, but in reality to learn the truth about what's going on between that dog Felix and his lackey, Jonathan the high priest. The news that they've been getting in Galilee is rather garbled, and he and his friends want to learn for themselves where things stand in the holy city and what patriots like us plan to do about it. Don't let his youth fool you; he's one of us, heart and soul."

When he was done speaking, all eyes turned to a hefty middle-aged man with a grizzled beard whom they all held in high esteem. "What do you say, Yohanan?" asked the man who had objected to the visitor's presence.

"Let him stay," replied Yohanan. "He has no reason to betray us, and it could be useful for us to have someone whom we could trust to forge ties with like-minded people in Galilee."

"Amen, amen," sounded a chorus of voices, and the matter was settled.

"Now that everyone is here," announced Yohanan, "we can begin. As you know, things have not gone well recently for those of us whose zeal for God has led us to follow the path of the Maccabees and take up arms to drive the pagans and their associates from our land. Since he arrived here four years ago, that bastard of a procurator has captured and executed many patriots who by their acts had sought to stir the populace up against the Romans. And we all know what happened to our brother Eleazar, who is now on his way to Rome in chains after Felix reneged on his promise to grant him safe passage if Eleazar would come to Jerusalem and meet with him. I tried to warn him that the Romans couldn't be trusted, but he wouldn't listen. Now I'm sure he wishes he had."

Yohanan stifled a smile, and several of the men around the circle nodded.

"Brothers," he went on, "the time has come for us to acknowledge that we've reached a dead end. We're never going to drive the Romans out of our land by attacking them openly. It's not that they're better fighters than we are; as you know, our brothers have made them pay dearly when they've engaged them in open combat. But right now there are more of them than there are of us, and they're better armed. They also have the support of the leading priests, who are corrupt to the core. In my view, these priests are even worse than the Romans because they've sold out their own people so that they can hold onto their ill-gotten riches and power."

"Amen, amen," rang a dozen lusty voices.

"The time has come," declared Yohanan, rising to his feet, "for a new approach. Confronting the Romans directly is gaining us nothing except early graves. We need to shift our attention to those who make it possible for them to maintain their hold over us—those who serve them for personal gain. We need to begin targeting wealthy Jews who are making money by selling goods to the Romans and collecting taxes for them from the produce of God's land! We need to strike those in the Council who call in godless armies against their own people in a vain attempt to maintain their positions! We need to bring down corrupt priests who betray their own people and pollute God's temple with their evil conduct! We need to show our people that the prophets of old did not speak in vain when they declared that God stands with the poor and oppressed and against the rich and powerful who abuse his people!"

Yohanan's voice had risen to a fever pitch by the time he reached the climax of his speech. His final words were greeted with a hearty round of applause and more shouts of "Amen!" He stared fiercely around the room for several moments before waving his hands and calling for quiet.

"Worst of all is that craven high priest, Jonathan," he went on. "He's the one who asked Caesar to send Marcus Antonius Felix"—he spat out the man's name as if the very words polluted his lips—"to replace Ventidius Cumanus as procurator after he was sent to Rome to answer for that episode with the Samaritans. Cumanus was bad enough, but Felix has been ruthless in his efforts to crush anyone who resists him. Any high priest who could unleash such evils upon his own people deserves to die."

The room grew suddenly silent. Finally a man spoke up.

"Are you suggesting that we kill the high priest?" he asked, his voice tinged with disbelief.

“That’s precisely what I’m saying,” answered Yohanan. “We have to begin somewhere, and his death would send a clear message to others who are working against our people and keeping the Romans in power. If they don’t heed the message, we’ll strike more of them. We need to show them that there is a price for their collaboration.”

“But won’t the death of the high priest call down the wrath of Rome against us before we can put the rest of your plan into action?” asked another man. “I’m as willing as the next man to give my life for my people and my God, but I don’t want to be taken down before I have a chance to strike a blow.”

“There’s no love lost between Jonathan and Felix,” explained Yohanan. “Jonathan might have brought him here, but he’s gone back and forth between supporting and criticizing the procurator in an effort to appease both sides. I don’t think Felix will be sorry to get rid of him. I’ve even heard that he was looking for someone to do the deed for him, though I doubt that he would go that far.”

“I like your idea,” announced another man. “But when and how do you propose to do it?”

“During the festival,” explained Yohanan. “The streets will be so crowded that it would be easy for one of us to slip in close to him with a dagger under his cloak and deal him a fatal blow before anyone knows what has happened. The executioner can slip away into the crowd in the ensuing uproar. The chances of getting caught are slim.”

“And if that doesn’t get their attention, you’re saying that we should do the same to others?” asked a man who had been less enthusiastic than the others in his response to Yohanan’s words.

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying,” answered Yohanan. “Soon all of them will be cowering in fear and asking what they need to do to make the killing stop. They’ll be ready to listen to us then.”

“And if they don’t?” asked another man.

“We’ll expand our operations beyond Jerusalem,” said Yohanan. “That’s where our young guest from Galilee could prove useful. He and his friends could initiate similar actions there, and others could do the same elsewhere. Soon the entire populace would be in revolt against its rulers. The sheep would become the wolves and the wolves the sheep. Even the mighty armies of Rome can’t wipe out an entire people. They would have to leave.”

“Amen!” shouted one man. “May God make it so!” cried another. The room rang with cries of assent. Yohanan allowed the cries to resound for several moments before calling for silence.

“I’m happy to see that so many of us are in agreement,” declared Yohanan. “But this is a serious matter, and we should not enter into it lightly. Let’s meet here again two days from now and discuss it further. Those who are willing to take part in the plan should come prepared to say so. Those who are not will swear an oath that they will not reveal our plans to anyone on pain of death. The lives of many good men are at stake. Are we agreed?”

Everyone signaled their assent.

“Before we go,” said Yohanan, “I have one more thing to say. This is a perilous course on which we are embarking, and its outcome is by no means certain. If we fail, it could—no, it undoubtedly will—cost us our lives. But if God grants us success, as I believe he will, we will unleash a holy conflagration that will not cease until it has cleansed every impurity from our land and made the city of Jerusalem once more a holy dwelling place for our God.”

Yohanan bowed his head and raised his arms in a call to prayer.

“Let God arise,” he announced in a mighty voice, “and his enemies be scattered.”

“Let those who hate him flee before him,” recited the other men in unison.

“As wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish before God,” intoned Yohanan.

“But let the righteous be glad; let them exult before God,” echoed the others.

“Yes, let them rejoice with gladness!” shouted everyone in unison.

“May God bless our endeavors,” declared Yohanan, lowering his hands.

“Amen, amen,” agreed the others.

The men lingered and talked for a while longer before slipping away one after the other into the darkness.

“And so it begins,” said Yohanan to Joseph, who with his young cousin was the last to leave.

“And so it begins,” repeated Joseph in a somber tone. “May God have mercy on us all.”

# BOOK I:

A NEW WORLD



## CHAPTER 1

“AND THAT’S how we came to be on this accursed ship heading for Caesarea,” concluded Marcus Coelius Felix. His voice was husky from the strain of speaking over a steady wind. “By Jupiter, I’d give anything right now to be on dry ground. My stomach is churning, and nothing that anyone has suggested will calm it. Will this infernal rocking never cease?”

He tightened his grip on the nearby railing, lowered his head, and closed his eyes in an effort to quell the rising nausea. He did not want to vomit in front of his new acquaintance.

“Swearing by a false god isn’t going to make it better,” chided his companion, a middle-aged man named Annas. “Remember, you’re a Jew now, and we Jews have nothing to do with Jupiter and his ilk. We honor and serve the one true god, the God of Israel, the Creator and Lord of the universe.”

The man’s patronizing tone annoyed Marcus. Why did he have to make such a fuss over an innocuous turn of phrase? Why couldn’t he let it pass? He had told Marcus that he was from a priestly family in Jerusalem; perhaps that was what compelled him to defend his god. Marcus wished that he would shut up and leave him alone.

“I’m telling you this for your own good,” Annas went on, oblivious to Marcus’s annoyance. “I’m sure you didn’t mean anything by it—you’ve spent your entire life among gentiles, and that is how gentiles speak. But you left that world behind you when you got onto this boat. You have to be more careful about what you say if you’re going to be living in Israel. Not all Jews are as tolerant as I am.”

Marcus did not look up. Annas stared at the sea as if he were done talking.

“We’re making good time today,” he said a while later. “I’ve made this trip several times when I’ve visited my brother in Attalia, and I can assure you that this is good sailing weather for this time of year.”

Marcus glanced up at him doubtfully. His nausea was beginning to subside.

“You’ll get used to it by tomorrow,” added Annas, patting Marcus’s arm. “Three days from now you’ll be sorry the trip is over.” Annas winked.

“You want to bet on that?” Marcus muttered. “I wish I had never set foot on this ship!”

“There’s no use thinking about that now,” replied Annas. “Think instead about what you hope to accomplish with this trip. In a few days you’ll be on dry ground looking for your long-lost family. If you find them, you’ll view these few days of suffering in a different light. Trust me.”

“I hope you’re right,” answered Marcus, relaxing his grip on the railing. “At any rate, it’s a helpful reminder.”

Annas turned his attention back to the sea. Marcus followed his gaze. The day was bright and clear, with only a few wisps of cloud marring the azure dome overhead. The swelling waves were flecked with foam, but the sail was full and the curled prow was cutting a sharp path through the waters. A flock of sea birds hovered over the stern, keeping pace with the ship. Marcus chuckled at the sight—they reminded him of a pack of simpering clients trailing after their patron as he made his way to the local baths.

As he watched, one of the birds tucked its wings and plummeted toward the water. Marcus was puzzled until he saw the bird return with a small fish in its mouth. A couple of nearby birds tried to take the fish away and a noisy struggle ensued. This, too, reminded Marcus of the world that he was leaving behind, a world where people were constantly striving to gain what others possessed. His new wife Miriam, who had been born a Jew, had told him that people were not like that in Israel—that Jews thought of each other as family and looked after one another. Marcus was doubtful, but he would know soon enough.

His eyes continued to follow the birds, but his thoughts drifted to the road that lay ahead of him. He knew almost nothing about this new land where he was going and had only vague ideas about what he would do when he got there. But he did know where he would start: he would journey inland to the city of Sepphoris, where his grandmother had once lived, and ask if anyone there had information about his mother or anyone related to her. What he would do after that was a mystery.

Miriam had assured him that the God of his ancestors would show him the way, but a lifetime of experience as a slave had left him with little confidence in the beneficence of deities. Only last year his former master had been sure that the divine Asklepios would heal him if he made the arduous trek across Anatolia to visit the god's sanctuary at Pergamon, but that belief had proved to be unfounded. Miriam had told him repeatedly that the God of Israel was different from the gods of Greece and Rome—he could be trusted to look out for his people. But Marcus was not yet persuaded; he preferred to rely on his own ingenuity. It had served him well enough in the past, and he saw no reason to abandon it now. He would figure out what to do based on what he learned at Sepphoris.

"That's quite a story you were telling me earlier about your family," remarked Annas, drawing Marcus back to the present. "I can see why you would be eager to look for your mother after learning that she might have returned to her own mother's former home after she was forced to give you up. But I was also thinking about how our God might have used that deception for good, since it resulted in you having the resources to help your mother if you find her. You're a bit like Queen Esther—she lived among the gentiles and enjoyed their riches, but she was in the right place to save her people when God called on her."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," observed Marcus, who only vaguely recalled hearing about Queen Esther from Miriam. "But I can see your point."

