





# A RAM FOR MARS



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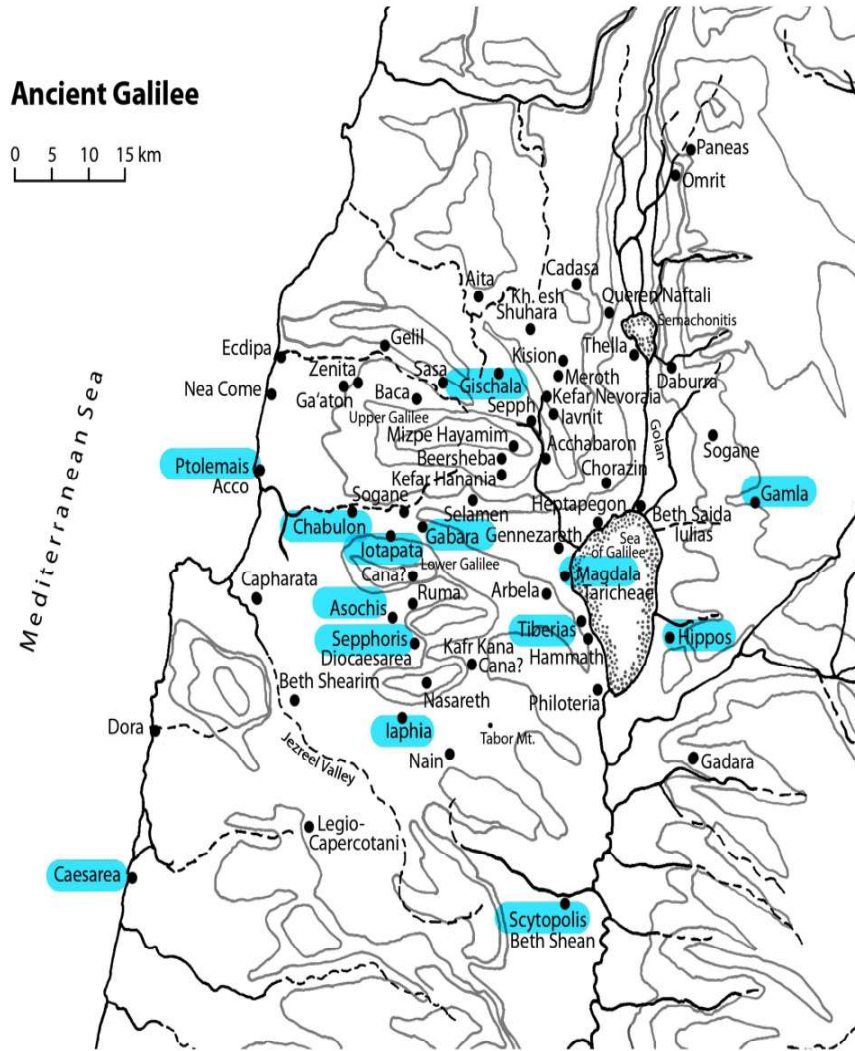
*To Elliot, Norton, and Lennon,  
my wonderful grandchildren  
who grew up hearing about these books.  
May they enjoy the stories themselves one day!*

## MAP OF JUDEA (CITIES NAMED IN BOOK SHADED)



# MAP OF GALILEE

(CITIES NAMED IN BOOK SHADED)





## SERIES CHRONOLOGY

## A ROOSTER FOR ASKLEPIOS

October 54 CE	Nero acclaimed Emperor
December 54 CE	Lucius elected agoranomos
July 55 CE	Lucius deposed as agoranomos
August 55 CE	Festival of Mên Askaenos at Antioch
September 55 CE	Lucius and Marcus travel to the Asklepion at Pergamon
September-October 55 CE	Lucius treated at the Asklepion

## A BULL FOR PLUTO

Early November 55 CE	Lucius and Marcus leave the Asklepion for Hierapolis
Mid-November 55 CE	Lucius attempts suicide at Pluto's cave
December 55 CE	Lucius and Marcus leave Hierapolis for Antioch
December 55 CE	Lucius exiles Gaius to the countryside
February 56 CE	Lucius reveals Marcus's past and adopts him as his son
March 56 CE	Lucius dies, Selena gives birth
April 56 CE	Lucius and Miriam marry and leave for Israel with Lucius's son

## A RAM FOR MARS\*

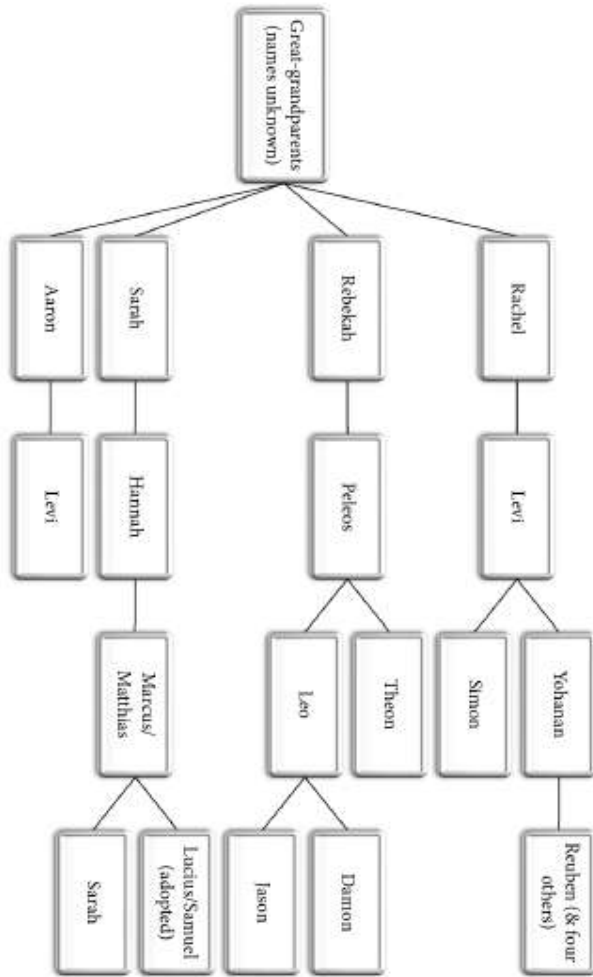
April 56 CE	Marcus and Miriam arrive at Caesarea, leave for Sepphoris
May 56 CE	Marcus and Miriam in Sepphoris, Tiberias, and Magdala
May 56 CE	Marcus meets his cousin Leo and learns his mother's story
56-65 CE	Marcus builds his business and is elected to city council
57 CE	Marcus meets his cousin Yohanan of Gischala

60 CE	Sarah is born
Spring 66 CE	Jew-Gentile conflicts in Caesarea
April 66 CE	Mocking of Florus in Jerusalem followed by slaughter of citizens
May 66 CE	Florus driven out of Jerusalem
July 66 CE	Marcus appointed to Magdala city council
August 66 CE	Jerusalem priests stop accepting sacrifices from gentiles
August-September 66 CE	Street battles in Jerusalem between rebels and supporters of Rome
September 66 CE	Sicarii take Masada, rebels take Antonia fortress and royal palace
October 66 CE	Jews attacked in Caesarea, killed or driven out
October-November 66 CE	Cestius Gallus attacks Jerusalem, routed while returning to coast
November 66 CE	Rebels set up governing council
December 66 CE	Yosef arrives as commander of Galilee, raises army, fortifies cities
December 66 CE	Burning of Antipas's palace in Tiberias
January 67 CE	Yohanan takes charge of security for northern Galilee
January 67 CE	Yosef attacked in Magdala over handling of seized goods, retaliates
January 67 CE	Yosef suppresses revolt at Tiberias with fake navy ruse
March 67 CE	Failed attempt by Jerusalem delegation to remove Yosef
April 67 CE	Sepphoris requests and receives a Roman garrison
May 67 CE	Vespasian and Titus arrive in Galilee,
May 67 CE	Marcus and Yannai deliver letter to Vespasian, confined to camp
May 67 CE	Placidus ravages lower Galilee, Yosef's troops desert
May 67 CE	Yosef goes to Tiberias, then Yotapata
June 67 CE	Vespasian arrives at Yotapata, erects seige
July 67 CE	Yotapata falls, Yosef surrenders, Marcus

	and Yannai go home
August 67 CE	Tiberias surrenders to Vespasian, rebels flee to Magdala
September 67 CE	Romans battle rebels at Magdala, Marcus intervenes to stop it
October 67 CE	Romans besiege and conquer Gamla
October 67 CE	Gischala capitulates, Yohanan flees to Jerusalem
Winter 67-68 CE	Vespasian rests troops at Caesarea, rebels battle in Jerusalem
Spring 68 CE	Vespasian moves into Judea, prepares to assault Jerusalem
June 68 CE	Nero dies by suicide
June 68-July 69 CE	Vespasian returns to Caesarea while would-be emperors fight
April 69 CE	Simon bar Giora enters Jerusalem
June 69 CE	Vespasian pacifies Judean countryside
July 69 CE	Vespasian's soldiers acclaim him emperor, he goes to Alexandria
December 69 CE	Supporters of Vespasian defeat Vitellius, making him emperor
Winter 69-70 CE	Conflicts between Simon and Yohanan in Jerusalem
April 70 CE	Titus arrives at Jerusalem, organizes siege
April 70 CE	Marcus visits Jerusalem to bring Samuel home
May 70 CE	Third (outer) wall taken by Romans
June 70 CE	Second wall falls, Romans pause
July 70 CE	Antonia fortress taken by Romans
August 70 CE	Romans invade temple compound, temple burns
September 70 CE	Romans besiege upper city, Marcus returns, last resistance fails
October 70 CE	Simon and Yohanan captured
73 or 74 CE	Masada fortress falls, war ends

\*Josephus gives few dates, so many of the dates listed here are scholarly approximations

FAMILY TREE OF MARCUS COELIUS FELIX



## JEWISH FESTIVALS, 65-70 CE

YEAR	PASSOVER	SHEVUOT	HIGH HOLY DAYS
65 CE	April 8-15	June 2	September 19-28
66 CE	April 28-May 5	June 22	October 9-18
67 CE	April 17-24	June 7	Sept 28-Oct 7
68 CE	April 4-11	May 29	September 15-24
69 CE	April 24-May 1	June 18	October 5-14
70 CE	April 13-20	June 3	Sept 24-Oct 3



## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

IN THE YEAR 66 CE (the notation that historians use instead of “A.D.”), a series of localized incidents in the Roman province of Judea marked the beginning of a brutal seven-year struggle for independence from Roman rule. The vast majority of Judeans longed for the restoration of a self-governing Jewish state like the one that the Maccabees had created in the second century BCE (the same as “B.C.”) after a successful rebellion against the Greeks, but for most this was a distant hope. Few could imagine taking up arms against the most powerful empire that the world had seen. The scattered bands who did so were derided by the rich and powerful as thugs and bandits.

The Romans moved periodically to suppress these bandits, killing some and arresting others. Those whom they caught were subjected to brutal punishments, including crucifixion, as an example for others. But their vindictiveness produced the opposite result—public sympathy was aroused and more people joined the movement. By the early 60s the land was a powder keg waiting to be lit. The fuse was ignited by a series of repressive acts by the Roman procurator Gessius Florus that spurred a revolt in Jerusalem. The rebellion quickly spread across the nation.

*A Ram for Mars* takes place in the years leading up to and including the disastrous war that resulted from this drive for freedom. It follows Marcus Coelius Felix, a recently liberated slave from central Anatolia (modern Turkey), as he searches for his long-lost mother and extended family in Galilee, the northern district of what we today call Israel. He is accompanied by his new wife Miriam, the infant son of his former master, and the child's nursemaid, a slave named Deborah. The story of how they ended up there is told in the first two books of this series, *A Rooster for Asklepios* and *A Bull for Pluto*.

*A Ram for Mars* can be read independently of the first two books, but many things about the characters' histories, motives, and actions will be confusing without them. If you're starting with this book due to an interest in the Jewish Revolt, I would highly encourage you to go back and read the other two books when you're done, or better yet, stop and read them now. They're also available in audio form on Audible.com if you prefer to listen.

A brief summary of the first two books will serve as a helpful reminder for those who have read them and fill in useful background information for those who have not.

*A Rooster for Asklepios* recounts an eventful year and a half in the life of Marcus, a slave in the household of Lucius Coelius Felix, a minor aristocrat in the Roman colony of Antioch-near-Pisidia in central Asia Minor (Turkey). Unlike

most slaves, Marcus was educated from childhood to serve as Lucius's bookkeeper and personal assistant, and Lucius leans heavily on him for managing his financial affairs and correspondence. They have a good working relationship, but the vast social gulf and power differential between them prohibits them from becoming friends.

The story follows Marcus and Lucius on an extended journey across western Asia Minor to the sanctuary of the Greek healing god Asklepios near the city of Pergamon. They go there in response to a dream in which Lucius believes the god promised to cure him of an abdominal ailment if he made a pilgrimage to his temple. The quest is unsuccessful, but along the way Marcus uncovers the startling fact that both his grandmother and his mother, who had died giving birth to him, had been Jews. In a society where anti-Jewish sentiment was rampant, this is not an pleasant discovery.

*A Bull for Pluto* relates the aftermath of that journey. A despondent Lucius tries to commit suicide by breathing noxious gasses at the temple of Pluto, Roman god of the underworld, but Marcus finds him in time to save his life. While awaiting his recovery, Marcus struggles long and hard with whether to embrace his Jewish heritage, assisted by a young Jewish slave named Miriam for whom he has developed an attraction. She insists that he must be circumcised before she can return his affection, but he is unwilling to go that far.

On his deathbed Lucius reveals the astonishing truth about Marcus's ancestry and birth, including the possibility that his mother might be alive in her ancestral home of Israel. To make up for his deception, Lucius liberates him and Miriam from slavery, adopts him as his son, and leaves him a sizeable inheritance. Free to write his own future, Marcus finally agrees to be circumcised so that Miriam will marry him. Lucius dies soon afterward and his young wife does the same while giving birth, leaving an infant son whom Marcus rescues from certain death at the hands of his jealous older brother. The three of them then board a ship for Israel to search for Marcus's long-lost family.

As in the first two books, everything you are about to read has been extensively researched and reflects the best of modern scholarship on first-century Israel and the events that took place during this era. All descriptions of landscapes and cities are based on personal visits and careful examination of archaeological remains. As far as possible, the names of characters other than Marcus and his family are those of people who really lived at the time of the story, though we know more about some than others. Where names were unknown, they were created for the sake of the narrative.

To learn more about the people, places, and practices mentioned in this series, see the materials posted under the Resources tab and the Blog tab on my website,

<http://aslavesstory.com>. If you have questions or comments about the novels, I'm happy to answer—just click on the Contact tab on my web page. Don't miss the pages that follow directly after the title page, where you'll find the following:

- maps of Galilee and Judea to help you locate the cities and other places mentioned in the story;
- a chronology of events that indicates how the story relates to modern calendars;
- a family tree for the main character (Marcus) that clarifies the links between his various family members; and
- a schedule of Jewish festivals from 65-70 CE that can help you to follow Marcus's various trips to Jerusalem.

For more information on the series, including new blog posts, giveaways, and special sales, follow me on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/aslavesstory> or on X (Twitter) at <https://x.com/aslavesstory>. If you liked this book, please leave a review on Amazon, Audible, or wherever you bought it so that others will know that it's worth their time. And if you've not yet read the first two books, make that your next priority!

### *Historical Notes*

If you don't really care about the history behind my story and are eager to start reading, feel free to do so at this point. But for readers who do care, here are some notes that you might find useful.

First, a word about names. As I explained in the preface to *A Rooster for Asklepios*, wealthy Romans typically had three names during the era when this story takes place, and freed slaves took on the family names of their former masters. The same was true for those who were adopted. Thus Marcus the slave became Marcus Coelius Felix after he was liberated and adopted by his master, Lucius Coelius Felix.

In Galilee, however, having a Latin name could subject the bearer to suspicion and abuse. When therefore Marcus and Miriam decide to settle in Galilee, he and the infant Lucius (named after his father) take on new names from the Aramaic language that was spoken in Israel at the time—Marcus becomes Matthias and the child becomes Samuel. This can be confusing since some characters call them by one name and others by the other. But you'll get used to it.

Converting Latin and Aramaic names into English raises additional problems because both languages have letters that English conventions render differently than one would expect—for example, the Latin "I" becomes "J" in English. Latin endings are also commonly dropped. Thus "Iulius Caesar" becomes "Julius

Caesar” and “Vespasianus” becomes “Vespasian.” I followed these conventions for Latin names so as not to confuse my readers since several of the Romans who appear in my story are known historical figures. For Aramaic names, on the other hand, I stuck with more literal renderings to give readers a sense of how foreign they would have seemed to their Roman rulers. For example, I use “Yacob” rather than “Jacob,” “Yehudah” rather than “Judah,” and “Yeshua” rather than “Jesus.” This decision leads to certain inconsistencies that will be noted by readers familiar with the languages, but most won’t know the difference.

Next, a word about characters. Two men who play a prominent role in my story are also important figures in the Jewish historian Josephus’s *Jewish War* (our only coherent account of the period) and his autobiographical *Life*. One is Josephus himself, who appears in these pages under his Aramaic name, Yosef bar Mattathias. (“Bar” is the Aramaic word for “son of.”) The other is his nemesis John of Gischala, or Yohanan bar Levi as he appears here. Josephus has a persistent (and annoying) tendency to glorify his own actions and motives while vilifying those of his opponents, so his depictions of historical figures must be taken with a sizeable grain of salt.

Like most propagandists, however, he does slip up now and then and present information that runs contrary to his agenda. For example, he says in *Life* 43-45 that Yohanan tried to tamp down the war fever in Gischala rather than promoting it as he claims elsewhere, and he admits that John was good at recruiting followers and getting things done (*War* 2.588-90). Historians have used these “slip-ups” and other material to forge a more balanced understanding of both men. Readers who are familiar with Josephus’s writings will note my revisionist interpretations of both men, but nothing is lost if you miss it. Imagination has of course been required to convert Josephus’s descriptions of both men into an engaging narrative.

Finally, a word about my handling of Josephus’s writings. Historians hold widely different opinions regarding the historical reliability of Josephus’s reports. Some view them as essentially sound if occasionally exaggerated while others question large swaths of his record. The matter is complicated by the frequency with which he creates speeches for his characters, describes events at which he was not present, and contradicts himself or external records. Sifting through his narratives to create a coherent account was a challenge, and other historians are sure to disagree with some of my reconstructions. That’s perfectly fine—the craft of creating history from fragmentary and conflicting sources is invariably messy. In several places I omitted, rearranged, simplified, or created materials to make sense of Josephus’s narratives and maintain the continuity of my narrative.

In the end I followed Josephus more often than not, but readers should not confuse my story (or that of Josephus, for that matter) with historical truth. This

is a work of fiction, and that gave me certain liberties that I would not take when writing as a historian. This is especially true for my efforts to show what events might have looked like from the standpoint of people living in Galilee, where Marcus and Miriam decide to settle. Josephus led the revolutionary army there during the war, yet he says little about what ordinary Galileans were thinking when relating his activities there, and what he does say is heavily biased.

I close with a word about the title, *A Ram for Mars*. Mars was the Roman god of war, and rams were one of his choice sacrifices. Roman soldiers routinely prayed and sacrificed to Mars before and after battle in the belief that he was the one who gave them victory. Josephus says nothing about Roman troops in Judea sacrificing to Mars, so the accounts that appear in this story are fictional. But there is little question that something like this would have happened on multiple occasions.

### *Acknowledgments*

I'd like to express my thanks to three people who read the final manuscript of this book finding errors and giving me suggestions for improvement: Elijah Anuluwapo, Jenny Miles, and Keith Salis. The book is better as a result of their helpful observations—they made me a better writer.

Thanks are also due to Mark Pogodzinski, my editor at NFB Publishing, who has done all that I asked and more to make the books in my “A Slave’s Story” trilogy look attractive and present them to the public. His patience is remarkable.

My greatest thanks are reserved for my wife Laurel, who launched me on the path of writing fiction by asking me one day out of the blue, “With all this historical work you do, why don’t you try writing historical fiction?” She bore with me through the years it took to bring the first two books to fruition while teaching a full load of university courses and writing academic books and articles, and she didn’t complain when the first two years of my retirement were consumed with writing the final book in the series. She’s a saint.

I dedicate this book to the three greatest grandchildren in the world, Elliot, Norton, and Lennon Stanley, who have never known a time when their granddaddy wasn’t working on these novels. I look forward to hearing their thoughts when they’re old enough to read them!



## PROLOGUE

THE CITY OF Jerusalem thrummed with anticipation in the days leading up to the Passover celebration. It was the third year of Emperor Nero's reign, but Rome seemed far away. If not for the prayers and sacrifices that the priests offered daily on his behalf at the holy temple, one might forget that Judea lay under the Roman thumb. 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 seat of Roman government lay not in Jerusalem but at the northern port of Caesarea, four days distant by foot or two on horseback, and the authorities there mostly left the management of Jerusalem to the priests. They did keep a small garrison in the Antonia fortress to monitor the crowds that gathered daily around the temple, but the soldiers generally kept to themselves unless trouble was brewing. They didn't like the Jews any more than the Jews liked them.

Passover was a time of festivity, but unrest always lurked just below the surface. The masses who thronged the city could hardly avoid thinking of Rome when they repeated the age-old story of how their God had humbled a seemingly invincible nation, the Egyptians, who thought they could oppress God's people without consequences. Every few years some wandering preacher would come to Jerusalem declaring that God stood ready to support his people if they would only rise up and drive the evil from their land.

These men knew better than to name the Romans openly, but everyone knew what they meant. Hordes of curious pilgrims would gather to listen and cheer their message, but few ever acted on what they heard. Everyone knew that the Romans made short work of popular prophets and their followers.

No one was more anxious during the Passover season than the priests and officials who managed the temple—they were the ones whom the Romans would hold accountable if the peace was broken. They had hoped that the current procurator, Marcus Antonius Felix, might be more sympathetic to Jewish interests after his recent marriage to Drusilla, the daughter of the former Jewish king Agrippa, but nothing that they had heard so far lent substance to those hopes. Reports from Caesarea indicated that he was still the same ruthless official who had brutally suppressed every Jewish preacher or bandit chief who challenged the authority of Rome.