Annas smiled at the acknowledgment. "I could tell from the quality of your clothing and speech that you were no ordinary pilgrim," he went on, "but I would not have guessed that you were a Roman citizen. I've known a few Jews in Jerusalem who could make that claim, but all of them had some connection with the family of the Herods, who have been citizens since the days of Caesar. My family is wealthy and influential, but we've never entertained any hopes of being granted citizenship because my grandfather and father did not get along well with the Herods. Even if we were citizens, I would be careful about publicizing the fact, especially up in Galilee where you're going."

"Why is that?" asked Marcus, puzzled. "Do people there dislike the Romans?" His only knowledge of events in Israel came from the stories that Miriam had told him about her people's distant past and a Jewish book that he had copied for Miriam's former master. He knew nothing about any anti-Roman sentiment, though he did know that Roman soldiers had been sent to Israel decades ago to put down a rebellion that broke out after Herod's death. He only knew about that event because his grandmother had been taken captive by a Roman soldier.

"Perhaps I spoke too quickly," suggested Annas. "We Jerusalemites have a regrettable tendency to look down on the people of Galilee. Galilee has had its troubles, but the Romans are unpopular everywhere these days. Since the death of king Agrippa a decade ago, our land has been ruled by Roman officials who know little and care less about our ways. Some of them have done things in ignorance that stirred up the populace and even caused riots, especially in Jerusalem. Their only concerns are to maintain the peace and keep the taxes flowing, and they can be brutal to anyone whom they see as a threat to those interests. They've rounded up and executed a number of troublemakers over the years, but more keep popping up. Some of them have gained enough followers to be dangerous, but most are little more than bandits who prey on rich and poor alike. When Roman soldiers are chasing after them, innocent people inevitably get hurt, and that stirs up even more bad will against the Romans. You'd think that they would know better by now. The entire land is like a cauldron of water hanging over a fire that needs only a little more heat to reach the boiling point. I fear that one day it might boil over into open revolt. God help us if it does."

"I had no idea," mused Marcus. "But why did you specifically mention Galilee? Are things worse there?"

"Galilee has been a hotbed of anti-Roman activity since my grandfather's time, if not before," explained Annas. "I don't mean that there has been open conflict or that everyone there hates the Romans, but Galilee has produced a number of rebels and bandits over the years who have gained a following among the people. There are also a lot of caves in the hills of Galilee where gangs of ruffians can hide out. I learned about this a few years ago from a friend of mine, a priest who lives in Sepphoris, but I don't recall the details. I'll give you his name and you can ask him about it when you visit his city. He would also be a good person to ask about your relatives—his family has lived in Galilee for generations, and his grandfather moved to Sepphoris soon after the city was rebuilt by Herod Antipas. If he doesn't know anything, he could probably tell you if there is anyone there who might remember your grandmother."

"I appreciate the kind offer," replied Marcus. "I've been wondering where to begin my inquiry since I don't know anyone in Sepphoris and can't even speak their language. Does your friend by any chance know Greek?"

“Yes, he does,” said Annas, “though not as well as I do. His parents sent him to Jerusalem when he was young to be educated in our traditions, and we shared the same Greek tutor. Many families in our social sphere want their children to learn Greek since it is the language used by Roman officials, foreign visitors, and merchants from other lands. But the number of native Greek-speakers in Jerusalem is small, so there is little need for most people to know more than a smattering of Greek. Aramaic is the language that you hear most often in the streets—you’ll need to learn it if you’re going to spend much time in Galilee. My friend hasn’t had much opportunity to speak Greek since he returned to Sepphoris, so you won’t find him fluent. But you’ll be able to communicate with him.”

“That’s a relief,” sighed Marcus. “So how did you come to speak Greek so well? I can hardly detect an accent.”

“My brother in Attalia is quite a bit older than I am,” explained Annas, “and my father sent me to stay with him and his wife for months at a time when I was young. He did it so that I could become fluent in Greek, something that he himself had never achieved. He always felt uncomfortable when he had to communicate in Greek, and he wanted to spare me that fate since I, as his only son, would one day represent his family to the outside world. I’m not unique, but you’ll find that Aramaic accents are common even among the wealthy citizens of Jerusalem. I can only imagine what it’s like in Galilee.”

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am for all of your help,” said Marcus, recognizing inwardly how he had misjudged the man. “Everything about this land where we’re going is new to me, and I know that I will make many mistakes. Remember, I wasn’t raised among Jews as you and Miriam were. But I wouldn’t want to say or do anything in my ignorance that would prejudice people against me or hinder my search. At a minimum, I’ll know now not to wear my brand-new toga out in public.” Marcus grinned, evoking a hearty laugh from Annas.

The two men lapsed again into silence, their eyes fixed on the sea. Marcus felt suddenly guilty at having withheld so much personal information from a man who had shown such genuine concern for his welfare. He had done what he and Miriam had agreed, giving Annas an edited version of their story that omitted key elements that they feared might cause people to think ill of them. Now he was having doubts about that strategy. Everything that he had told Annas was true: how he had met Miriam in Hierapolis while traveling home from Pergamon; how he had learned from an acquaintance about his mother’s Jewish ancestry; how he had been led by Miriam to embrace the faith of his ancestors; how the two of them had fallen in love and married; and how they were now on their way to Israel to look for Marcus’s long-lost relatives and to begin a new life in the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But he had not told him that they had been slaves during most of these events, nor that he had only reluctantly agreed to abandon the gods of Rome and be circumcised in order to be with Miriam. And he certainly had not let on that the infant who traveled with them was not their child or even a natural-born Jew, but the circumcised son of Marcus’s deceased master. That fact was to be shared with no one, not even the boy himself.

He now saw that they would have to edit their story even further to avoid offending potential helpers in Galilee. He could leave out the part about being a Roman citizen unless they encountered a situation where the information might prove useful, but he could not conceal the fact that they had spent their entire lives in Roman society. That would be evident from the way they spoke and dressed, not to mention how little they knew about the geography, history, and practices of their new homeland. They didn’t even know the language. They would learn to fit in over time, but that wouldn’t help them when they arrived in Sepphoris as strangers and began asking questions about Marcus’s family. What were they to do? It was a conundrum. Perhaps Miriam would have some ideas.

The thought of Miriam jolted him back to reality. “I need to go and check on my wife,” he said suddenly. “We’ve been talking for a long time, and she or the baby or our servant might be feeling seasick and need my help.”

Marcus rose unsteadily, then waited to see if his stomach had settled down enough for him to walk.

“Oh, the joys of young love,” teased Annas. “But hearing you speak of Miriam reminds me how much I miss my own wife. Her health is not what it used to be, and I hesitated about leaving her to visit my brother. But she insisted that I go since the letter that we received from his wife indicated that he was quite sick, and she feared that it might be the last time I saw him. But thanks be to God, his health improved while I was there, so I was able to return home with a good conscience. I was doubly fortunate to find this ship that could get me home in time for Passover. I pray daily that my wife will be better when I return. Perhaps she just needed a break from me.” He winked.

“I doubt that,” chuckled Marcus. “I’m sure that she will be happy to see you.”

“May it be so,” echoed Annas. “But this talk about going home has given me an idea. You and Miriam should come with me to Jerusalem for the festival before you head off to the hinterlands. It would be a fitting way to mark your return to the land of your forefathers after spending a lifetime in your own Egypt. You can stay with us—we have plenty of room and servants to care for your needs—and you can also eat the Passover meal with us. There’s no place like Jerusalem during a festival—it’s noisy and crowded, but it’s exhilarating to be surrounded by so many of our people celebrating our ancestors’ deliverance from Egypt by the mighty hand of God. You can go to Galilee after it’s over. Lots of pilgrims will be returning home at that time, and you could meet some new friends along the way.”

“I appreciate the invitation,” answered Marcus, “but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline. I don’t want to add to your wife’s burdens, and there are things that I need to do in Caesarea before we can travel anywhere. But perhaps we can join you in a future year if you tell me how and where I can find you. We would both like to see Jerusalem.”

“I’ll excuse you this time,” said Annas, his tone suddenly serious. “But you must know that God commands all Jewish men in the land of Israel to go up to the holy city for the three major festivals and present their offerings at his temple. Many of our brothers have grown lax about observing this and other commandments of God, and I don’t want to see you joining them in their error. This is why God has left us to be ruled by the ungodly—so many of his people continue to wallow in the mire of disobedience for which he punished our ancestors. The way to regain our freedom is to obey the laws of God, not to engage in hopeless battles against the Romans. Remember this when you go out to Galilee. There are many good people there who are devoted to the ways of God, but there are also many who trust in the arms of men rather than the arms of God. Keep away from them.”

Marcus felt taken aback. He had never heard a Jew speak so critically about other Jews, and the experience made him keenly aware of how little he understood about these people with whom he had thrown in his lot. He did not even know enough to judge whether he should agree or disagree with Annas.

“I will certainly remember what you have said,” he equivocated. “And I will make sure to come and visit you and your wife the first time that Miriam and I journey to Jerusalem.”

“I look forward to it,” replied Annas, his jovial expression returning. “Until then, may God make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you, and give you peace.”

“The same to you,” echoed Marcus, unsure how to respond. The two men clasped hands and smiled, then turned and walked unsteadily toward the places where their goods were stored at the opposite ends of the ship.

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Three days later the port of Caesarea appeared in the distance. Marcus and Miriam had visited the railing several times in the last few hours in hopes of catching a glimpse of the city where they would finally step onto the soil of Israel, and their excitement only increased when Annas at last pointed it out to them. They had thought that they were approaching their destination earlier when one of the sailors announced that he had sighted land, but their hopes had proved to be misguided as the sails were trimmed to sail leisurely along the coast. Miriam was eager to set foot on the ground where the God of Israel had appeared to their ancestors in the stories that her mother had told her since childhood, while Marcus was ready to settle on any patch of dry land. He had already sworn to Miriam that he would never board a ship again if he could help it.

Annas had become like an old friend during the many hours that Marcus and Miriam had spent with him during the last three days. At Miriam’s urging, Marcus had finally confessed to Annas how he had glossed over their former status as slaves and his reasons for doing so. Annas had surprised them with his nonchalant reception of the news.

“I understand why you would be hesitant about trusting a stranger with that kind of information,” he had said, “but you need not be anxious. Thousands of our people have been taken captive by foreign armies over the years, but that doesn’t make them any less our brothers and sisters. How do you think so many Jews came to reside in the lands of the gentiles? Some, like my brother, moved there by choice, but many others are the descendants of people taken in war. Some have succeeded in regaining their freedom while others remain in bondage. You’re certainly not the first Jewish slaves who have returned to the land of your ancestors after achieving your liberty—I’m sure that you will

meet others like yourselves as you get to know your neighbors in Galilee or wherever you choose to settle. You'll also meet people who will look down on you, but that happens in every society."

Marcus felt as if a heavy weight had fallen from his shoulders. He started to thank him, but Annas was not done.

"On the whole," he went on, "I think you will find that our people have a soft spot in their hearts for Jews like you who have used their freedom to return to their homeland rather than remaining among the gentiles. I don't think you need to worry about hiding the fact that you were slaves—be truthful from the start and people will respect you for it. Your story might even elicit sympathy from those whom you approach about your relatives, especially when they see that you are both wealthy and educated. Those qualities carry weight in our land as they do everywhere, whereas family lineage is less important among us than it is for the gentiles. The only place where ancestry really matters is for priests like me, who have to be descended from a long line of priests in order to serve at God's altar. With your resources, you should not find it difficult to forge a new life among our people."

Now they were cruising along the coast of the land where Annas's assurances would be tested. Marcus wanted to believe him, but he could not help feeling nervous. For his entire life he had been either ignored or treated as less than human by his master's friends and family, and this image of himself was now deeply ingrained in his soul. He had also seen how these same people looked down on freedmen as ill-mannered boors and avoided their company whenever possible. Were people really that different in Israel?

Even more perplexing was Annas's assurance that his embrace of Judaism would cause people to think better of him. Most of the people whom he knew in Antioch, whether slave or free, held poor opinions of Jews and made jokes about them behind their backs, while some openly despised them as atheists and misanthropes because they shunned the rites of the gods. Few had anything good to say about them, and even fewer had any interest in doing business or interacting socially with them. His own master, who was more genial than most, had been upset when he learned that his new business partner was a Jew, though his feelings had mellowed with experience. To think that being a Jew could be an asset had never occurred to Marcus.

"If you look carefully," said Annas, pointing toward a gray smudge on the horizon, "you'll see two buildings protruding above the horizon that mark the location of the harbor. One is a lighthouse; the other is a temple that I'll tell you about later. That's where we're going. The harbor is a marvelous piece of engineering. Today it's one of the largest ports on the Great Sea, but it was only a tiny fishing town before Herod decided to make it his capital. Our land is deficient in natural harbors where ships can load and unload their cargoes and take refuge from storms, and Herod needed a good port to ferry people and supplies to Rome and other cities. He brought in a group of Roman engineers who designed an artificial basin big enough to hold scores of ships at one time, and he conscripted soldiers and slaves to execute their plan. It took more than a decade to build since it required the creation and sinking of massive concrete blocks into the sea and the construction of warehouses and other facilities for storing and shipping goods. But it was worth the trouble when you consider how much it has improved our opportunities for trade and travel. And it looks beautiful, too! You'll be amazed when you see it."

"The only harbor that I've seen, apart from the one at Attalia, was at Ephesus," remarked Marcus, eager to show off his knowledge. "It was a massive place. Is the harbor at Caesarea as big as that one?"

"I wouldn't know," replied Annas. "I've never been that far west. But I would suspect that ours is larger since it's the only port on our entire coast, whereas there are ports all over Anatolia, including the one at Ephesus."

"I guess I'll see when we get there," observed Marcus. "What else can you tell us about the city? I'm thinking that we might stay there for a while until we know more about what awaits us in Galilee. I can travel inland from there and leave Miriam and the baby in the city where it's safe."

Miriam jerked her head up suddenly and stared him in the face. "Oh no, you're not!" she exclaimed. "Wherever you go, I go. You never said anything about leaving me behind."

"I only thought of it during this trip," Marcus responded, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "We can talk about it later."

Miriam pushed his hand away. "We most certainly will," she replied, glaring icily at him for a moment before turning to face the horizon. Marcus continued staring at the approaching city.

“You were asking me about Caesarea,” remarked Annas in a clumsy attempt to distract them from their dispute. “Except for the harbor, it looks like any Greek or Roman city. The streets are arranged in a grid pattern and well-paved, and it has all of the structures that you would expect in a city: a bustling agora, a large theater, a stadium, an aqueduct, public fountains, and honorific statues. Unlike other cities, it also has a massive seaside palace where the Herods stay when they visit. But on the whole, it probably resembles the city where you grew up.”

“That’s good to know,” observed Marcus. “It will be comforting to have something around us that seems familiar as we’re finding our way in this new land.”

“I’m sure it will,” replied Annas. “But you might be surprised to learn that Caesarea also contains many statues and temples honoring the so-called gods of the gentiles. Even more troubling is the fact that it was Herod who paid for them. Herod was never known for being scrupulous about our traditions; some people claimed that he wasn’t a Jew at all because his father came from a line of converts and his mother was a Nabatean Arab, not a Jew. So was his first wife. Perhaps it was these foreign influences that made him lax about observing God’s commandments, but my grandfather, who knew him, insisted that it was his lust for power that drove his actions. Herod was always currying favor with the Romans, shifting his loyalties from one Roman leader to another as the political winds blew. It seems to have worked, since they eventually made him king. But never felt secure in his position, and his fears caused him to put many innocent people to death. My grandfather survived by contributing generously to his building projects and staying out of politics.”

“If your grandfather was that close to the king,” interjected Marcus, “your family must be pretty important in this country. I wouldn’t have guessed it from the way you’ve engaged with me and Miriam. You’ve been kinder than we had any right to expect.”

“Our God tells us to welcome and provide for aliens and strangers,” replied Annas, “and I’ve always tried to abide by that commandment. Not everyone is like me, but I like to think that our people are kinder and more welcoming than the gentiles. At least that’s been my experience.”

Marcus noticed that Annas had not replied to his comment about his family’s influence, but his opportunity to pursue the matter passed as Annas resumed his discourse about Herod.

“I can understand to some degree how a power-hungry man like Herod might be willing to compromise some of his principles in order to attain his ends,” he went on. “People do that all the time, and we Jews are not exempt from such pressures. But I’ve never been able to comprehend how he could justify paying for the construction of temples dedicated to the worship of false deities. That’s a clear violation of the second commandment that our Lord gave to Moses, where we read that we are to honor no god but him and make no images of divine beings. We take these prohibitions seriously in order to avoid the fate of our ancestors—their worship of other deities is what led God to send foreign armies to conquer and rule over them, according to the prophets.”

“Some of our people insist that this is why we remain under Roman rule today. The problem extends beyond the temples of Caesarea, which was a gentile city until Herod decided to build his harbor there. Herod also erected three temples for the worship of Rome (in the form of a goddess) and Augustus, whom they regard as divine. One is the building that I pointed out to you earlier that rises above the harbor. The second is located in the ancient city of Samaria, which Herod rebuilt and named after Augustus. The third is part of a gentile shrine on the northern edge of Galilee. All three have huge statues of these supposedly divine beings, and all three are served by priests who present sacrifices and offerings to them on public occasions. The presence of such abominable practices in the land that God gave to our ancestors is a perpetual mockery of the one true God.”

Annas spit on the deck in an expression of disgust.

“We had a temple like that in Antioch,” remarked Marcus during the momentary pause, “where everyone used to gather periodically for rites honoring the imperial family. I never knew if people really believed that they were divine or if it was just their way of expressing their loyalty to Rome. It wasn’t something that we talked about; we just went because it was expected. Mostly we went for the free food and for the drinking and games that followed the rituals.”

“Yes, I imagine that you did many such deeds in the days of your ignorance,” replied Annas in a tone that made Marcus feel uncomfortable. “Thanks be to God who delivered you from that darkness.” He glanced briefly toward the heavens before resuming his narrative.

“Getting back to those temples—as offensive as they are, there’s not much that we can do about them. Some of the rebels that I mentioned earlier have cited them as an excuse for rising up against the Romans. They point to the example of the Maccabees who took up arms rather than sacrifice to false gods and with God’s help freed our people from foreign rule. They tell people that God will do the same for us if we will only follow the path of our ancestors. But that is a sure path to destruction. Our only hope is to follow God’s laws as faithfully as we can until he arises to deliver us from the gentiles and purge this evil from our midst. He alone knows when that might be.”

Annas closed his eyes and raised his arms slightly as if in prayer. Marcus looked away, sensing that it would be wrong to interrupt such a holy moment. He and Miriam stood side by side gazing at the approaching city and the shifting waves. After a while the baby squirmed in Miriam’s arms and began to whimper.

“It’s time for him to eat,” announced Miriam, breaking the silence. “I’ll take him to Deborah.”

Miriam left to find the nursemaid, whom they had left sitting on the inner deck watching over their belongings. They had brought nothing with them except for a few chests of clothes and the money bag that Marcus wore on his waist at all times, but they needed everything that they had. Miriam had questioned the need for such precautions after learning that most of their fellow passengers were Jews traveling to Israel for the Passover festival, but Marcus was not persuaded. Why should Jews be more honest than other people? And what about the crew? Surely they knew how to lift items from their passengers’ belongings without getting caught.

“My wife used a wetnurse for our children also,” remarked Annas, recalling Marcus’s wandering mind to the present. “It makes things easier for the mother. It’s hard for her to manage a household when she’s tied down with nursing a baby all day.”

“That’s true,” replied Marcus without looking at his companion. He had almost said that Miriam faced no such dilemma since she had never been pregnant, but he had caught himself just in time. Keeping such a secret was going to be harder than he had thought.

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THE day was well spent by the time the ship rode into the harbor. Marcus and Miriam gazed with open mouths at the magnificence of the port facilities. The basin was only half the size of the one at Ephesus, if Marcus’s memory was correct, but the harbor was newer and more regular in appearance. Dozens of ships lined the three-sided stone quay. Workers scurried like ants around several of the boats as they loaded and unloaded the cargo, while others rocked listlessly on the rippling waves. A narrow roadway ran along the perimeter of the quay, flanked by an array of warehouses, shops, and offices that apparently served the needs of the port.

Towering above the western end of the harbor, just as Annas had described, was a massive Roman temple flanked on both sides by colonnaded wings that glowed a brilliant white in the late-day sun. A long staircase, as wide as the building, led to the elevated platform on which the buildings stood. The sanctuary resembled the one that Marcus had known in Antioch, but it was two or three times larger and even more grand.

Marcus was struck with awe. In earlier days he would have taken this feeling as evidence of a divine presence, but Miriam had taught him that such feelings could not be trusted. For a long moment he wondered if she might be wrong. Then he shook his head and looked away. He had made his choice, and there was no turning back.

The passengers huddled along the ship’s rail admiring the scene while the captain waited for instructions about where to dock. Suddenly Annas spoke up.

“I just realized that I never asked you if you had a place to stay in Caesarea,” he said, looking a bit sheepish. “You told me that you didn’t know anyone here, but it hadn’t occurred to me until just now that you might be lost after we leave the ship. If you have no plans, please come with me. I’m spending the night with a friend—a fellow Jew—who owns a large house and could easily put you up for the night at my recommendation. He’ll probably insist that you stay longer, but you can work that out with him. I’ll find a boy who can carry a message to him as soon as we dock. It won’t take long—he lives nearby, just north of the harbor.”

“That’s very kind of you,” said Marcus uneasily, but...” Miriam cut him off before he could finish.

“We would be happy to accept your generous offer,” she said, looking past Marcus as if he had become invisible. “Assuming that your friend approves, of course. I’d much rather stay in the home of a fellow Jew than in some dirty public inn, which is probably what my husband had in mind.”

Marcus’s face flushed with embarrassment as he realized that he had not considered whether Miriam might have an opinion about where to stay. He was still learning what it meant to be married to a forceful woman like Miriam.