If Felix had gained any wisdom from his Jewish wife, he would stay in Caesarea until the festival was over. But the Romans were rarely wise when it came to managing Jewish affairs. Everyone knew that he would arrive soon leading a troop of reinforcements for the Jerusalem garrison, which would be placed on

high alert. That was the Roman way—intimidate the crowds with a display of force to halt any disturbances before they began. And on the whole it worked: no one was eager to see Roman soldiers hacking into the crowd with those well-honed swords. Enough Jewish blood had been spilled in the past to make people fear what the Romans might do. Until God arose to redeem them, they had no choice but to submit.

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

"It's about time you got here, Ephraim," called one of the men as the two newcomers entered the circle and found a place on the dirt floor. "We were beginning to wonder if you were coming."

"I apologize for my tardiness," said the new arrival, scanning the circle with his eyes. "A couple of customers came to my shop just as I was ready to close, and I had to hurry home after they left and pick up my cousin to join me." He waved toward the young man sitting next to him, who gave the men an uneasy smile.

"He doesn't belong here," muttered a gruff voice from the other side of the circle. "How do we know 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 Ephraim. "But there's no reason to worry about him. His name is Yehudah, and he walked all the way here from Galilee where his family has led the effort to purify the land since the time of the first Herod—cursed be his name. He lost several relatives to Roman swords in the rising that followed Herod's death. He's the nephew of those brave Galilean brothers Yacob and Shimon who were crucified a decade ago by that turncoat Jew Tiberius Alexander. He came to Jerusalem ostensibly to attend the festival, but in reality to learn what's going on between that dog Felix and his lackey, Yonathan the high priest. The news that they've been getting in Galilee is rather garbled, and he and his friends want to see 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."

All eyes turned to a hefty middle-aged man with a grizzled beard whom they evidently held in high esteem. "What do you say, Manasseh?" asked the man who had objected to the newcomer's presence.

“Let him stay,” replied Manasseh. “He has no reason to betray us, and it might be useful 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 Manasseh, “we can begin. As you know, things have not gone well recently for men like us whom God has moved to drive the idolators from our land. Since his arrival four years ago, that bastard Felix has executed many of our brothers who by deeds of valor called our people to rise up against the godless Romans. Equally despicable is what he did to our brother Eleazar, who is on his way to Rome in chains after Felix reneged on his promise to give him safe passage to Jerusalem to meet with him. I tried to warn him that the Romans couldn’t be trusted, but he wouldn’t listen. Now he wishes he had.”

Manasseh stifled a smile and several heads nodded their agreement.

“Brothers,” he went on, “the time has come for us to admit that we’ve reached a dead end. We’re never going to drive the Romans out by attacking them openly. It’s not that they’re better fighters than we are; you all know how our brothers have made them pay dearly when they’ve engaged in open battle. 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 chief priests, who are corrupt to the core. They’re worse than the Romans—they’ve sold out their people in order to hold onto their ill-gotten gains.”

“Amen, amen,” shouted a dozen lusty voices.

“The time has come,” declared Manasseh, rising to his feet, “for a new approach. Confronting the Romans directly is gaining us nothing except early graves. We should focus instead on the men who help them maintain their hold on us, those who serve them for personal gain.”

He paused and peered around the room to gauge their reaction.

“Who did you have in mind?” asked one of the conspirators.

“Who do I have in mind?” echoed Manasseh. “Who do you think? The rich bastards who are making money hand over fist by supplying the Romans and collecting taxes for them from the produce of God’s land! City councilors who invite godless armies to suppress their own people so that they can stay in power! Corrupt priests who pollute God’s temple with their evil deeds! Show our brothers that the prophets of old did not speak in vain when they declared that God stands with the lowly and oppressed and exacts judgment on the rich and powerful who abuse them!”

Manasseh’s voice trembled with fervor by the time he reached the end of his speech. His words were greeted with hearty applause and shouts of “Amen!” He

gazed fiercely around the room for several heartbeats before raising his hand to call for quiet.

“Worst of all is that craven high priest, Yonathan,” he went on. “He’s the one who petitioned Caesar to send Marcus Antonius Felix”—he spat the man’s name as if the very words polluted his lips—“to replace Ventidius Cumanus as procurator after he was shipped off to Rome to answer for his treatment of the Samaritans. Cumanus was bad enough, but Felix has been utterly ruthless. Any high priest who could unleash such evils upon his own people deserves to die.”

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

“Are you suggesting we execute the high priest?” he asked, his voice tinged with disbelief.

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

“But won’t the death of the high priest bring Felix down on us before we can put the rest of your plan into action?” probed another man. “I’m as willing as anyone to sacrifice my life for my people and my God, but I don’t want to be cut down before I have a chance to strike a blow.”

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

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

“During the festival,” explained Manasseh. “The streets will be so crowded that it will be easy for one of us to slip up beside him with a dagger and deal him a fatal blow. The executioner can melt into the crowd before anyone realizes what has happened. The chances of getting caught are slim.”

“And if that doesn’t get their attention,” asked a man whose tone betrayed his doubt, “are you saying we should do the same to others?”

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

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

“We’ll expand our operations beyond Jerusalem,” said Manasseh. “That’s where

our young guest from Galilee can prove his worth. He and his friends could initiate similar actions there, and others could do the same elsewhere. Soon the entire nation would erupt in revolt against the Romans and their accomplices. The sheep will become the wolves and the wolves the sheep. Even the mighty armies of Rome can't obliterate an entire people. They'd have to leave."

"Amen! Amen!" cried a chorus of voices.

"May God make it so!" called another. The room resounded with shouts of assent. Manasseh allowed the cheers to continue for several moments before calling for silence.

"I'm happy to see that we're in agreement," he declared. "But this is a serious change of strategy and we should not enter into it lightly. Let's meet here again in two days and discuss it further. Those who are willing to take part in the executions should come prepared to say so. Those who are not will swear an oath that they will reveal our plans to no one on pain of death. The lives of many good men are at stake. Are we agreed?" Everyone shouted their assent.

"Before we go," said Manasseh, "I have one more thing to say. This is a perilous course, and its end is by no means certain. If we fail, it could cost us our lives. But if God grants us his support, as I believe he will, we will unleash a holy conflagration that will burn until it has cleansed every impurity from our land and restored Jerusalem to the holiness that befits the city of God." He lowered his head and raised his arms in a signal for prayer.

"Let God arise," he announced in a booming voice, "and his enemies be scattered."

"Let those who hate him flee before him," intoned the other men, repeating the next verse of the well-known psalm.

"As wax melts before the fire," continued Manasseh, "so let the wicked perish before God."

"But let the righteous be glad," recited the others, "let them exult before God."

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

"May God bless our endeavors," declared Manasseh, lowering his arms.

"Amen, amen," echoed the others.

"Now go in peace," said Manasseh, "and I'll see you back here in two days."

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

"And so it begins," said Manasseh to Ephraim, who with his young cousin was the last to leave.

"And so it begins," echoed Ephraim somberly. "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 the creaking of the boat and the waves lapping its sides. “By Neptune, I’d give anything right now to plant my feet 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 rail, lowered his head, and squeezed his eyes tight 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 Neptune 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 irked Marcus. Why did he have to make such a fuss over an innocent turn of phrase? Why couldn’t he let it pass? He had told Marcus that he came 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 idolators and that’s how they speak. But you left that life 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 gazed at the sea as if he were done talking.

“We’re making good time today,” he remarked a while later. “I’ve made this trip several times to visit 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 as a bigger wave rocked the deck beneath them. “Three days from now you’ll be sorry the trip is over.” He winked.

“You want to bet on that?” countered Marcus. “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 on 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,” said Marcus, relaxing his grip on the rail. “At any rate, it’s a helpful reminder.”

Annas turned his attention back to the sea and 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 curved prow was cutting a clean swath 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 behind a wealthy patron as he made his way to the baths.

As he watched, one of the birds tucked its wings and plummeted toward the water. Marcus was puzzled until the bird emerged 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 men—it was invariably men—were constantly striving to obtain what others possessed. His new wife Miriam, who had always known she was a Jew, had told him that people were not like that in Israel—people 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 as his thoughts drifted to the road ahead of him. He knew almost nothing about this new land where he was going and had only vague ideas about what he might do when he got there. But he knew where he would start: he would travel 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 confidence 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 wasn’t persuaded; he preferred to rely on his own ingenuity. It had served him well 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 about your family,” remarked Annas, calling his mind back to the ship. “I can see why you’d be eager to search for your mother after learning that she returned to her mother’s homeland after being forced to give you up. But I was also thinking about how God might have used your master’s 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 who could make that claim, but virtually all of them had some connection with the family of the Herods, who have been citizens since the time of Caesar. My family is rich and influential, but we never entertained any hopes of being given citizenship because my grandfather and father did not get along with the Herods. Even if we were citizens, I’d be careful about publicizing the fact, especially up in Galilee where you’re going.”

“Why is that?” asked Marcus, puzzled. “Do people there dislike 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 of how they viewed Romans, though he did know that Rome had sent soldiers to Israel decades earlier to put down a rebellion that broke out after Herod’s death. His master had told him that story because it resulted in his grandmother being 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 its troubles, but Romans are unpopular everywhere these days. Since the death of king Agrippa a decade ago, our land has been ruled by Roman officials who see us as little more than numbers on a tax scroll. Some of them have done things in ignorance that moved people to riot, especially in Jerusalem.”

“Like what?” asked Marcus.

“Like refusing to punish a soldier who exposed his backside to the priests when they were engaged in a sacrifice,” replied Annas. “They have no respect for our religion. Their only concerns are to maintain order and keep the taxes flowing, and they can be brutal to anyone whom they perceive as a threat to those interests. They’ve rounded up and executed many troublemakers over the years, but more keep popping up. When soldiers chase after them, innocent people are invariably hurt, and that adds fuel to the fires of resentment.”

“I can see how that would make things worse,” remarked Marcus. “Don’t they see how counterproductive it is?”

“You’d think they would have learned by now,” replied Annas. “But they seem oblivious. Our nation is like a cauldron hanging above a crackling fire that needs only a little more heat to boil, yet they keep adding fuel. I fear that one day it will spill over into open revolt. God help us if it does.”

“I knew none of this,” 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’s 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 popular following. When the procurator sends men to chase them down, they take refuge in one of the many caves that pock the region. I learned about this a few years ago from a friend of mine—a priest who lives in Sepphoris—but I’ve forgotten the details. I’ll give you his name and you can ask him about it when you visit the city. He’d also be a good person to ask about your relatives—his family has lived in Galilee for generations. They were in Sepphoris when it was devastated by the Romans following Herod’s death. He could tell you if there is anyone still alive from that time 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?”

“He does,” affirmed 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 of our leading families want their children to learn Greek since it’s 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’s little need for the resident to know more than a smattering of Greek. Aramaic is the language of the people—you should learn a few phrases if you intend to spend much time in Galilee. My friend hasn’t had much need to speak Greek since returning 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 barely detect any accent.”

“My brother in Attalia is several years older than I am,” replied Annas, “and my father sent me to stay with him and his wife for months on end 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 the family before 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 your help,” declared Marcus, abashed at the way he had misjudged the man. “Everything about this land where we’re going

is new to me, and I'm sure I'll make countless mistakes. Remember, I wasn't raised among Jews as you and Miriam were. But I don't want to say or do things in my ignorance that might prejudice people against me or hinder my search. If nothing else, you've taught me not to wear my brand-new toga in public." He 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 information from a man who had shown such heartfelt concern for his welfare. He had done what he and Miriam had agreed, giving Annas an edited version of their story that left out key elements that they thought might cause people to think ill of them. Now he was having doubts about that strategy.