“I have a letter of recommendation from one of my former master’s friends to a friend of his in Caesarea,” he explained, “but I wasn’t planning to call on him until we’ve had a chance to clean up. I had assumed that a port like Caesarea would have a decent inn where we could stay for the night, but I know better than to argue with my wife when she puts her foot down. We will accept your kind offer and figure out tomorrow what to do next.”

Marcus smiled down at Miriam, who replied by poking him in the side with her elbow. “Ouch!” he exclaimed, exaggerating the effect of the jab.

“He’s still young,” she grinned to Annas. “But he’ll learn eventually.”

“You sound like my wife,” laughed Annas. Marcus screwed up his face in a mock expression of annoyance. Then he, too, joined in the laughter.

The landing of the passengers proceeded smoothly for the most part, though a few were daunted by the narrow wooden gangway that spanned the gap between the ship and the quay. Deborah was one of those—Marcus had to take the baby from her arms before she would even attempt the crossing. Marcus, too, felt uneasy at the rocking of the boat as he stepped onto the plank, but he did his best to keep his composure. He did not want anyone to see his anxiety after Miriam had hopped across the board like a goat.

A group of boys greeted them on shore with offers to remove their baggage from the ship and deliver it to wherever they were staying. Marcus had been unsure what to do with the tent and pallets that they used on the ship since they had no more need of them, but Annas had informed him that there were shopkeepers near the harbor who did a brisk business buying supplies from arriving passengers and reselling them to others who were leaving.

While Annas looked for a boy who knew where his friend lived and could carry a letter to him, Marcus arranged for a couple of men with a mule cart to unload their belongings and deliver those that they no longer needed to a shop where he could dispose of them. The owner gave him only a pittance for them, but he had no time to haggle. He did not really need the money anyway—he would have all that he needed tomorrow.

By the time Marcus returned to the quay with his wagon, Annas had heard from his friend. He would be happy, he said, for Marcus and Miriam to stay with him for as long as they were in the city. He would also put his servants to work immediately preparing a hearty dinner for them, as he knew from experience that they could not have eaten well on the ship.

Darkness was closing in by the time they reached the house and began unpacking their goods. Their host had set aside two rooms for Marcus and Miriam, not knowing whether Deborah was slave or free and whether therefore she would need a room of her own. Miriam informed the servants that she wanted Deborah sleeping in the same room as herself and Marcus so that she could be available to care for the baby, and a bed was soon procured for her.

At dinner that evening, Marcus found that he had been assigned the place of honor on the central couch while Annas and their host, a middle-aged man named Benjamin, flanked him on either side. Miriam and their host’s wife, a rotund, kind-faced woman named Judith, sat in chairs at either end of the side couches. Marcus had seen this arrangement occasionally when his master took him along to a friend’s house for dinner, but it had not happened often since the women rarely ate with the men. On the only other occasion when he had eaten in a Jewish house, the women had reclined with the men. He wondered if that had been because it was the sabbath. He decided to hold his tongue and ask Annas about it later; he did not want to reveal his ignorance in front of their host. It was awkward enough to be reclining at dinner, a posture that he had always associated with important men like his master and his friends.

“Annas tells me that you intend to leave us soon and go up to Galilee,” said their host after the first course had been served. “What is it that takes you out there?”

Marcus was surprised by the man’s directness; he wondered how much Annas had told him about them. His first instinct was to launch into the story that he and Miriam had agreed to give to strangers, but he quickly realized that



this would be a mistake. It was obvious that Annas had told the man a portion of their story, and he did not want to risk being branded a liar if Annas had already informed him about their past. The truth would probably come out anyway if they stayed here for long.

After a few moments of hesitation he began to recount their story, simply and directly. As with Annas, he had to fudge the timeline to make it seem as if the child was their own, but otherwise he hewed closely to the truth. Miriam interrupted now and then to clarify a detail or to add her perspective, but she left Marcus to do most of the talking.

Their hosts listened quietly but attentively. Their silence made Marcus uncomfortable; were they regretting having taken these former slaves into their home? In his anxiety he began rushing to reach the end of his story and soon found himself stumbling over his words. He felt annoyed but relieved when Miriam volunteered to finish the story so that he could eat.

“So now you’ve come home,” remarked their host when Miriam had concluded. “The land of your fathers was calling to you all those years, but you were unable to hear it. When your ears were finally opened, you came. I find that admirable—quite admirable. Don’t you, dear?” He addressed these last words to his wife.

“I do,” she replied. “We should do whatever we can to assist these young people on their journey. And of course, we have to keep them here until they leave.”

Miriam beamed with satisfaction—this was exactly what she had told Marcus would happen. Marcus glanced at her before replying, but there was no doubting her response.

“We are truly grateful for your interest in us,” said Marcus hesitantly, “and doubly so since it includes a place for us to stay while we’re getting oriented. If you really don’t mind, we would be happy to take you up on your offer.”

Miriam smiled sweetly at him. He smiled back at her; apparently he had said the right thing. Reading the mind of a woman was hard work, but he was making progress. They took turns answering questions about their story as the various courses were placed on the tables that stood next to each of them.

When it appeared that they had satisfied their hosts’ curiosity, Marcus decided to shift the conversation. “If we’re going to be staying with you,” he said, “it would be nice to hear more about you and your city, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” answered Benjamin with a broad smile. “We’re pretty simple people—I run an import business and Judith manages the household. We have two children who are grown with families of their own, and we do our best to get along with everyone—Jews, Greeks, Romans, Syrians, or whatever the boats bring in. You can’t play favorites in my line of business. We strive to follow the laws of God while also respecting the authority that God has given the Romans over us. We have no patience with those hotheads who preach that we should take up arms and drive out the Romans. You should keep away from them when you’re in Galilee.”

“Annas gave me a similar warning,” said Marcus, nodding toward him. “But we didn’t talk about Caesarea. Do you have people like that here?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Judith. “They’re a pestilence. They’re going to get us all killed.”

“How do you mean?” asked Miriam, looking worried.

“They’ve been stirring up trouble in our synagogues and our city for years,” answered Judith. “Ever since king Agrippa died and was replaced by a Roman governor.”

“Annas told me how many people resented the Romans taking control again,” observed Marcus. “But what have they done here in Caesarea? I would have thought that the Jews would be more careful in the city where the Roman procurator is based. I also assumed that there would be hordes of Roman soldiers and officials here who would be quick to punish anyone who spoke ill of Rome. Is that not the case?”

“Not really,” replied Benjamin. “There aren’t as many Romans in Caesarea as you might suppose. Most of the soldiers stationed here aren’t Roman at all—they were recruited from the gentile populations of our own city and the neighboring territories, especially Samaria. A few thousand of them are posted here year-round, but their camp lies on the edge of town where they can be readily deployed to places where trouble is brewing. They mostly keep to themselves unless they are called in to keep order. The bulk of the Roman army is in Syria, hundreds of miles north of here, except for a small garrison that occupies a fort next to the temple in Jerusalem. They and the ones here are the only Roman soldiers in Israel. You won’t find them in Galilee or anywhere else you travel.”

“That surprises me,” responded Marcus. “With all of the troubles that Annas has described, I thought that there would be Roman soldiers all over the place. How are they able to keep the peace with so few soldiers?”

“Often they can’t,” interjected Annas. “That’s why we have so many gangs and hoodlums roaming the land and harming innocent people. Many of us would be happy to see more soldiers sent to the countryside, at least for a while, so that they could stamp out these troublemakers once and for all.”

“Amen,” echoed Benjamin and his wife.

“But why do they attack innocent people?” asked Miriam.

“That brings me to the other part of your question,” replied Benjamin. “The procurators don’t bring in a lot of Roman officials to manage the affairs of our nation. They do have a small staff and some slaves to assist them, but most of the work is done by locals—primarily Greeks, but some Jews as well—who keep things running on a day-to-day basis. They’re the ones who oversee the markets, manage the port, collect the taxes, keep the records, organize public events, and do the many other tasks that keep the government running. So you can see why they might be targeted—Roman rule would fall apart without them. But they’re not the ones whom the critics hold accountable; they blame people of my class whose only wish is to keep the peace.”

Annas took up the narrative at this point. “They claim that we’re somehow in league with the Romans,” he said, “because we don’t agree with their methods. We, too, would like to see our people ruling in their own land, but they want more than that—they want to overturn the whole system. They want to wipe out all debts, divide large estates among the peasants, end taxation for the masses, and share power among themselves. Some even call for the wealthy to be stripped of their goods and everything foreign to be removed from the land. They’re too weak and cowardly to stand up to the Romans directly, so they attack their fellow citizens instead. They want to run the country, but they are too ignorant and illiterate to run a pigsty. It’s madness!”

Annas lowered his eyes and shook his head. Benjamin and Judith muttered “Amen” and copied him.

“I’m sorry for your troubles,” said Marcus after a few moments of silence. “From what Miriam had told me, I thought that Israel was a land of peace and plenty. I had no idea that we were jumping into a cauldron of unrest. Growing up in a Roman colony like Antioch, I had no idea that people held such hateful attitudes toward Rome. I can see now why Annas warned me not to publicize my Roman citizenship when we’re in Galilee. Miriam and I are going to have to be very careful about what we say and do out there.”

“Yes, you certainly will,” agreed Benjamin. “Most people probably won’t care that you’re a Roman citizen, and some might even admire you for it. But you never know who might be listening. You’re going to attract attention anyway as an outsider asking questions of the locals. If your Roman connections were known, someone might think that you’re spying for the Romans. You wouldn’t want that to happen.”

“Certainly not,” replied Marcus. “I can only imagine where that might lead.”

“Galilee isn’t the only place where you need to be careful,” added Judith. “You should watch what you say and do here in Caesarea as well.”

“My wife is right,” observed Benjamin. “It’s not just your links to Rome that could cause you problems in our city, but also the fact that you are a Jew. As you may know, we Jews are a minority in this city, though a sizeable one, and tensions have been simmering for years between our people and the Greek and Syrian residents. They resent our wealth and influence in the city, but that’s not the main issue. It’s really about power: they claim that Caesarea was founded as a Greek city and that they should therefore decide how the city is run, whereas we insist that it’s a Jewish city because Herod was a Jew and it’s located in the land of the Jews.”

“Tensions came to a head,” he went on, “during the reign of king Agrippa. He was the first Jew since Herod to have authority over the entire land—under Roman supervision, of course—and the Greeks and Syrians were afraid that his presence in Caesarea was going to tip the balance of power in our favor. They feared that he was going to make everyone live by Jewish laws—a ridiculous notion, I might add—and they didn’t want that.”

“I can understand their feelings,” Marcus interjected. “I was like them for most of my life. Everyone that I knew in Antioch held low opinions of Jews and their laws.”

“It’s the same way here,” replied Benjamin. “As it turned out, Agrippa only ruled for three years before he was poisoned, most likely by one of them. The Greeks and Syrians held public celebrations at his death, and some of the

soldiers performed shameful acts with the statues of his daughters that they stole from his palace. We Jews were outraged, of course, but there was nothing that we could do until a successor was named. We had hoped that Rome would give the post to his son, also named Agrippa, but he was young and they apparently thought that he wasn't ready for the job. They gave him a small kingdom up north and sent a Roman procurator to govern us."