He thought back over the story he had told Annas, and it was all was true: how he had met Miriam in Hierapolis while traveling home from Pergamon; how a man he knew had told him of 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 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 what he had left out was equally important, if not more so: the fact that they had been slaves during most of those events; that he had only agreed to forsake the gods of Rome and be circumcised in order to marry Miriam; that the infant who traveled with them was neither their child nor a hereditary 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 saw now that he would have to adopt a new strategy to avoid being caught in a lie. He could leave out the part about being a Roman citizen unless they met a situation where it might be useful, but he could not hide the fact that they had spent their entire lives in gentile 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 could learn these things in time, but that would not help them when they arrived in Sepphoris and began inquiring about Marcus's family. People would know immediately that they were foreigners and become suspicious. They might even refuse to speak with them. What were they to do? 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 straightened 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 good, and I hesitated about leaving her behind to visit my brother. But she insisted that I go since the letter that we received from his wife indicated that he was very sick and it might be the last time I saw him. But thanks be to God, his health improved significantly while I was there, so I was able to return home with a clear 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 by the time I return. Perhaps she just needed a break from me.” He winked.

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

“May it be so,” agreed 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 ancestors 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 we can eat the Passover meal together. There’s no place like Jerusalem during a festival—it’s noisy and crowded, but it’s exhilarating to be surrounded by thousands of 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, so you could meet some new friends along the way.”

“I’m grateful for the invitation,” said 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 go anywhere. But we can join you next year if you tell me how and where to find you. We’re both eager to see Jerusalem.”

“I’ll excuse you this time,” said Annas, turning suddenly serious. “But you must know that God commands every adult male among his people to go up to the holy city for the three major festivals and present 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—too many of his people are wallowing in the same mire of disobedience for which he punished our ancestors. The way to gain our freedom is to obey the laws of God, not to engage in some hopeless struggle against the Romans. Remember this when you go up to Galilee. There are 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 was 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'll certainly remember what you said," he equivocated. "And I'll make sure to come and visit you and your wife the first time Miriam and I come to Jerusalem."

"I look forward to it," replied Annas, resuming his jovial demeanor. "Until then, may God make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you, and give you peace."

"The same to you," echoed Marcus, unsure how to respond. They clasped hands and smiled, then turned and walked unsteadily toward the spots where their goods were stored at opposite ends of the ship.

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THREE days later the port of Caesarea emerged above the horizon. Marcus and Miriam had stood by the railing all day after the captain assured them that they would reach land that day, but all they could see was varying shades of blue. A few hours ago they had thrilled to the call of a sailor shouting he had sighted land, but a quick inquiry had told them that they were still well north of the capital. They stared for an hour or so at the sandy coastline, but their legs grew weary and they decided to go and rest.

Miriam found it hard to relax. She was so eager to set foot on the ground where the God of Israel had appeared to her ancestors that she could barely sit still. Marcus could not understand her attachment to a place she had never visited. All he wanted was to get off this boat; any patch of dry land would do. He had already sworn to Miriam that he would never board a ship again if he could help it.

Sprawling on a stack of blankets that smelled of salt and sweat, Marcus marveled at how close they had grown to Annas in the three days they had spent together. At Miriam's urging, he had finally confessed how he had glossed over the years they spent as slaves and his reasons for doing so. Annas had surprised them with his nonchalant acceptance of the news.

"I understand why you'd be hesitant about trusting a stranger with that kind of information," he told them, "but you need not be anxious. Thousands of our people have been enslaved by foreign adversaries over the years, but that doesn't make them any less our brothers and sisters. How do you think so many Jews came to live in the lands of the gentiles?"

"I—I never thought about it," confessed Marcus. "They were just there."

"Some, like my brother, moved there by choice," Annas explained, "but many others are like you, descendants of men and women taken in war. Many have succeeded in regaining their freedom as you did, but thousands more still labor in bondage. You're not the first Jewish slaves who have returned home after gaining your liberty—you're sure to meet others as you grow acquainted with your neigh-

bors 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 like a heavy weight had fallen from his shoulders. He started to thank Annas, but he was not done.

"On the whole," he continued, "I think you'll find that our people have a soft spot for people like you and Miriam 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. It might even elicit sympathy from those you approach about your family, especially when they see that you're rich and educated. Those qualities carry as much weight in our land as they do elsewhere. Familial descent, on the other hand, is less important here than among the gentiles because our people intermarry regularly across clan lines. The only time it matters is for priests like me, who must be descended from a line of priests in order to serve at God's altar. With your resources, you won't find it hard to forge a new life among our people."

That conversation had occurred only yesterday, but it felt like an age ago as they coasted south toward the place where Annas's assurances would be tested. Marcus wanted to believe him, but he could not help feeling anxious. Since childhood he had been ignored or treated as an inferior by his master's friends and family, and this view of himself had become deeply ingrained in his soul. He had also seen how such 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 confidence that his recent acceptance of Judaism would cause people to think well of him. Most of the people he knew in Antioch, whether slave or free, held low opinions of Jews, deriding them as atheists and misanthropes because they shunned the rites of the local deities. Few had anything good to say about them, and even fewer had any interest in doing business with them or interacting socially. His own master, who was more welcoming than most, had been angry when he learned that his 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.

"Come with me," urged Annas, who knelt beside him prodding his shoulder. "You can see Caesarea from here."

"Really?" exclaimed Miriam, leaping to her feet. "Come, Marcus! We're there!"

Marcus roused himself and wiped the sleep from his eyes, amazed to learn that he had been sleeping. A crowd had formed at the rail by the time he sidled up beside Miriam.

"If you look carefully," said Annas, pointing toward a distant jumble of gray

and white structures, “you’ll see two buildings protruding upward 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.”

Marcus peered in the direction where he was pointing but saw only a lumpy mass.

“The harbor is a marvelous piece of engineering,” Annas went on, oblivious to his incomprehension. “Today it’s one of the largest ports on the Great Sea, but it was only a tiny fishing village when the first king Herod decided to make it his capital. Our land has a long coast, but it lacks natural harbors where ships can load and unload cargo and take shelter from the storms that buffet the shore on occasion. Herod needed a good port to ship people and goods to and from the rest of the empire, so he hired a pack of Roman engineers to design an artificial basin broad enough to hold scores of ships at once. Then he drafted soldiers and slaves to build what they designed.”

“It sounds like a massive project,” observed Marcus. “How long did it take to finish?”

“Not as long as you might think,” said Annas. “The work was completed in less than a decade. The foundation was the hardest part—the workers had to sink huge pillars of concrete into the sea, then erect the port facilities on top of them. They also built warehouses and other structures for storing and shipping goods. It was a gargantuan project, the biggest that our country had ever seen, but it was worth the cost when you consider how it has improved our opportunities for trade and travel. And it’s beautiful, too! You’ll be amazed when you see it.”

“The only harbor I’ve seen, apart from the one at Attalia, was at Ephesus,” observed Marcus, eager to show off his knowledge. “It was a massive facility. 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’d suspect that ours is bigger 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 learn 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, who had not appeared to be listening, jerked her head up 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 explained, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder. “We can talk about it later.”

Miriam pushed his hand away. “We most certainly will,” she replied, glaring at

him for a long moment before turning to face the horizon. Marcus followed her gaze to the approaching city.

“You were asking me about Caesarea,” said Annas in a rather clumsy attempt to distract them from their dispute. “Apart from the harbor, it’s much like any other Greek or Roman city. The streets are arranged in a grid pattern and paved with stones, and you’ll find all of the facilities that you would expect in a city: a bustling agora, a large theater, a stadium, an aqueduct, public fountains, and honorific statues. The only unusual feature is the seaside palace where the Herods stay when they visit. I imagine it’s much like the city where you grew up.”

“That’s good to know,” said Marcus. “It will be comforting to live in familiar surroundings while we find our way in this new land.”

“I’m sure it will,” agreed Annas. “But you might be surprised to learn that Caesarea also has many statues and temples honoring the so-called gods of the gentiles. Even more disturbing is the fact that Herod paid for them. He wasn’t known for being scrupulous about our traditions, and some people claimed that he wasn’t a Jew at all because his father descended from a line of converts and his mother was a Nabatean Arab, not a Jew. So was his first wife.”

“Just a moment,” Marcus interrupted, a puzzled look on his face. “This is the same Herod who was king of Israel, right? How could he not be a Jew?”

Annas shrugged. “It’s complicated,” he said. “We Jews don’t always agree on what makes a person a Jew. You if anyone should understand that since you’re worried about being accepted here.”

“That’s true,” replied Marcus. “But I’m not wanting to be king of Israel.”

Annas laughed. “Even kings aren’t exempt from scrutiny—in fact, we have a long history of prophets challenging our kings. But to return to my subject, many people believe that these foreign influences had something to do with Herod being lax about following God’s commandments. But my grandfather, who knew him, insisted it was his lust for power that drove his actions. Herod was always currying favor with the Romans, shifting his allegiance from one Roman pretender to another as the political winds blew. Apparently it worked because they eventually named him king. But he was deeply insecure about his position, and his fears led him to put many innocent people to death. My grandfather survived by contributing generously to his building projects and keeping 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.”

“God tells us to welcome aliens and strangers,” replied Annas, “and I’ve always tried to abide by that command. 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 answered his comment about his family's influence, but the moment passed as Annas resumed his discourse about Herod.

"I can understand 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 can't 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 command that our Lord gave to Moses, which says 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. Many of us believe this is why we're under Roman rule today."

"What do you mean?" asked Marcus, puzzled by the reference.

"Our God is a jealous god," said Annas somberly. "He won't share his glory with other deities, and that applies to his land as well. Our ancestors ignored this and paid with their lives as foreign armies battled to control the region. The Romans are only the latest in a long string of rulers that God has sent to discipline our people and bring us back to him." Annas gazed at him as if waiting for him to agree.

"To be honest," replied Marcus, "my understanding of Israel's history is still a bit vague. I have much to learn."

"You'd better learn it quick," advised Annas. "Knowledge of our history is vital if you want to understand what's happening here now. God doesn't change—that temple that you'll see in Caesarea offends him just as much as the ones for which he punished our ancestors."

Marcus nodded but said nothing.

"The problem isn't limited to Caesarea," added Annas, warming to his subject. "That area was populated by gentiles long before Herod decided to build his harbor there, so there was no purity to be compromised. But he also built two other temples to the goddess Roma, the embodiment of Roman power, and the Emperor Augustus, whom the Romans view as divine. One is in the ancient city of Samaria, where Herod made one of our ancient capitals into a Greek city and named it after Augustus. The other sits next to a gentile shrine on the northern border of Galilee. All three, including the one in Caesarea, hold statues of these supposedly divine beings, and all are served by priests who present sacrifices and offerings to them on public occasions. The presence of such abominations in the land that God gave to our ancestors is a perpetual mockery of the one true God."

Annas spit on the deck to show his disgust.

“We had a temple of Roma and Augustus in Antioch,” remarked Marcus during the pause. “The whole city used to gather there for rites honoring the imperial family. I never knew if people truly believed that they were divine or if they participated to express their loyalty to Rome. It wasn’t something we talked about; we just went because it was expected. Mostly we went for the free food and the drinking and games that followed the rituals.”

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

“Regarding those temples,” he said, “as offensive as they are, there’s not much we can do about them. Some of the rebels that I mentioned earlier cite their presence as a justification for rising up against Rome. They point to the Maccabees who took up arms rather than sacrifice to foreign gods. God used them to free our people from foreign rule, and they insist that he will do the same for us if we follow their example. But that’s a sure path to destruction; the Romans are too powerful and we’re too weak. Our only hope is to follow God’s laws as faithfully as we can until he acts 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 lifted his arms slightly as if in prayer. Marcus turned away to avoid interrupting such a holy moment. He took Miriam’s hand and they gazed together at the approaching city and the shifting waves. Their reverie was broken when the baby squirmed in Miriam’s arms and began to whimper.

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

She went to find the nursemaid, whom she had left sitting with their scant belongings. They had brought nothing with them except a few chests of clothing and the money bag that Marcus wore under his tunic at all times, but they needed everything 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 convinced. Why should Jews be more honest than other people? And what about the crew? Surely they knew how to relieve passengers of their belongings without getting caught.

“My wife used a wetnurse for our children, too,” observed Annas, calling Marcus’s wandering mind back to the present. “It makes things easier for the mother. It’s hard for her to manage a busy household when she has to nurse the baby at all hours.”

“I can see how that could be a problem,” agreed Marcus without looking. 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 mostly gone by the time the ship rode into the harbor. Marcus and Miriam gazed with open mouths at the size and splendor of the port. The harbor was only half the size of the one at Ephesus, if Marcus's memory was correct, but the docks were newer and more regular in appearance. Dozens of ships lined the three-sided stone quay. Workers scurried like ants around several boats loading and unloading their cargo while others rocked listlessly on the rippling waves. A narrow road ran along the perimeter of the quay, flanked by an assortment of warehouses, shops, and offices that served the needs of the port.

Towering above the eastern 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 raised platform on which the buildings stood. The sanctuary resembled the one that Marcus had known in Antioch, but it was two or three times bigger and even more grand.

Marcus was awestruck. Until recently he would have taken such feelings as evidence for a divine presence, but Miriam had taught him that such feelings could not be trusted. He wondered for a moment if she might be wrong, then 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 if you had a place to stay in Caesarea," he said, looking sheepish. "You told me that you didn't know anyone here, but it hadn't occurred to me until now that you might be lost after you leave the ship. If you have no plans, please come with me. I'm staying with a friend, a fellow Jew who owns a large house and could easily put you up for the night at my recommendation. Knowing him, he'll probably want you to stay longer, but you can work that out with him. I'll find a boy who will 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'd be happy to accept your kind offer," she said, peering past Marcus as if he had suddenly become invisible. "Assuming your friend approves, of course. I'd much rather stay in the home of a fellow Jew than in some dirty inn, which is probably what my husband had in mind."

Marcus's face flushed as he realized that he had not asked whether Miriam might have an opinion about where to stay. He was still learning what it meant to be married to a strong-willed woman like her.

"I have a letter of recommendation from one of my former master's friends to one of his friends in Caesarea," he explained, "but I wasn't planning to visit him until we had a chance to clean up. I 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'll accept your offer and figure out tomorrow what we should do next."

He smiled down at Miriam, who answered by poking his side with her elbow. "Ouch!" he shouted, 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 momentary 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 gangplank that spanned the gap between the ship and the quay. Deborah was one of those—Marcus had to take the baby from her before she would even attempt the crossing. Marcus, too, felt uneasy at the rocking of the boat and the creaking of the boards as he stepped onto the plank, but he did his best to maintain his composure. He did not want anyone to witness his anxiety after Miriam 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 carry it to wherever they were staying. Marcus was unsure what to do with the tent and pallets that they had used on the ship since they had no more use for them, so he was relieved when Annas told 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 could carry a message to his friend, Marcus arranged for a couple of men with a mule cart to unload their belongings and deliver the things they no longer needed to a shop where he could dispose of them. The owner paid only a pittance for them, but he had no time to haggle. He didn't need the money—he would have all that he needed tomorrow.

By the time he returned to the quay with the wagon, Annas had heard from his friend. He would be happy for Marcus and Miriam to stay with him for as long as they were in the city. His wife would put the servants to work immediately preparing a hearty dinner for them since 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, unsure whether Deborah was slave or free and whether 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 was surprised to see that he had been given the place of honor on the center couch while Annas and their host, a middle-aged man named Benjamin, flanked him on either side. Miriam and the host's wife, a matronly woman named Judith, sat in chairs at either end of the couch. Marcus had seen this arrangement occasionally when his master took him along to a friend's house for dinner, but it was rare because the women rarely ate with the men. Something similar had occurred on the only other occasion when he had eaten in a Jewish house, but there the women had reclined on couches rather than sitting in chairs. He had wondered at the time if this was their usual practice or if women only reclined on the sabbath. He decided to ask Annas about it later so as not to embarrass him. He felt awkward enough reclining at all since he had always associated that posture 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 Benjamin 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 concocted for strangers, but he quickly realized that this would be a mistake. It seemed clear that Annas had given the man a portion of their story, and he did not want to risk being branded a liar if Annas had already told him about their past. The truth would come out anyway if they stayed here very long.

After a few moments of hesitation he began to relate 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 let Marcus do most of the talking.

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

"So now you've come home," said Benjamin when she had finished. "The land of your ancestors was calling to you all those years, but you were unable to hear it. Once your ears were 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’re truly grateful for your interest in us,” said Marcus hesitantly, “and doubly so as it includes a place for us to stay while we’re getting oriented. If you really don’t mind, we’d be happy to take you up on your offer.”

Miriam smiled sweetly at him and he returned her smile; he had clearly 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 between them. When their hosts at last seemed satisfied, Marcus shifted the conversation.

“If we’re going to be staying here with you,” he said, “it would be nice to learn more about you and your city, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” replied Benjamin with a broad smile. “We’re pretty simple people—I run an import-export 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 whoever 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 placed 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, suddenly 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 people resented the Romans retaking control,” 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 lives. 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 neighbor-

ing territories, especially Samaria. A few thousand of them are posted here year-round, but their camp is on the edge of town where they can be deployed to places where trouble is brewing. They mostly keep to themselves unless they're needed to keep order. The bulk of the Roman army is in Syria, hundreds of miles north of here, except for a small garrison in a fort next to the Jerusalem temple. 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 the troubles that Annas has described, I thought there would be Roman soldiers all over the place. How are they able to keep the peace with so few soldiers?"

"They can't," replied 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 the 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," observed Benjamin. "The procurators don't bring a lot of Roman officials with them to manage our affairs. They do have a small staff and some slaves to assist them, but most of the day-to-day administration is done by locals—mostly Greeks and Syrians, but some Jews also. They're the ones who keep the city running. They oversee the markets, manage the port, collect the taxes, maintain the records, organize public events, and perform countless other tasks related to governance. You can see why the rebels hate them—Roman rule would fall apart without their work. But they're not the ones whom the critics hold accountable; they blame people like us, the higher classes whose only wish is to maintain peace."

"Why would they do that?" asked Miriam.

Annas took up the story. "They claim that we're in league with the Romans," he explained, "because we refuse to support them. We, too, would like to see our people ruling their own land, but they want more than that—they want to overturn the entire system. They want to cancel all debts, break up large estates, end taxation for the masses, and direct all government offices. Some call for the wealthy to be stripped of their goods and everything foreign removed from the land. They're too weak and cowardly to stand up to the Romans directly, so they assault us instead. They want to manage the country, but they're 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 did the same.

"I'm sorry for your troubles," said Marcus, eager to fill the silence. "From what

Miriam taught me, I thought that Israel was a land of peace and plenty. I had no idea that we were leaping 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."

"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 suppose 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," agreed Benjamin. "It's not just your links to Rome that could cause you problems but also the fact that you're a Jew. 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 the problem goes deeper than that. It's really about power: they claim that Caesarea was founded as a Greek city and they should decide how it 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 during the reign of king Agrippa. He was the first Jew since Herod to rule the entire land—under Roman supervision, of course—and the Greeks and Syrians were afraid that his presence in Caesarea would 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," said Marcus. "I was like them for most of my life. Everyone I knew in Antioch held low opinions of Jews and their laws."

"It's the same here," replied Benjamin. "Agrippa ruled for only three years before he was poisoned, most likely by one of them. The Greeks and Syrians conducted public festivities at his death, and some of the soldiers performed shameful acts with the statues of his daughters that they stole from the palace. We Jews were outraged, of course, but there was nothing we could do until a successor was named. We had hoped that Rome would give the post to his son, who is also called Agrippa, but they decided he was too young 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. The Greeks and Syrians saw this as a victory

and commenced wheedling their way into the good graces of the new procurator 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 occasionally boil over into street fights."

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

"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 you need to be careful; we don't want you getting caught in the middle of something like that."

"I appreciate the warning," said Marcus. "Ordinarily I might stop and see what's going on if I encounter a group of people arguing. But given what you've said, I'll make sure to avoid all disturbances while we're here. I don't want to cause your community any trouble." He gave them a rueful smile.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Benjamin assured him. "The odds of you experiencing trouble are low, but now you'll understand if a stranger should take offense at something you say or do. Just keep to yourself as much as possible and don't 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 don'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 I still worry about him."

"We understand," said Judith 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 and I have a lot to do tomorrow. We've been looking forward to sleeping in a real bed again." He wrapped an arm around Miriam's waist and grinned down at her.

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

## CHAPTER 2

THE NEXT MORNING found Marcus on his way to the house of a man named Isidoros who—if all went as planned—would place in his hands 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 and given him so much money that he and Miriam could live comfortably for the rest of their lives. He also felt a twinge of doubt that a man whom he had never met would hand over such a huge sum to him on the basis of a letter from an acquaintance in Attalia.

His master's trusted friend and executor, Publius Servius Frugi, had explained that such letters were used every day to move large amounts of money between merchants and traders living in different cities. The man to whom the letter was directed, he assured him, would know what to do. His host had confirmed that Isidoros was a wealthy and honest businessman who could be trusted, but Marcus still felt relieved when Benjamin offered to come with him to assist with the transaction. Until he had the money in his hands—or better yet, tucked away in a safe place where he could reach it—he would worry.

The well-dressed porter gave them a chilly greeting, ordering them to wait outside while he checked to see if his master was available. "Isidoros doesn't like Jews," Benjamin whispered after the door shut, "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 into the large atrium. With its brightly painted walls and mosaic floors, Isidoros's house looked like other elite homes that Marcus had visited with his master in Antioch. But it felt different this time—this was his first visit to a rich man's home on his own account rather than that of his master. He felt like an imposter whose true identity might be discovered at any moment. He had to remind himself several times that this wasn't the case—he had a right to be here. He had known that it was going to take some time to become accustomed to his new status, but he wondered as they entered a hallway whether he could ever make the adjustment.

The porter halted at the doorway of a large room and waved for them to enter. A heavy-set middle-aged man whom Marcus took to be Isidoros sat behind a marble desk poring over a scroll. He glanced up as they entered the room but said nothing. He looked annoyed.

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

“Yes, yes,” he said impatiently. “Enough small talk. What brings you here today? I’m a busy man.”

“I brought someone to meet you,” Benjamin explained, struggling to maintain his composure in the face of such rudeness. “His name is Marcus Coelius Felix, and he arrived yesterday from Antioch-near-Pisidia in Anatolia. He’s a Roman citizen who has business in Galilee, and he holds a letter of credit from one of your associates in Attalia. Your friend promises to repay any funds you might advance to him up to the amount specified in the letter. I can vouch for his identity and integrity if that should be necessary.”