"But that only made things worse," he added. "The Greeks and Syrians saw this as a victory and began to push for more influence with the Romans, while on our side the change gave new fuel to those who said we should rise up and take back our land. We adults do our best to get along, but there are young hotheads on both sides who can't keep their mouths shut, and their disputes have occasionally boiled over into street fights."

"They actually attack one another in the streets?" asked Marcus, incredulous.

"Yes, they do," replied Benjamin. "It's not a frequent occurrence, but you never know what might happen when they start arguing and taunting one another in public. That's why Judith was saying that you need to be careful; we don't want you to get caught in the middle of something like that."

"I appreciate the warning," said Marcus. "Ordinarily I might stop and see what was going on if I heard a group of people arguing. But in view of what you've said, I'll make sure to avoid any disturbances that I might encounter. I don't want to end up in trouble before I even leave your city." Marcus gave a rueful smile.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," replied Benjamin. "The odds of you experiencing any trouble are small, but now you'll understand what's going on if a stranger should take offense at something you say or do. Just keep to yourself as much as possible, and don't say or do anything that might identify you as either a Jew or a Roman. The less you say, the better."

"That won't be easy for him," teased Miriam. "He likes to talk with people."

Marcus feigned being offended, then grinned. "She's right," he admitted. "But I'll be careful. I wouldn't want to do anything that might jeopardize my family or my mission."

"Speaking of family," said Miriam, "I should go and check on the baby. Deborah is a good girl who watches over him like a mother, but that doesn't prevent me from worrying."

"We understand," replied Judith, smiling warmly. "Our children were young once, too."

"I should go with her," said Marcus, rising awkwardly from his couch. "We've had a long day today and I have a lot to do tomorrow. We've also been looking forward to sleeping on a real bed again." He wrapped his arm around Miriam's waist and grinned down at her.

"That's perfectly fine," answered Benjamin, rising and taking both of their hands. "We're happy to have you with us. This has been a most enjoyable and memorable evening."

## CHAPTER 2

THE NEXT morning found Marcus on his way to the house of a man named Isidoros, from whom—if all went as planned—he would receive the hundred thousand sesterces that his master had left him in his will. Marcus had been anxious about this visit ever since they left Antioch. He still found it hard to believe that his master had adopted him as his son and given him enough money for him and Miriam to live comfortably for the rest of their lives. He also had trouble believing that a man whom he had never met would hand over such a huge sum to him on the basis of a letter that he was to present at their first meeting.

His master's trusted friend, Publius Servius Frugi, had told him that similar letters were used every day to transfer even larger amounts between merchants and traders living in different cities, and he had assured him that the man to whom the letter was directed would know what to do with it. His host in Caesarea, Benjamin, had confirmed that this Isidoros was a wealthy and honest businessman who could be trusted to handle his money properly. But Marcus still felt relieved when Benjamin offered to come with him and assist with the transaction. Until he had the money in his hands—or better yet, tucked away in a safe place where he could access it as needed—he would worry.

The porter greeted Benjamin somewhat coldly, ordering him to wait outside while he checked to see if his master was available. "Isidoros doesn't really like Jews," Benjamin whispered after he had left, "but our community is large enough and wealthy enough that he can't ignore us. He'll see us unless he has someone else with him."

The porter returned soon, nodded, and led them wordlessly toward his master's office. The house was much like the ones that Marcus had visited with his master in the Greek section of Antioch, but the experience was different this time. This was his first visit to a wealthy man's home on his own business and not as a slave. He felt like an imposter whose true identity might be discovered at any moment. He had to remind himself several times that this was not the case, that he had a right to be here. He had known that it was going to take some time to get used to his new status, but he wondered as he walked down the hallway whether he could ever make the adjustment.

The porter stopped at the open doorway of a nondescript room and motioned for them to enter. A well-dressed middle-aged man, whom Marcus took to be Isidoros, sat at a marble desk poring over a scroll that lay open before him. He looked up as they entered the room, but he neither stood nor spoke. Marcus thought that he looked annoyed.

"It's been a while since I've seen you, my friend," began Benjamin, but the man cut him off with a wave of the hand.

"Yes, yes," he replied impatiently. "Enough small talk. What brings you here today? I'm a busy man."

"I've come here with this young man who just arrived from Antioch-near-Pisidia in central Anatolia," explained Benjamin, struggling to keep his composure in the face of such rudeness. "His name is Marcus Coelius Felix. He is a Roman citizen who has business in Galilee, and he brings with him a letter of credit from one of your friends in Attalia. Your friend asks you to assist him and promises to repay at your request any funds that you advance to him up to the amount specified in the letter. I can vouch for his identity and integrity if that should be necessary."

The man's face brightened when Benjamin mentioned Marcus's status. "A Roman citizen, huh? Where's his toga?"

"I advised him not to wear it so as not to attract unwanted attention," replied Benjamin. "You know that Felix and his friends are not exactly popular these days."

"Not popular with you people, you mean," retorted Isidoros. "I think he's doing a fine job of keeping the peace so that respectable people can go about their business."

Marcus winced. He regretted bringing Benjamin with him. Evidently there was bad blood between the two men.

"I'm happy to meet you," interjected Marcus, seeking to turn the conversation in a more fruitful direction. "My friend tells me that you are an influential man in Caesarea and that you can provide me with the funds indicated in this letter."

He placed the document on Isidoros's desk as he spoke, then stepped back and met his stare. He had been around men like Isidoros all of his life and watched how his master treated them. Men like him valued flattery, but it had to be balanced with firmness or it would be taken as a sign of weakness. No doubt he was brutal toward his slaves.

Isidoros picked up the letter and glanced over it quickly, then laid it down.

“So what brings a Roman citizen all the way from the heart of Anatolia to a backwater like Galilee?” he inquired. His face had softened, but his voice betrayed a lingering doubt.

“That, if you don’t mind, is my affair,” answered Marcus, following the script that he and Benjamin had rehearsed. He had wanted to say that he was going on family business, but Benjamin had cautioned against such a course as it might reveal that he was a Jew. Saying that he had family in Galilee could give him away since Jews formed the bulk of the population in Galilee. After some discussion they had agreed that he should tell the man as little as possible.

Isidoros looked momentarily affronted, but his face showed a hint of respect. “Very well, then,” he replied. “I know better than to question a Roman about his business. You don’t look like a merchant; perhaps someone has sent you there to take the pulse of the population? I hope so. Do you mind me asking where in Galilee you are going?”

“Sepphoris at first,” responded Marcus. “After that, I’ll go wherever my business should take me.”

“Sepphoris,” echoed Isidoros. “That’s a good place to start, whatever your intentions. It’s still ruled directly by the Romans, so it’s more secure than the nearby cities of Tiberias and Tarichaea that Nero gave to that Jew Agrippa. The regional treasury was also moved there recently from Tiberias, so you’ll have a safe place to store your money. But I wouldn’t advise carrying a hundred thousand sesterces with you to Sepphoris unless you want to arrive with an empty pouch. There are robbers on the road to Galilee, and they have a keen nose for sniffing out which travelers are carrying money. Of course, you wouldn’t be carrying sesterces in any case—most people out there wouldn’t know what to do with a coin like that. You’ll want to convert them to local money before you leave.”

For the first time since they entered the house, Marcus relaxed. The man had evidently accepted his response and was conversing with him as an equal. His first attempt to live up to his new status had been a success.

“I appreciate the advice,” said Marcus warmly. “This land is new to me, and I’m still learning its ways. I wasn’t intending to carry that much money with me, but I’d like to have it available when I need it. What’s the best way to do that in this country?”

“The easiest solution would be to for me to hold onto the money while you’re traveling,” explained Isidoros. “You can send someone you trust to withdraw funds as you need them. Or if you prefer, I could give some or all of it to Benjamin and he could manage it for you. He’s used to handling money, so he’ll know how to keep it safe. If you won’t need it for a while, one of us could even invest some of it for you.”

“Those are all good suggestions,” observed Marcus, “but I’d like to have at least a portion of the money available in Galilee so that I don’t have to send someone to Caesarea whenever I need funds. I might be there for a while. What’s the best way to do that?”

“The usual way,” replied Isidoros, “would be to find someone in Sepphoris who would accept a letter like the one that you brought me today and advance you money as you need it. That person would then petition me or Benjamin for repayment. I don’t know many people in Galilee, but I’m sure Benjamin does. They’re his people, after all.”

Isidoros glanced at Benjamin with a look of disdain. Marcus could not be sure, but it appeared that Isidoros had concluded that he, Marcus, was not a Jew. Perhaps the Roman citizenship had fooled him—he was only beginning to realize the privileges that his new status carried. Or perhaps it was because he had been watching wealthy Romans all of his life and was better at imitating them than he had anticipated. Whatever the reason, the error was clearly to his advantage.

“I can think of several possibilities,” Benjamin volunteered. “So perhaps it would make more sense for me to hold the money.”

This was the goal toward which they had wanted to steer the conversation, but Marcus wished that his friend had not been quite so enthusiastic. Benjamin had assured him that he could do whatever he wanted with the money, but Marcus did not want to offend his new acquaintance. It could be useful to have an acquaintance like him in Caesarea.

“Let me think on it,” replied Marcus noncommittally. “In the meantime, I will need some of the money to tide me over until I reach Sepphoris and get things in order there.”

“That’s understandable,” said Isidoros. “How much might you need?”

“I was thinking that five hundred sesterces would be enough for now,” replied Marcus. It was a stupendous sum to him, but Isidoros hardly batted an eyelash.

"I can give you that much today," replied Isidoros. "How about if I give you half of it in Roman denarii to use while you're in Caesarea and half in the coinage of this country? You'll have to trust my secretary for the latter—the money system that they use out in the countryside is so complicated and inconsistent that I've never bothered to figure it out. My family came here from Syrian Antioch when the city was built, and I've lived in Caesarea all my life. I've never even visited Galilee."

"I'll trust your judgment," answered Marcus, relieved that the matter would be resolved so easily.

"Come back this afternoon and I'll have it ready for you," said Isidoros with a smile. "I would have said to send one of your slaves, but it wouldn't be safe to entrust a bag of money to a slave in this city. He's just as likely to run off or get robbed as to make it home with a full pouch. I'm sure you understand."

"Perfectly," answered Marcus. His smile masked the disgust that he felt at the man's view of slaves, but he knew that he would have to get used to it since this was how everyone talked about slaves at this level of society.

"Now if you don't mind, I have work to do," said Isidoros, reverting to the tone that he had used when they first entered. "Welcome to our city."

"We have no other business here today," remarked Marcus coolly. "I'll return this afternoon for the money you promised me, but I'll have to tell you later what I decide to do about my money. Please accept my gratitude for your wise counsel."

"Yes, yes," replied Isidoros, hardly glancing up from his desk. Marcus took Benjamin's arm and strolled quickly toward the door. He did not want to give the older man a chance to speak lest he should say something that would upset everything that he had accomplished.

"By the way, how did the two of you meet?" called Isidoros as they reached the threshold. He had raised his head and was staring at them curiously.

"Someone on the boat told me about him," replied Marcus. "They said that he had money and might be able to help me. I had never heard of him before that."

He hustled Benjamin out the door before their host could probe further.

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AS THEY entered Benjamin's house, they found Annas waiting for them. "I've had troubling news from Jerusalem," he began.

"What is it?" asked Marcus and Benjamin simultaneously.