Marcus shifted uneasily at the attention, but Isidoros’s face brightened at the mention of his status. “A Roman citizen, huh? Where’s his toga?”

“I advised him not to wear it,” explained Benjamin, “so as not to attract unwanted attention. Roman officials aren’t exactly popular in our city these days.”

“Not with your people, you mean,” Isidoros huffed. “I think Felix is doing an excellent job of keeping the peace so that men like me can go about our business.”

Marcus winced, wishing he had not brought Benjamin along. The tension between the two men was palpable, and he worried that it might interfere with his mission.

“I’m happy to meet you,” he interjected, hoping to steer the conversation in more fruitful directions. “I’m here because my contact in Attalia assured me that you have ample resources to supply me with the funds indicated in this letter.”

He laid the document on Isidoros’s desk as he spoke, then stepped back and waited nervously for his response. He had been around men like Isidoros his entire life and knew their type. Men like him valued flattery, but it had to be balanced with firmness or it would be taken as a sign of weakness.

Isidoros picked up the letter and skimmed 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 probed. His face had softened, but his voice betrayed his skepticism.

“That’s my affair, if you don’t mind,” replied Marcus, following the script that he and Benjamin had devised. He had wanted to say that he was going on family business, but Benjamin cautioned against it. Everyone knew that Jews formed the bulk of the population in Galilee, so having family there would invariably mark him out as Jewish. After some discussion they had agreed that he should tell the man as little as possible.

Isidoros looked briefly affronted, then gazed at him with respect. “Very well, then,” he replied. “I know better than to question a Roman about his business. Perhaps someone has sent you there to take the pulse of the region. If that’s the case, you have my full support. Do you mind me asking where in Galilee you’re going?”

Marcus thought for a moment but could see no harm in being honest. “Sepphoris at first,” he answered. “After that, I’ll go wherever my business takes me.”

“Sepphoris,” echoed Isidoros. “That’s a good place to start, whatever your intentions. It’s part of Felix’s territory, so it’s more stable than the neighboring cities of Tiberias and Magdala that Nero assigned to that Jew Agrippa. The treasury was also moved there recently from Tiberias, so you’ll have a safe place to store your money. But I wouldn’t advise taking a hundred thousand sesterces with you to Sepphoris unless you want to arrive with an empty pouch. Robbers patrol 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—few people out there would know what to do with a Roman coin. You’ll need to convert them to local currency before you go.”

For the first time since they entered the house, Marcus relaxed. The man had evidently accepted his answers and was now speaking to 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 had no intention of carrying 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 it while you’re traveling,” Isidoros explained. “Take what you require, then send someone you trust to draw out additional funds as you need them. Or if you prefer, I can give some or all of it to Benjamin and he can 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.” He glanced at Benjamin as if seeking his opinion.

“I know a man in Sepphoris who would accept a letter from Isidoros and advance you money when you need it,” said Benjamin eagerly. “If you leave your money with me, I can reimburse him and save Isidoros the trouble.”

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 his money, but Marcus did not want to offend his new acquaintance. There could be value in having a friend like him in Caesarea.

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

“How much would you need?” asked Isidoros.

Marcus hesitated, unsure what would count as a reasonable request. “I was

thinking five hundred sesterces for now,” he said. It was a stupendous sum to him, but Isidoros hardly batted an eyelash.

“I can give you that today,” replied Isidoros. “What if I give you half of it in Roman denarii to use while you’re in Caesarea and the other half in local coins? You’ll have to trust my secretary to do the calculation—the money system that they use in this country is so complicated and inconsistent that I’ve never bothered to figure it out.”

“I’ll trust your judgment,” said Marcus, relieved that the matter could be resolved so easily.

“Come back this afternoon and I’ll have it ready for you,” said Isidoros with a smile. “I’d ask you to send one of your slaves to get it, but it wouldn’t be safe to entrust so much 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 can understand.”

“Perfectly,” said Marcus, suppressing the disgust that he felt at the man’s view of slaves. He had to get used to it since this was how everyone talked about slaves at this level of society.

“Now if you don’t mind,” said Isidoros, reverting to the tone that he had used when they first entered, “I have a lot of work to do. Welcome to our city.”

“It’s been a pleasure working with you,” replied Marcus coolly. “I’ll come back this afternoon for the money you promised, and I’ll tell you then what I decide to do about the rest of it. I appreciate your wise counsel.”

“Yes, yes,” replied Isidoros, barely glancing up from his desk. “Gods be with you, and all that.”

Marcus took Benjamin’s arm and tugged him toward the door. He did not want to give the older man a chance to speak lest he say something that would upset what they had accomplished.

“By the way, how did the two of you meet?” called Isidoros as they reached the threshold. He had laid his quill down and was staring at them curiously.

“Someone on the boat from Attalia pointed him out to me,” 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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THEY had barely entered the door of Benjamin’s house when Annas rushed up and seized Benjamin’s sleeve. “I’ve had troubling news from Jerusalem,” he began, urgency written on his face.

“What is it?” asked Marcus and Benjamin simultaneously.

“One of my slaves arrived while you were gone and told me that the Romans had butchered a mob on the Mount of Olives,” he said grimly. “Some Jewish preacher from Egypt persuaded a bunch of gullible fools to gather there, claiming that God would knock down the walls at his command so that his followers could march in and take the city. Passover was the ideal time for such a charade since everyone is thinking about the miracles that God did for our ancestors when he led them out of Egypt, including the miraculous collapse of Jericho’s walls.” He shook his head in disgust.

“So what happened to them?” asked Benjamin. “Did the Romans assault them?”

“Felix was already on his way to Jerusalem with a troop of reinforcements for the garrison,” Annas explained. Seeing the puzzlement on Marcus’s face, he added, “They do that every year at Passover so they’ll be ready if trouble should break out. The Romans are always nervous when so many people gather in one place. Felix got wind of what was happening and led a cavalry unit to where the people were waiting. His men surrounded the mob, then he ordered them to attack. Hundreds were killed, possibly thousands. The ringleader got away, and now the Romans are searching for him throughout Jerusalem and the surrounding territory. Everybody is on edge. I must return immediately and be with my family.”

“That’s certainly a troubling development,” mused Benjamin. “Is there anything 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 a wagon to carry my chests. I’ll leave as soon as he returns.”

“I knew this would be a short visit,” remarked Benjamin, “but I’m sorry you have to leave under such difficult circumstances.”

“I knew you’d understand,” said Annas. “The timing is dreadful. The last thing we need is some crazy preacher stirring up the masses in Jerusalem while Roman soldiers are chasing rebels in the hinterlands. The Romans are going to think we’re staging a revolt.”

“I doubt that,” replied Annas. “But it’s one more burr in their saddle.” Turning to Marcus, he added, “This isn’t the first time some madman has persuaded the masses to follow him by claiming that God had chosen him to free them from foreign rule, and I fear it won’t be the last.”

“We’ve certainly had our share of false prophets in the last few years,” agreed Benjamin. “Remember that man Theudas a decade or so ago? The one that gathered a mob in the desert by claiming that God was going to split the river at his command? And before him there was that Samaritan who hoodwinked even larger people by saying that God had shown him the hiding place of some sacred

vessels that Moses had supposedly buried at Mt. Gerizim. Both seem to have believed that their miraculous deeds would be followed by some sort of divine intervention against the Romans, but the soldiers crushed them as they did those fools in Jerusalem.”

“Why in God’s name do people listen to such charlatans?” exclaimed Annas, shaking his head in disgust. “How many deaths will it take to convince them that Rome is too powerful for anyone but God to overcome?”

“I think you answered your own question,” observed Benjamin. “In their eyes, these men aren’t charlatans but prophets chosen by God to bring down the Romans. I don’t find it so hard 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 appearance will be clear to everyone. He won’t go skulking about among the masses like the men you mentioned, or like that Yeshua from Galilee whom Pontius Pilate crucified a few decades ago. He’s the only one whose followers stayed true to his memory—in fact, I’ve heard that they believe God raised him from the dead and carried him to heaven, or some similar nonsense.” He spat in contempt. “I fear they might prove more dangerous in the long run than the ones you mentioned given how they’ve persisted despite their leader’s execution.”

“I doubt that,” retorted Benjamin. “There’s a group of them here in Caesarea, and I’ve heard nothing about them calling for 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 their master was the Messiah!” sputtered Annas. “He’s the one they’re waiting for! I can at least understand why people might believe that God will come to their aid if they take up arms since that has actually happened in the past. But I can’t comprehend 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. “A slave girl who was a member of the group told me about them, and they sounded like what you’ve described here. According to her, they’ve got followers all over the empire.”

“They’re a pestilence!” cried Annas, spitting again in disgust. “Wolves in sheep’s clothing! A cancer on the body politic! However you describe them, they’re a danger that has to be stopped. Back in the early days the high priest Caiaphas sent a promising young rabbi named Saul out to combat their influence in our synagogues, and he ended up joining them! Can you believe that? He eventually became one of their leaders, but he had to go out and preach to the gentiles because our people refused to listen. Those Greeks and Romans will believe anything when it comes to gods or spirits. They deserve each other.”

Benjamin offered no reply. Annas waited for several heartbeats before turning to face Marcus.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've been so preoccupied with events in Jerusalem that I never thought to ask how things went this morning with your money."

"Everything went well," answered Marcus, who proceeded to relate what had transpired at Isidoros's house. As he was finishing, the porter came in to say that 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 once I know the facts."

"I'd appreciate that," 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 if they're ready. You'll need to eat."

When he was gone, Annas turned his attention to Marcus. "So your next stop is Galilee," he observed. "When do you think you'll leave?"

"I don't know yet," replied Marcus. "I need to talk to Miriam about it, and I'll need some time to gather what we'll need for the trip."

"May God guide and protect you as you go," said 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 holding a woven sack and a skin of wine.

"This should tide you over until you get home," he said, handing the items to Annas.

"I'm grateful for your thoughtfulness," said Annas, smiling and 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 said, peering directly at Marcus. "I forgot to tell you the name of my friend in Sepphoris who might have information about your relatives. His name is Eliashib, but his friends call him Eli. Ask around for Eli the priest and you'll find him. He lives near the top of the hill."

"I'm glad you remembered," said Marcus. "I would have been sorry if you'd left without telling me."

"Farewell," said Annas, wearing a broad smile. "I expect to see both of you soon 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 over the bag. Marcus felt embarrassed at receiving such deference from a man who a few months ago he

would have viewed as a peer or possibly even a friend. He wished that he could talk with the man, but he knew that such conduct was forbidden to one in his social station. All that he could do was speak kindly to the man and give him a couple of coins from the bag as a tip. The man nodded when Marcus asked him to tell his master that he had decided to leave the rest of 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 Benjamin's house, driven by a young boy and accompanied by four brawny slaves carrying clubs. Marcus only learned of it when the porter called him to the door. Stepping into the street, he was informed that the cart carried four chests filled with the money that he had requested from their master.

Marcus stared at the chests in disbelief. Were they truly filled with money? Could all of this be his? He stood lost in wonder until one of the slaves worked up the courage to speak. "Where should we put these boxes?" he asked. "Our master warned us not to dally."

"I'm sorry!" exclaimed Marcus, his face flushing with embarrassment. "I'll be right back."

He rushed inside to ask Benjamin what to do with the chests. Benjamin returned with him and led the men to a storeroom, where Marcus used his new seal to certify receipt of the money.