"One of my father's slaves arrived while you were gone and told me that the Roman garrison has butchered a bunch of Jews on the Mount of Olives," said Annas, his face grim. "Some Jewish preacher who claimed to be from Egypt had persuaded a crowd of gullible fools to congregate there, telling them that God was going to knock down the walls of Jerusalem at his command so that his followers could march in and take over the city. Passover was the perfect time for such a charade, since everyone is thinking about the miracles that God performed for our ancestors when he led them out of Egypt, including the destruction of the walls of Jericho." He shook his head in disgust.

"Felix had already gone up to Jerusalem with a troop of reinforcements for the garrison," he continued. "They do that every year at Passover so that they'll be ready to respond if trouble breaks out with so many people gathered in one place. Felix got wind of what was happening and led a small army out to where the people had gathered. His soldiers surrounded the mob, then he ordered them to attack. Hundreds were killed, perhaps even thousands. The ringleader got away, and now the Romans are searching for him all over Jerusalem and the surrounding territory. The entire city is on edge. I must return immediately and be with my family."

"That is troubling news indeed," mused Benjamin. "Is there anything that I can do to help?"

"No, thank you," replied Annas. "My belongings were still packed from my trip to Attalia, and I sent the slave who brought the message to find me a wagon to carry my chests. I'll leave as soon as he gets back."

"I knew already that this would be a short visit," remarked Benjamin, "but I'm sorry that you have to leave under such difficult circumstances."

“I knew that you would understand,” replied Annas. “As you know, it’s not the first time that some madman has persuaded people to follow him by claiming that God had chosen him to free his people, and I fear that it won’t be the last. Remember that man Theudas a decade ago who gathered a mob in the desert by telling them that God was going to split the river at his command? And before him there was that Samaritan who hoodwinked an even larger group into thinking that God was going to reveal to him the hiding place of some sacred vessels that Moses had supposedly buried at Mt. Gerizim. Both men seem to have thought that their miraculous deeds would be followed by some sort of divine intervention against the Romans, but the soldiers crushed them before they could do anything. Why in God’s name do people listen to such charlatans? How many deaths will it take to convince them that Rome is too powerful for anyone but God to overcome?”

“I think you’ve answered your own question,” remarked Benjamin. “These people truly believe that their leader is the man that God has chosen to overthrow the Romans. I don’t find it so difficult to understand—after all, you and I have similar hopes for the coming of God’s Messiah.”

“Yes, but that’s different,” argued Annas. “His coming will be obvious. He won’t go skulking around among the ignorant masses like the men that I mentioned, or like that Yeshua from Galilee whom Pontius Pilate crucified a couple of decades ago. He’s the only one whose followers have remained faithful to his memory—in fact, I’ve heard that they believe that God raised him from the dead and made him a second deity, or something like that. I fear that they might prove even more dangerous than the others when you consider how they’ve persisted after their leader was killed.”

“I doubt that,” replied Benjamin. “There are few of them here in Caesarea, and I’ve never heard of them threatening violence. In fact, my understanding is that they’re a lot like us—waiting for God’s Messiah to come and ransom Israel.”

“But they believe that their master is the Messiah!” exclaimed Annas. “He’s the one they’re waiting for! I can at least comprehend why those rebels out in the countryside might think that God will come to their aid if they take up arms, since that has actually happened in the past. But I can’t understand how anyone could believe that a dead man will come back one day as the agent of God’s deliverance. It boggles the mind.”

“I met some of those people in Anatolia,” interjected Marcus. “They called themselves Christoi, or Christianoi, or something like that. A slave girl who was a member of the group told me about them, and it sounded a lot like what you’ve said here. According to her, they’ve got followers all over the place.”

“They’re a pestilence,” remarked Annas, spitting in disgust. “Wolves in sheep’s clothing. A cancer on the body of God’s people. Whatever name you call them, it’s not bad enough. Back in the early days the high priest Caiaphas, a friend of my father, sent a promising young man named Saul out to combat their influence in our synagogues, and he ended up joining them! In fact, I’ve heard that he became one of their leaders, though he had to go out and preach to the gentiles because our people wouldn’t listen to him. Those Greeks and Romans are gullible—they’ll believe anything when it comes to their so-called gods. They deserve each other.”

The men sat together in silence for several moments. Then Annas turned to Marcus and spoke up.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve been so preoccupied with affairs in Jerusalem that I never asked how things went this morning with your money.”

“Everything went well,” answered Marcus, who proceeded to narrate what had transpired at Isidoros’s house. As he was finishing, the porter came in to say that the slave who had gone to get a wagon had arrived for Annas.

“That’s my cue to leave,” said Annas, rising from his chair. “I’ll write and tell you more about events in Jerusalem once I know the facts.”

“I would appreciate that very much,” replied Benjamin. “Before you go, I told my cook to prepare some food and a skin of wine for your journey. Let me go and find out where it is. You’ll need to eat.”

“So I guess you’ll be getting ready now to head for Galilee,” he observed, turning to Marcus. “When do you think you might leave?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Marcus. “I need to talk to Miriam about it, and I’ll need some time to gather what I’ll need for the trip.”

“May God guide you and protect you as you go,” intoned Annas, raising his hand in a gesture of blessing. “And do come and see me when you make your first visit to Jerusalem. Benjamin can tell you how to find me.”

Benjamin walked in at that moment holding a woven sack and a skin of wine.

“This should tide you over until you reach home,” he said, handing the items to Annas.

“I’m grateful for your thoughtfulness,” said Annas, embracing him. “I’ll return the favor the next time you’re in Jerusalem.

He took a few steps toward the front door, then stopped suddenly and turned back to face them.

“I’m sorry!” he exclaimed, looking directly at Marcus. “I almost forgot to tell you the name of my priestly friend in Sepphoris who might have some information about your relatives. His name is Eliashib, but his friends call him Eli. Just ask around for Eli the priest and you’ll find him. He lives near the top of the hill where the city is located.”

“I’m glad you remembered,” said Marcus. “I would have been sorry if you had left without telling me.”

“Farewell,” said Annas with a broad smile. “I’ll see both of you in Jerusalem!”

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That afternoon Marcus returned for the money that Isidoros had promised to advance him. Isidoros had entrusted the transaction to his secretary, a slave several years older than Marcus, who bowed his head as he handed Marcus the bag. Marcus felt embarrassed at receiving such deference from a man whom a few months ago he might have viewed as a peer and even a potential friend. He wished that he could talk with the man, but he knew that such behavior was forbidden to one in his social station. The most that he could do was to speak kindly to the man when he asked him to tell his master that he had decided to leave his money with Benjamin and to let him know when it would be available. Then he took the bag and left.

The next day a donkey cart arrived at the door of Benjamin’s house, driven by a young boy and accompanied by four brawny slaves carrying clubs. Marcus only learned about it when the porter called him to the door. Stepping out into the street, he was surprised to see two men holding a chest that they said contained the money that he had requested from their master.

Marcus had to leave them at the door while he went to find out what to do with the box. Benjamin returned with him and led the men to his office, where Marcus used his new seal to certify his receipt of the money.

Benjamin waited until the men had left the house, then closed the door to his office. “I can’t believe that Isidoros was so prompt in sending that money to you,” he said in a hushed voice. “Let’s see if it looks right.”

Marcus lifted the latch and opened the chest, then stood back in awe. He had never seen so much gold and silver in his life! He knew that his master had kept far more than this in a locked room in his house, but he had never had occasion to look into any but the smallest chests. His master had been wary about theft, and none of his slaves were allowed to enter that room except in his company.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” chuckled Benjamin. “If you’re careful, that should be enough to provide for you and Miriam for the rest of your lives.”

“I’m—I’m dumbfounded,” Marcus stuttered at last, his eyes still fixed on the pile of coins. “I can’t imagine how anyone could ever spend that much money.”

“I’ve heard of people losing more than that in one night of gambling, or betting on an athletic contest,” Benjamin replied. “Gentiles, of course—the Jews that I know don’t go in for such foolishness, except for the Herods and their kin. They pour out money like water. But it’s not as bad as those rabbleroxing preachers make it out to be—they rile up the masses by telling them that it’s their tax money that the Herods are wasting. In reality, much of their wealth comes from the estates that they own all over the land.”

“I’m not a gambler,” Marcus reassured him, “though I do enjoy watching other people play. I never had money to waste until now, and I can’t imagine that I would start gambling now that I do. My first concern is to give my family a secure future, and I won’t do anything that would jeopardize that goal.”

“That’s good to hear,” replied Benjamin. “I didn’t think you were the kind of person who would fritter away his fortune, but money can make people do strange things.”

“Not me,” assured Marcus. “But you mentioned earlier that you might be able to help me invest some of it. I did a little of that in Antioch—I hired a mule cart to haul produce from a nearby farm to sell at the local market, and I made some money doing it. But I’m sure you have bigger things in mind. I’d like to hear your ideas. The only options



that I know about are farming and moneylending, and I only know of them because my master did both. He also participated in a business that imported luxury goods to our city, but I would imagine that something like that would require more money than I have. I know nothing about other possibilities.”

“Let me think about it,” answered Benjamin. “A lot of people here in Caesarea are involved in trade and shipping, but those are risky activities that require you to tie up your money for long periods of time. You need to keep yours within reach until you know where you’ll be settling. If you stay in Galilee, there’s money to be made in local industries like fishing and pottery-making, but they’re harder to get into and require more work. Farming could also be an option—they’ve got some of the best farmland in the country. But none of that helps you now.”

Benjamin paused as if weighing other possibilities. Marcus waited for him to continue.

“If your goal is to earn some income without tying up your money,” he resumed, “the easiest option would be moneylending. But you’d have to find some gentiles who need the money and can pay you back, since we Jews are forbidden to collect interest from one another. Some do it anyway on the grounds that they’re protecting their brothers from the rapacity of the gentiles, but a newcomer like you would quickly become an outcast if you tried it. I don’t think you want that. Another possibility would be to find a banker who would pay you interest while lending your money out to others. Isidoros could probably help you with that. Or you could just leave the money with me until you know what you want to do with it. It’s up to you.”

Benjamin crossed his arms and waited for Marcus to reply. Marcus sat pondering what he had heard.

“This is more complicated than I had thought,” he said at last. “With all of the uncertainty that hangs over our future, I think it might be better for me to leave the money with you so that it will be here when I need it.”

“That’s what I would advise,” agreed Benjamin. “But I thought that you should at least know about these other possibilities. Having money opens many doors, but it also introduces new problems.”

“I can see that,” mused Marcus. “But I’d rather have these problems than the ones that come with owning nothing, which has been my fate until now.”

“Amen,” intoned Benjamin. “I’m sure that you will do well.”

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Marcus spent the next few days preparing for their trip and enjoying the life of the city. He felt at home here in Caesarea—except for the harbor and the ever-present sea, it was very much like his home city of Antioch. The weather was pleasant this time of year, and he and Miriam spent hours wandering around the city and admiring its beauty. They also enjoyed walking on the beach, which was a new experience for both of them. Miriam liked to sit and watch the waves cresting and tumbling onto the shore, while Marcus was more interested in the seabirds as they floated and darted in search of prey. He could understand why Miriam found the waters entrancing, but he could never forget how sick he had felt during those days when they were bobbing around on the open sea. He would never be able to enjoy the crashing of waves after that experience.

Benjamin had persuaded them to delay their departure for at least a week so that they could eat the Passover meal with him and his family before leaving. In the evenings he gave them helpful information about their upcoming trip to Galilee, which he had visited a number of times.

“Galilee has almost no paved roads,” he told them. “Most are packed earth, and it can take a while for the locals to fill in the ruts that develop during the rainy season. Most people get around on mule carts, or else they walk. Sepphoris is one of the few places that you can reach by carriage from here, since it’s close to the route used by caravans to ferry goods between Egypt and Damascus. The road is paved, but the stones have been worn down over time, so you’ll have a bumpy ride if you take a carriage. But it’s still better than a mule cart.”

Marcus remembered the long days that he had spent bouncing around on the hard seat of a supply wagon when traveling with his master from Antioch to the sanctuary of Asklepios at Pergamon. That trip, too, had followed the main trade road, but that did not prevent him from having sore buttocks at the end of the day. He did not want to repeat the experience, especially when he could afford to rent a carriage with cushioned seats.

“You’ll have to stay overnight along the way,” Benjamin went on. “Sepphoris is up in the hills, and the mules don’t go much faster than a walking pace on that climb up to the city. There’s another stretch like that between here and the Great Plain where you cross over the base of Mount Carmel. The winter rains often wash dirt over the stones in those areas, so your progress will be slower than usual.”

Benjamin paused for a moment to see if Marcus was following him. “I know these names and places don’t mean anything to you,” he observed, “but you’ll get to know them after you’ve been here for a while.”

Marcus smiled and nodded for him to go on. “I’m telling you all of this so that you’ll understand why it will take two days to reach Sepphoris even though it’s not that far from here. A soldier on horseback could get there in a day, but you have chests to carry, so you’ll go slower. When I travel to Galilee, which isn’t often, I stay at the home of a friend who owns an estate in the valley between Carmel and Sepphoris. I’m sure that he would be happy to host you and Miriam for an evening. I’ll send a messenger to him once you know when you’ll be leaving so that he can be ready to receive you.”

“Your kindness toward us is overwhelming,” replied Marcus, his eyes suddenly brimming with tears. “I feel so ignorant and helpless. I used to handle these kinds of details for my master, but I don’t even know where to begin in this new land. You are truly a godsend.”

“Think nothing of it,” answered Benjamin, clapping him on the shoulder. “It’s a pleasure to come to the aid of a brother in need.”

“I will repay your kindness one of these days,” said Marcus, cupping his hand over Benjamin’s extended arm. “I don’t know when or how, but I will repay you. I swear it. May the God of Israel be my witness.”

“If that is your wish, so be it,” replied Benjamin with a genial smile. “Perhaps there will come a day when I do need your help. In these troubled times, who knows what the future might bring?”

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The synagogue service in Caesarea was surprisingly similar to the ones that Marcus had attended in Anatolia. He had anticipated that it might be conducted in Aramaic or even Hebrew, but Benjamin had assured him ahead of time that everything except the prayers would be in Greek since that was the only language that most Caesareans had in common. Even so, he was surprised to hear the Scriptures being read in Greek since Miriam had told him that Torah scrolls in Israel were written in Hebrew.

“It will be different once you’re in Galilee,” Benjamin explained as they walked home. “The entire service there will be in Aramaic or Hebrew. You’ll feel lost until you learn enough Aramaic to follow along. But the basic framework of what Jews do on the Sabbath is the same everywhere, so you’ll pick it up quickly enough. Perhaps you could find a Greek-speaker to summarize it for you afterward if you want to know what was said.”

“Miriam and I are going to need a tutor anyway to teach us Aramaic,” observed Marcus. “So perhaps the same person could do both. We’ll work it out once we get there.”

The next day a messenger arrived from Isidoros inviting Marcus to attend a chariot race that would take place in the local stadium in five days. Marcus was puzzled—had Isidoros concluded that he was a man of influence whose friendship should be cultivated? He chuckled at the thought.

Marcus had never been to a chariot race. His home city of Antioch had a stadium, but it was used only for athletic competitions. The one in Caesarea was larger and more impressive in appearance. Marcus had hoped that a race would be announced before he left the city, but he was still surprised when it happened. He could only imagine how thrilling it must be to cheer on the drivers as they careened around the oblong course while trying to avoid crashing into their competitors. A man like Isidoros would surely have good seats.

Marcus did not have to think twice about accepting the invitation—of course he would go! He scribbled a quick reply, sealed it, and gave it to the messenger.

After dinner that evening, as the slaves were clearing away the final dishes, Marcus told the others about Isidoros’s invitation and his reply. As he spoke, he suddenly realized that no one else seemed to share his enthusiasm about the

race. Benjamin was peering down at the mosaic in the middle of the floor, while Miriam was staring at him as if he had grown a second head.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, looking at each of them in turn. “Did I say something wrong? I keep forgetting how easy it is to offend people here.”

“When did you say that race would take place?” asked Miriam after a pause.

“Five days from now,” he replied. “Why do you ask?”

“And what else is happening five days from now?” she probed, barely concealing her annoyance.

“Five days from now...,” echoed Marcus, peering up at the ceiling as if he might find the answer there. “Five days from now...”

“I give up,” he said at last. “What’s happening five days from now? Are we having dinner with someone?”

“Yes—we are,” replied Miriam through gritted teeth. “That’s the first day of Passover. We’ll be eating here with Benjamin and Judith. Did you truly forget such an important event?”

Marcus flushed with embarrassment. “I... I... I didn’t forget about Passover,” he stammered. “I just forgot when it was. It never crossed my mind that there might be a problem with the date.”

“The error is understandable,” suggested Benjamin. “You’re new here, and you have a trip to prepare for...”

Miriam raised her hand as a sign for him to be quiet. Benjamin lowered his head.

“You made a mistake,” observed Miriam, her voice teetering between sympathy and indignation. “But it’s not too late to fix it. Just write to Isidoros and tell him that you forgot that you had a prior commitment.”

Marcus stared at her for a moment, then at Benjamin and Judith, then at the wall. He needed time to figure out how to answer her, but Miriam wanted an immediate response.

“I... I don’t know what to do,” he said at last. “I understand that Passover is important for Jews, but you have to remember that I’m still new at this—I don’t know much about the celebration. Perhaps I should have asked you about it so that I would know what is expected of me. But I didn’t intentionally schedule another event on the same day.”

He paused to see if the others’ faces had softened, but it was impossible to read them. “I feel bad about what I’ve done,” he went on, “but I can’t back out now. Isidoros is an important man in this city, and he would be offended if I told him that I was attending another event instead of his. He might even ask me what was so important that I would miss a chariot race, and what would I tell him? That I was attending a Jewish celebration? The time might come when we need a friend in Caesarea who isn’t a Jew.”

“I have an idea,” he said, feeling suddenly inspired. “I think you told me earlier that Passover begins in the evening, right? So the meal will take place the night before the race. Why can’t I do both?”

He smiled with satisfaction at having devised such a reasonable compromise. He was surprised when the others did not immediately embrace his suggestion.

Benjamin was the first to speak. “Passover is more than just eating a meal together,” he began, speaking slowly as if to underline the seriousness of his words. “It’s a time to remember and meditate on the greatness of our God who rescued our ancestors from bondage in Egypt. It’s a time to reflect on what might be binding our hands and hearts from serving the Lord and to pray for his power to overcome those bonds. It’s also a time to renew our bonds with our fellow Jews by spending time with family and friends. The festival lasts for eight days, but the first day is especially important—it’s a Sabbath, a day of rest just like the ones that we observe every week, though we celebrate it at home rather than at the synagogue.”

“And that’s the day when you propose to go to the races,” interjected Miriam. “You want to spend the day with a bunch of gentiles enjoying a frivolous spectacle rather than staying home with your family and friends.”

Marcus could see that they were determined to change his mind, but he was equally resolved to resist. “I won’t be gone the whole day,” he protested. “It’s only for a few hours. And I won’t be working—I’ll just be sitting in the stands and watching the action. How is that a problem?”

“You’ll still be surrounded by gentiles,” retorted Miriam, “and you know how foul their entertainments can be. They offer prayers and sacrifices to their worthless deities at these kinds of events, and the spectators say and do all kinds of things that are offensive to God. Your mind will be focused on vain pleasures and not the ways of God. That’s no way to spend a Sabbath.”

“But I’ll be with you in the evenings and every other day of the festival,” complained Marcus. “We’ll have more time together than most Jews, since we don’t have to work all day.”

Miriam looked as if she were about to retort, but Marcus cut her off. “This isn’t just about my pleasure,” he said. “It’s about our future. You’ll be glad that I went if a time should ever come when we need this man’s help. I understand your concerns, but my mind is made up. I’m going. If I’m wrong, surely God will have mercy on my ignorance.”

An awkward silence reigned for several moments. Miriam turned away from him and pouted. Benjamin and his wife looked thoughtful.

“I have to admit that your argument has some merit,” said Benjamin at last. “One never knows what the future might bring. We live in dangerous times, and there may come a time when our security or even our lives depend on knowing the right people, including gentiles. I’ve cultivated many such relationships over the years, and sometimes this has put me in situations where I would have preferred not to be. You know no one here, and I can understand how precarious that makes you feel. If that is your reason for wishing to attend this event, I won’t stand in your way. I still have my doubts about whether this is the time and place to be pursuing such interests, but I’ll leave that between you and God.”

Marcus breathed a sigh of relief. “What about you, Miriam?” he asked, turning to face her. “Can you accept what Benjamin is saying? I don’t want you to be cross with me. You know that I want to do what is right, even when we disagree about what that means.”

Miriam remained stubbornly silent. Marcus was tempted to fill the gap with more arguments, but he knew his wife well enough to judge that this would only cause her to dig in her heels. He turned his mind instead to what he would say if she refused to back down. He did not intend to lose this battle.

Finally she spoke. “Benjamin understands these things better than I do,” she mumbled without raising her head. “He knows the political situation as well as the laws of God. I still don’t like it, but if he thinks that this gentile might be God’s instrument to keep us safe in the future, I will defer to his judgment.”

Marcus beamed. “I know that this is hard for you,” he said, rising from his couch and folding her into his arms. “I know that you want what’s best for me, and you know that I take your opinions seriously. I would enjoy it more if you would come with me, but I know better than to ask. Still, I promise that I’ll come home as soon as we’re done and we can be together for the rest of the day.”

Miriam nodded, but she still looked unhappy. She did not return his embrace.

“I think it’s time for us to head to bed,” announced Marcus, taking Miriam’s hand and raising her to her feet. “I’m grateful for your wise counsel. I’m only sorry that we won’t be staying in Caesarea long enough for me to benefit further from your knowledge and experience.”

“You’ll be back,” Judith assured him. “Everyone has business in Caesarea at one time or another. You’re always welcome to stay with us.”

Benjamin nodded his agreement, and they parted for the evening.

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The Passover meal was a memorable affair as it was the first time that either Marcus or Miriam had experienced this home-based ceremony. Miriam had been raised as a Jew, but she had spent her entire life in gentile households with her enslaved mother. Marcus had never even heard of Passover until a few months ago when his master spent time with some Jews during his journey to Pergamon. Miriam was at least familiar with the Exodus story on which the ritual was based, whereas Marcus knew only the vague outlines.