Benjamin waited until the men had left his house, then turned to face Marcus. "I can't believe 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 from one of the chests and opened it, then stood back in awe. He had never seen so much gold and silver in his life! He knew that his master had kept more than this locked away in a closet, but he had never looked into any but the smallest chests. Lucius had always been wary of thieves, and none of his slaves were allowed to enter that room except in his company.

As Marcus stood there, Benjamin proceeded to open the other three chests. "Impressive, isn't it?" he chuckled. "That should be enough to support you and Miriam for life."

"I'm—I'm overwhelmed," Marcus stuttered, his eyes racing from one pile of coins to another. "I can't imagine how anyone could spend so much money."

"Believe it or not," said Benjamin, "I've heard of rich men losing more than that in a single night of gambling, or betting on an athletic contest. I mean gentiles, of course—we Jews don't go in for such foolishness, apart from 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 claiming it's their tax money that the Herods are throwing away. In truth, most of their wealth comes

from farming the estates that they own all over the land.”

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

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

“Not me,” insisted Marcus. “But you mentioned earlier that you might be able to help me invest some of it. I did a little investing 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, and I’d like to hear your ideas. The only options I know are farming and moneylending, and I only know about them because my master did both. He also partnered in a business that imported luxury goods to our city, but I’d guess that something like that would take more money than I have. I know nothing about other possibilities.”

“Let me think on 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 industries like fishing and pottery, but they’re harder to get into and require more work. Farming could 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 patiently 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. You’d have to find some gentiles who need to borrow and can pay you back with interest since God forbids us from charging interest to fellow Jews. Another possibility would be to find a banker who would pay you interest while lending your money 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 thought about what he had said.

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

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

“I 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 you’ll do well.”

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MARCUS spent the next several days preparing for their trip and enjoying the sights and sounds of the city. He felt at home in Caesarea—it reminded him of Antioch, apart from the harbor and the ever-present sea. The weather was pleasant this time of year, and he and Miriam spent hours wandering across the district and admiring the scenery. They especially enjoyed strolling on the beach, which was a new experience for both of them. Miriam liked to sit on the sand and watch the waves cresting and tumbling one over the other while Marcus was more interested in the seabirds that floated and darted in search of prey. He could see why Miriam found the rolling waters entrancing, but he could not forget how sick he had felt in those days when they were bobbing around on the open sea. He could find no pleasure in waves after that experience.

Benjamin had persuaded them to delay their departure so that they could eat the Passover meal with him and his family. In the evenings he offered them helpful information about Galilee, which he had visited a number of times.

“Galilee has almost no paved roads,” he explained. “Most are packed dirt and many are rutted this time of year—it takes a while for the locals to fill the holes that develop during the rainy season. Most people get around on mule carts, or else walk. Sepphoris is one of the few places that you can reach by carriage from here, since it’s close to the road used by caravans to ferry goods between Egypt and Damascus. The road is paved, but the stones have worn down over time, so you’ll have a bumpy ride if you take a carriage. Still, it’s better than a mule cart.”

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

“You’ll have to stay overnight on the way,” Benjamin went on. “Sepphoris is up in the hills, and the mules don’t go much faster than a walking pace during that long climb to the city. There’s also a short uphill stretch 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 added, “but you’ll get to know them when 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 goods to carry, so you’ll be slower. When I travel to Galilee, which isn’t often, I stay overnight at the home of a friend who owns an estate in the valley between Carmel and Sepphoris. I’m sure he’d be happy to host you and Miriam for the evening. I’ll send a messenger to him once you know when you’ll be leaving so that he’ll be ready to receive you.”

“You’re a godsend,” said Marcus, patting his new friend’s knee. “I feel so ignorant and helpless. I used to handle these kinds of details for my master, but I don’t know where to begin in this new land. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Think nothing of it,” replied Benjamin. “It’s a pleasure to assist a brother in need.”

“I’ll repay you one of these days,” said Marcus, grasping his hands and gazing into his eyes. “I don’t know when or how, but I will repay you. I swear it. May the God of Israel be my witness.”

“Then may it be so,” echoed Benjamin. His face grew clouded for a moment, then lifted. “Perhaps your Roman citizenship will work to my advantage some day. In these troubled times, who knows what the future might bring?”

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THE Sabbath 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 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 holy scriptures being read in Greek after Miriam telling him that Torah scrolls in Israel were written in Hebrew.

“It’ll be different in Galilee,” Benjamin explained as they strolled home. The gentle sea breeze felt cool on their skin after being cooped up in a hot room all morning. “Everything 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 can 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 four 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 for athletic competitions. The one in Caesarea was larger and much more impressive. Marcus had hoped that a race might be announced before he left the city, but he was still surprised when it happened. He could only imagine how thrilling it would be to watch the drivers careening around the oblong course while struggling 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 onto a wax tablet, sealed it, and gave it to the messenger.

After dinner that evening, while the slaves were clearing away the final dishes, Marcus told the others about Isidoros’s invitation and his reply. As he spoke, he could see that his listeners did not share his enthusiasm for the race. Benjamin peered down at the mosaic in the middle of the floor while Miriam stared at him as if he had grown a second head.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, glancing at each of them in turn. “Did I say something wrong? Are chariot races forbidden to Jews? 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.

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

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

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

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

“It’s Passover!” exclaimed Miriam. “It starts the night before the races, when we’ll eat our first Passover meal in the land of our ancestors with Benjamin and Judith. That evening and the following day is a special Sabbath—we’re supposed to be resting and reflecting on what God has done for our people, not cheering at a pagan racetrack. How could you 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....”

Miriam raised her hand in a signal for him to be quiet. Benjamin stopped immediately.

“You made a mistake,” observed Miriam, wavering 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, 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’d know what is expected of me. But I didn’t intentionally schedule another event 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’d be offended if I told him I was attending another event rather than his. He might even ask me what was so important that I’d turn down the opportunity to attend a chariot race, and what would I tell him? That I was attending a Jewish celebration? A day might come when we need a friend in Caesarea who isn’t a Jew.”

“I have an idea,” he added, feeling suddenly inspired. “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 congratulated himself at having devised such a reasonable compromise. He was surprised when the others did not immediately embrace his solution.

Benjamin was the first to speak. “Passover is more than eating a meal together,” he began, speaking slowly as if to underline the seriousness of his words. “It’s a time when we remember the power and compassion of our God who rescued our ancestors from bondage in Egypt. It’s also a time to meditate on what might be binding our hands and hearts from serving our Lord and to pray for his help to overcome those bonds. And of course, it’s a season when we renew our ties with God’s people by spending time with family and friends. “

“The festival runs for eight days, but the first day is the most important. We observe it as a Sabbath regardless of the day on which it lands. It’s like other Sabbaths in that we refrain from work that day. The only difference is that we perform rituals at home rather than at the synagogue.”

“And that’s the day when you want to go to the races!” exclaimed Miriam, exasperated. “You want to spend the day with a bunch of gentiles watching a

frivolous spectacle instead of staying home with family and friends.”

Marcus could tell that they were determined to change his mind, but he was just as resolved to resist. “I won’t be gone all 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 sacrifice and pray to idols at these events, and the spectators say and do all sorts of things that are offensive to God. Your mind will be focused on vain pleasures and not on God and his ways. That’s no way to spend a Sabbath.”

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

Miriam started to object but Marcus cut her off. “This isn’t just about my pleasure,” he resumed. “It’s about our future. After what we’ve learned about this troubled land, I fear that a day may come when we need this man’s help. Your concerns are valid, but my mind is made up. I’m going. If I’m wrong, then God have mercy on my ignorance.”

An awkward silence filled the room. Miriam turned away and pouted. Benjamin and his wife looked thoughtful.

“I have to admit that your argument has merit,” said Benjamin at last. “One never knows what the future might bring. We live in dangerous times, and there might well come a time when our security or our very lives depend on knowing the right people, including gentiles. I’ve cultivated many such relationships over the years, and at times this has landed me in situations where I would have preferred not to be. You don’t know anyone in Caesarea, and I can understand how precarious that makes you feel. If that is your reason for wanting to attend this event, I won’t stand in your way. I have my doubts about whether this is the time and place to be pursuing such interests, but I can’t say you’re wrong to do so. I’ll leave that between you and God.”

Marcus heaved a sigh of relief. “What about you, Miriam?” he asked. “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’s right, even when we don’t agree about what that means.”

Miriam continued staring stubbornly at the ground. Marcus was tempted to fill the silence with further appeals, but he knew this would only make her more intransigent. He thought instead about what he might 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 as if speaking to the floor. “He knows the political situation as well as

the laws of God. I don't like it, but if he thinks that this gentile might be God's instrument to keep us safe in the future, I'll defer to his judgment."

Marcus beamed. "I know this is hard for you," he said, getting up from his couch and folding her in his arms. "I know you want what's best for me, and you know that I take your opinions seriously. I'd like it better if you'd come with me, but I know that's too much to ask. I promise to come home as soon as the races are over and we can spend the rest of the day together."

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

"I think it's time for us to head for bed," announced Marcus, taking Miriam's hand and pulling her to her feet. "But I do appreciate your counsel. I'm only sorry that we won't be staying in Caesarea long enough for me to benefit more from your knowledge and experience."

"You'll be back," Judith assured him with a motherly smile. "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 participated in the family celebration. Miriam had been raised a Jew, but she had spent her entire life in gentile households where Jewish holidays were unknown. Marcus had never even heard of the festival until a few months ago when his master spent the night with a Jewish family on his way to Pergamon. Miriam's mother had taught her the Exodus story on which the ritual was based, but Marcus knew only a vague outline.

Recognizing their ignorance, Benjamin and Judith explained everything as they went along. Benjamin recounted how the God of Israel had answered the prayers of his suffering people 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 male of every household 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 split the sea to make a path for the fleeing Israelites and closed it again on the armies of Egypt, thus assuring his people's salvation.

When he was done, Judith pointed to each of the items on the table and explained how it symbolized some aspect of this story. She focused especially on the lamb, which represented the sacrifices that were offered on this day every year at the Jerusalem temple to commemorate the central event of the story, the part

where the angel of death ‘passed over’ the houses of Israelites who had marked their doors with the blood of a lamb. The lamb before them had been purchased from a Jewish butcher, but it was ritually pure like those sacrificed at the temple.

Marcus found the story fascinating. He had always known that gods could perform miracles, and the idea that a deity might favor one group of people over another was equally familiar. Every city he had visited had a patron god or goddess whom people honored with prayers and sacrifices in the belief that the deity would watch over them and protect them.

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

He mentioned these observations during the course of the meal and Benjamin congratulated him on grasping the key points of the story. “Those who worship many gods cannot comprehend why we honor only one,” he observed. “They 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, who like a good father disciplines us to bring us into line. If we persist in such conduct, he’ll cast us out of our land as a master rids himself of a rebellious slave. The analogy isn’t perfect since our lord and master regards us as his children and not as slaves. But he’s a jealous deity, and we cannot take his favor for granted.” Judith and Miriam nodded their agreement.

“That’s why we take our laws so seriously,” he continued. “The God who chose our ancestors gave them a set of laws that spelled out how they and their descendants should act to stay in his good graces. We parents do the same when we set rules for our children. God doesn’t expect perfect obedience—he knows that we are but dust—but he does expect us to strive persistently to obey his decrees. As long as we do that, he will overlook our failings. Such a kind parent deserves our undivided love and respect. Passover is a time when we renew our commitment to honor our God and obey the laws he gave to our ancestors, both now 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,” added 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 your God. But as I told you before, I can understand why you would think 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 about to add her opinion, then fell back into her chair. “I’ll think on what you said,” replied Marcus. “What you’ve told me tonight has certainly cast my decision in a different light.”