Recognizing their ignorance, Benjamin and Judith explained everything as they went along. Benjamin recounted to Marcus how the God of Israel had answered the prayers of his suffering people in Egypt by sending a series of dreadful plagues against the Egyptians to compel the Pharaoh to let them go. He related in more detail the events of the final plague when the angel of death killed the firstborn of every family in Egypt that did not have the blood of a sacrificial lamb smeared on their doorpost as God had commanded. He went on to tell how God opened the sea to make a path for the fleeing Israelites and closed it again on the armies of Egypt, thus assuring his people’s freedom.

When he was done, Judith explained how each of the elements of their meal symbolized some aspect of this story. Marcus found the account fascinating. He had heard many stories of gods performing miracles, and the idea that a deity might favor one group of people over another was equally familiar. Everyone knew that the gods had favorites, just as every city or nation had a patron god or goddess whom they honored with prayers and sacrifices in the belief that the deity would watch over them and protect them.

But the gods of Greece and Rome were inconstant in their attention to humans and fickle about when and how they would act. The idea that a deity would care so much about a group of people that he would do mighty miracles to rescue them from bondage and lead them to a land of freedom and plenty was unlike anything that he had ever heard. Now he understood why the Jews were so devoted to their god. Who would not serve such a powerful deity? Who would dare to cross him?

He mentioned these observations to the others during the course of the meal, and Benjamin congratulated him on grasping the central point of the story. "Those who worship many gods cannot comprehend why we honor only one," he observed. "They even call us atheists because we deny the reality of their gods. But as you see, we have no need of other gods—we are the chosen people of the one true god who created and rules over the universe. Just as a slave cannot serve two masters, so also we cannot serve other deities. If we do, we lose the favor of our divine master and become subject to discipline. If we persist in such behavior, he will cast us out into the street as a master would a rebellious slave. The analogy isn't perfect, of course, because our lord views us as his children and not as slaves. But he is a jealous deity, and we cannot take his favor for granted." The others nodded their agreement.

"That's why we take our laws so seriously," he went on. "The God who chose our ancestors gave them laws that spelled out how they and their descendants should behave in order to remain in his good graces. Parents do the same when they set rules for their children. Like a parent, God does not expect perfection—he knows that we are but dust—but he does expect us to strive toward obedience. As long as we do that, he is merciful toward our failures. Such a parent deserves our undivided love and respect. In celebrating Passover, we not only recall what God did for our ancestors on that glorious and dreadful night, but we also renew our promise to honor and obey him and his laws both today and in the days to come."

"Amen," intoned Judith and Miriam in unison.

"And that's why you didn't want me to go to the races tomorrow," remarked Marcus, recognition dawning on him at last. "You think that my attendance violates the spirit of Passover and dishonors the god of your ancestors."

"They're your ancestors, too," Benjamin corrected him. "And their God is also your God. But as I said before, I can understand why you would consider it expedient to curry this man's favor, so I leave that decision between you and God. I have nothing more to say on the matter."

Miriam leaned forward as if she wanted to add her opinion, then relaxed back onto her cushion. "I will think on what you have said," replied Marcus. "This evening has certainly cast my decision in a different light."

Benjamin steered the conversation toward other subjects as the meal progressed toward its conclusion, and after a while he closed the evening with a blessing and dismissed everyone to their rooms.

The next day Marcus awoke at dawn and his mind turned immediately to the races. He felt vaguely guilty about his decision to attend, but he could not shake his earlier impression that it was the right thing to do. He knew that his judgment might be clouded by his desire to witness the spectacle, but he could not believe that following the God of Israel meant depriving himself of all pleasures. Prudence counseled him to cultivate friends among the gentiles in order to assure his family's future, yet his friends insisted that attending such an event on Passover would displease the lord of the universe. Why the God of Israel should care about such a trifling point of behavior was a mystery to him, but the same could be said about the other deities whom he had followed for most of his life.

In the end, his natural inclination toward pragmatism prevailed. God, he concluded, would understand that his presence at the races did not constitute approval of the prayers and sacrifices that were performed there. He knew from talking with Jews in Anatolia that some of them attended theaters and competitions where similar offerings were made, and his own experience had taught him that it was impossible for anyone living in a Greek or Roman city to avoid all public displays of reverence toward the gods. If that was what God wanted, then all Jews should decamp to the countryside, and even then they would be surrounded by people who worshiped a pantheon of deities.

When everyone was awake, he informed them that he would be attending the races. To his surprise, even Miriam accepted his decision without further protest.

He spent the next couple of hours airing out his new toga and figuring out how to wear it. If he was going to be sitting with one of the leading citizens of the city, he had to look as if he belonged there. Fortunately, his master had asked him several times during their trip to Pergamon to assist him with draping the voluminous garment around his body, so he knew generally how to do it. If not for that experience, he would have had no idea where to begin.

With Miriam's assistance, he eventually succeeded in producing a reasonable facsimile of the costume that he had observed daily on the streets of Antioch and in his master's home. He still felt as if he were wearing someone else's clothes, but Miriam assured him that he looked as good as any Roman and that he would get used to it with time.

Around the fourth hour he knocked on the door of Isidoros's house and was ushered into the atrium. He was surprised to see a dozen or so well-dressed men milling about the frescoed corridors. A few wore Roman togas, but most were attired in colorful tunics and cloaks in the Greek style.

He had presumed from the invitation that Isidoros meant for him to be his personal guest at the event, so he was surprised and disappointed to learn that he was only one member of the retinue that the wealthy man had assembled for the day. He could see now that Isidoros regarded him as a potential client and not as a friend. But he had no grounds to complain—to be treated with such honor by one of the leading citizens of Caesarea was beyond anything that he could have imagined only a few months ago. Perhaps it was even for the best, since it gave him a chance to make additional acquaintances during the course of the day.

As Marcus stood reflecting on the turn of events, he saw a thin young man in a toga working his way toward him. He appeared to be a couple of years younger than Marcus, and his face wore a convivial smile.

"You must be Marcus Coelius Felix," he declared. Marcus was startled; how did this man know his name? What else did he know about him?

"Don't look so surprised," the young man continued. "My name is Alexander, and Isidoros is my father. He told me to look out for you. I know everyone else here, so I figured you must be the man he wanted me to meet."

Marcus relaxed a bit, but remained wary. "I'm honored to make your acquaintance," he replied in as dignified a manner as he could muster.

"My father doesn't know what to make of you," said Alexander with a conspiratorial grin, "so he asked me to find out more about you. He's gotten it into his head that you're some sort of spy sent by Rome to investigate how well the procurator is managing those troublemakers in Galilee. I told him that you wouldn't tell me even if it was true, but he insisted. So I have to ask: are you spy?"

Marcus was taken aback by the question. "Of course I'm not a spy," he responded somewhat indignantly. "What ever gave your father that idea?" He regretted the tone as soon as the words left his mouth.

"I don't know," responded Alexander, showing no sign of being offended. "But I've done my duty. Now we can enjoy the races and I'll tell my father afterward that I learned nothing useful from you. How does that sound?"

"I'd be happy to have your company," he replied. "I know no one here and I've never been to a chariot race, so it would be helpful to sit with someone who can tell me what's going on."

Now it was Alexander's turn to look puzzled. "Never attended a chariot race?" he queried. "Surely you've been to the Circus Maximus in Rome." The young man eyed him suspiciously.

"I've never been to Rome," explained Marcus. "My home city in Anatolia, Antioch-near-Pisidia, has a stadium, but it's only used for athletic events. I know nothing about chariot races."

"Is that so?" mused Alexander. "You sound so genuine that I'm inclined to believe you. But you might just be a good actor who knows how to cover his tracks. If you were indeed a Roman spy, you would have an answer ready for anything that I might ask you, so there's no use in my trying to trip you up. It wouldn't matter, of course, since my father would support anything that Rome wished to do to bring those rebels to heel. He just likes to know what's going on."

He gazed at Marcus for a moment as if trying to read his mind, then went on.

"I'm being frank with you," he confided. "I don't like keeping secrets from people. But if you don't want to tell me what brings you here, that is your choice. Tell me as much or as little as you like—it's all the same to me. I've done what my father asked, and I won't trouble you any further."

Marcus felt relieved—Alexander's curiosity had given him an excuse for remaining quiet about his past. He liked the young man, but he knew better than to trust anyone in this city who wasn't a Jew. If even one person learned his true identity, his credibility would be lost. He disliked being less than honest with people, but it was crucial for him to forge ties with men like Alexander and his father in case the tensions that hung like smoke over this land should at some point break out into open conflict.

As he was considering what response to make to Alexander's final words, Isidoros rendered the question moot by emerging from his office. All eyes turned to him as he made his way around the room, greeting each man by name. He paused in front of Marcus as if trying to recall who he was. Alexander quickly stepped forward to relieve him of the trouble.

"This is Marcus Coelius Felix," he said, "the young man whom you told me to look out for. He and I have been having a nice chat while we waited for you to arrive." He smiled knowingly at Marcus.

"Marcus Coelius Felix," repeated Isidoros as if trying to seal the name in his mind. "It's good to see you again. I'm glad that you could join us today. I hope you enjoy the races. I've asked my son to watch over you and address any needs that you might have."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness," answered Marcus, bobbing his head briefly as a sign of respect. "I've enjoyed talking with your son, and I look forward to watching the races with him."

Isidoros leaned forward and laid a hand beside his mouth as if he were about to say something that he did not want others to hear.

"Given your interest in Galilee," he whispered in a conspiratorial tone, "I think you'll enjoy what the procurator has planned for the interval between races."

"Is he here?" interjected Alexander. "I thought that he was going to stay in Jerusalem until that Jewish holy day was over."

"That's correct," answered Isidoros. "He's still in Jerusalem keeping watch over those accursed Jews. But he sent his prefect back to Caesarea to stage a little show for us in recognition of his victory over a band of rebels who had gathered on the outskirts of Jerusalem. That's why we're having these races today—the whole event was put together rather hurriedly at the command of the procurator."

Isidoros peered at Marcus as if awaiting his response. "I look forward to seeing what the procurator has in store for us," he replied, trying his best to look as if he meant it.

"Good, good," replied Isidoros with a thin smile that reminded Marcus of a fat toad that has just swallowed a fly. Then he turned to the others in the room. "Come, come, everyone!" he shouted. "It's time to head for the stadium!"

Isidoros stepped toward the doorway as the others jostled for position behind him. Alexander seized Marcus's elbow and dragged him to the front of the line so that they stood directly behind his father. Marcus tried to resist, but Alexander ignored him. For them to sit together, he explained, they would have to enter the stadium at the same time and file one after the other into the rows that were reserved for his father and his retinue. It would also be good for Marcus, as a new man in the city, to be seen occupying a leading position in Isidoros's retinue.

Seeing that he had no choice in the matter, Marcus acquiesced, and soon he and Alexander were strolling side by side through the streets of Caesarea. As they walked, Marcus pondered what Isidoros had said about a special event that would take place between the races. What could it be? His mention of Jewish rebels near Jerusalem reminded Marcus of the news that Annas had received from home, but he could not imagine what kind of entertainment they might have planned or why Isidoros thought that he might enjoy it. He felt uneasy about the prospect, but there was nothing that he could do about it now. The answer would come soon enough.