Benjamin steered the conversation toward other subjects as the meal progressed, then closed the evening with a blessing and dismissed everyone to their rooms.

The next day Marcus awoke to the sound of a nearby cockerel and his mind turned immediately to the races. He felt vaguely guilty about his decision to attend, but he could not shake his earlier feeling 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 oneself of all pleasures. Prudence cautioned him to cultivate friends among the gentiles in order to assure his family’s safety, yet his friends insisted that attending such an event on Passover would displease the lord of the universe. Why such a mighty being should care about such trifling matters 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 it was his inclination toward pragmatism that settled the matter for him. God, he concluded, would understand that his presence at the races did not constitute approval of the prayers and sacrifices that were offered there. He had heard that Jews in Anatolia visited theaters and competitions where such 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 Jews should decamp to the countryside, and even there they would be surrounded by people who worshiped a pantheon of deities.

As they broke their fast that morning, he informed them that he still meant to attend the races. He was surprised when even Miriam accepted his decision without protest.

He spent the next couple of hours airing out his new toga and practicing how to wear it so that it stayed in place as he moved. 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. He felt suddenly grateful that Lucius had asked him several times during their trip to Pergamon to assist him with draping the voluminous garment around his body. Otherwise, he would have had no idea where to begin.

With Miriam’s help he eventually succeeded in producing a reasonable

facsimile of the costume that he had seen daily on the streets of Antioch and in his own home. He still felt as if he were wearing someone else's clothing, but Miriam assured him that he looked handsome in the garments and that he would get used to them with time.

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

He had assumed from the invitation that Isidoros meant for him to be his personal guest at the event, so he was surprised to learn that he was only one member of a group that the wealthy man had collected to serve as his retinue for the day. He saw now that Isidoros viewed him as a potential client and not as a friend. He felt disappointed, but he could not complain—even the lesser honor was beyond anything he could have imagined only a few months ago. It might even be for the best since it would give him a chance to meet other wealthy citizens whose influence might prove useful in the future.

As he stood reflecting on this turn of events, he noticed a thin young man in a deep red tunic working his way toward him. He looked to be a couple of years younger than Marcus and his face bore 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 somewhat, though he remained wary. "I'm honored to make your acquaintance," he answered in as dignified a manner as he could muster.

"My father doesn't know what to make of you," whispered Alexander with a conspiratorial grin, "so he told 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 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 indignantly. "What ever gave your father that idea?" He regretted the tone as soon as the words left his mouth.

"I don't know," replied Alexander, giving no sign of being offended. "But I've done what he asked. 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 pleased to have your company," agreed Marcus, warming to the young

aristocrat. "I don't know anyone here and I've never attended a chariot race, so it will 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," said Marcus. "I come from Antioch-near-Pisidia in central Anatolia. My city 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 sincere that I'm inclined to believe you. But you might be a good actor who knows how to cover his tracks. If you were indeed a Roman spy, you'd have an answer ready for anything I might ask, so there's no use in trying to trip you up. It wouldn't matter, of course, since my father would support anything that Rome does to bring those rebels to heel. He just likes to know what's going on."

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

"I'm being frank with you," he confided. "More frank than I ought to be. My father thinks I lack discretion, but the truth is that I don't like keeping secrets from people. If you don't want to tell me what brings you here, that's your prerogative. 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 further."

Marcus was puzzled by his new friend's candor, but it relieved him of some anxiety. Isidoros's speculation about him being a spy had given him an excuse for remaining silent about his past. He liked Alexander, but he knew better than to trust anyone in Caesarea who wasn't a Jew. If even one person discovered his identity, his credibility would be lost. He abhorred dishonesty, but it was vital 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 burst into open conflict.

As he was weighing how to respond 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 remember who he was. Alexander quickly stepped forward to rescue him

"This is Marcus Coelius Felix," he said, "the 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 assist with any needs that you might have."

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness,” replied Marcus, bobbing his head briefly in a mark 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.

“With your interest in Galilee,” he whispered, “I think you’ll enjoy the entertainment that the procurator has arranged for the interval between races.”

“Is he in town?” asked Alexander. “I thought that he was going to stay in Jerusalem until that Jewish holy day was over.”

“That’s correct,” observed Isidoros. “He’s still in Jerusalem keeping watch on 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 outside to attack Jerusalem. That’s why we’re having these races today—the event was arranged rather hurriedly at the command of the procurator.”

Isidoros peered at Marcus as if expecting a 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. His face reminded Marcus of a fat toad that had swallowed a fly. He turned from Marcus to the others in the room. “Come, everyone!” he shouted. “It’s time for the races!”

Cheers echoed from the walls of the atrium. Isidoros stepped toward the door and 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 had 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 guests. It would also be good for Marcus, as a new man in the city, to be seen holding the lead 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 be held 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 connection they had with the entertainment or why Isidoros thought he would enjoy it. He felt uneasy at the prospect, but there was nothing he could do about it now. The answer would come soon enough.

## CHAPTER 3

MARCUS FELT AS if all eyes were on him as Isidoros's party made its way through the vaulted corridor that took them under the stadium seating, up a flight of stairs, and into the stands where Isidoros's seats were located. The stadium was nearly full by now, and Marcus found it hard to hear what Alexander was saying over the chattering of the crowd. It had been a long time since he had seen so many people in one place, and he had forgotten how chaotic it could be when hordes of people waited impatiently for a contest to start.

As they found their seats, Marcus noted with pleasure that they were sitting directly beside the podium reserved for important dignitaries, where he would have an enviable view of the action. They were so close that Marcus could almost smell the sweat and blood soaked into the dirt track from years of competition. He would miss nothing here.

He could not believe his luck. As a slave, he had been relegated to the upper reaches of stadiums and theaters that reeked of urine and vomit. The seats were so high that it was hard to see and hear what was happening. Today he was seated directly above the finish line where he could see every detail of the horses and riders as they sped past. Best of all, he would have a clear view of the winner. He had often imagined what it must be like to sit so close to the action, but he had never dreamed that it might happen to him.

Alexander seemed to have lost interest in him for the moment, preferring to shout over the heads of the spectators to various friends seated in nearby rows. Marcus gazed around at the stadium, which had been transformed since the day he and Miriam stopped by to see it. The building was still the same with its oblong ranks of seats surrounding a packed earth racetrack that was flanked on all sides by a barrier wall painted to resemble colored marble. But the seats now overflowed with men and women of every size and description and the dignitaries' platform had been decorated with bright fabrics and colorful pennants that flapped in the breeze. Larger flags flew over the colonnaded structure at the end of the track that Marcus guessed was where the chariots were kept.

The dignitaries had not yet arrived, and there were still a few empty seats around the platform that Marcus knew would be filled by important men and women who were either running late or wished to be noticed by the crowd when they entered. The races could not begin until the presiding officers took their place. Vendors of food and other goods took advantage of the delay to clamber up and down the stairs hawking their wares.

On Marcus's right sat a middle-aged man who had come with Isidoros's

retinue to the stadium. Sensing a useful contact, Marcus introduced himself. The man answered pleasantly enough, but his interest quickly waned once he learned that Marcus would be leaving the city in a few days. Marcus had seen many like him in the years that he spent helping his master with his clients: utterly self-absorbed, interested in other people only insofar as they might advance their interests. A man like him would be a thin reed in times of trouble. It was better to ignore him.

Marcus turned to see if Alexander was still busy with his friends, but just then a peal of trumpets blared from the racetrack in front of him. A moment later a line of important-looking people emerged from the tunnel through which Isidoros's party had entered. At the end came a haughty-looking man dressed in Roman military regalia.

"That's the prefect," said Alexander, who had remembered his guest at last. "His name is Titus Mucius; his father held the same post when Agrippa was king. He'll preside over today's races since procurator Felix is stuck in Jerusalem. I've heard that he's a good soldier, but he's not very communicative. I doubt you'll have an occasion to meet him while you're here—unless you're a spy, in which case you probably know him already."

Alexander winked at the jest. Marcus gave him a crooked grin, then looked away. He didn't want to offend his host, but he wished that he would shut up about him being a spy. There could be serious consequences if the wrong person should hear him.

When the dignitaries had settled into their seats, another round of trumpets sounded.

"That's the signal for the procession to begin," explained Alexander. "The crowds love it, but I wish they'd just get on with the races. You might enjoy it, though—it's pretty impressive the first time you see it."

A squad of soldiers entered the stadium through the gate on Marcus's left and marched in formation to the front of the dignitaries' platform. The spectators quieted at their appearance. The soldiers gave the prefect a hearty salute, then marched backward to the center of the track.

Nothing more happened for several moments. The delay made the crowd restive and a chorus of voices clamored for the action to begin. Marcus was turning to ask Alexander what was happening when the first charioteer emerged from the gate holding his reins in one hand and waving with the other. The spectators immediately leapt to their feet and burst into raucous applause. A second driver entered close behind the first one, and the others followed in turn. The stadium echoed with the shouts and cheers of the crowd and the drivers waved and preened in return. One even performed a few dance steps to the delight of the audience.

Each driver paused at the platform to offer a brief salute to the dignitaries. They stood so close that Marcus could smell the oiled leather of their harnesses and hear every creak of the chariots' wheels. The drivers wore short, colorful tunics banded around the chest with some sort of fabric or leather breast-piece. Alexander explained that this was to prevent their garments from catching in the reins.

The chariots proceeded slowly around the track to the adulation of the spectators. Marcus counted sixteen in all, each bearing a different color or pattern. When they had completed the circuit, they exited through the same gate they had entered.

"Where are they going?" asked Marcus, puzzled by the chariots' sudden disappearance.

"They're heading to the starting gates," Alexander replied, pointing to the colonnaded structure at the end of the stadium. "Each of those arches is a gate. The first four racers will enter their gates through a small plaza located at the back of that building and the others will wait there until it's their turn. You'll see how it works when they start."

"They certainly know how to put on a show," observed Marcus. "They remind me of gladiators in the way they show off for the crowd."

"Yes, they're quite similar," agreed Alexander. "I think it's because they're all low-born slaves. They don't know how to behave in public."

Marcus wondered what the young aristocrat would say if he knew that the man sitting beside him had been a slave until a few months ago, but he resisted the urge to respond.

"I didn't know that the drivers were slaves," he said instead.

"Not all are," Alexander admitted. "A couple are freedmen who were liberated in their master's will, and a couple more were cast aside after being injured but recovered enough to hire out their services to other chariot owners. In theory anyone can be a charioteer, and the best drivers can earn a lot of money and honors. But only people like us can afford to set up and maintain a racing team, and they're not about to risk life and limb driving a chariot when they could have a slave or freedman do it for them. Did you notice that driver with the green cloak over his shoulder?"

"I did," replied Marcus. "What about him?"

"He belongs to my father," said Alexander proudly. "That cloak is just for show; he'll remove it before the race begins since it would get in his way."

"I didn't realize that your father had a stake in the race," remarked Marcus. "I thought you were just here for the excitement."

"The driver is a recent acquisition," Alexander explained. "My father is one

of the richest men in the city, but he's never held high office. To achieve that, he has to do things that enhance his reputation in the eyes of his peers. Owning a successful chariot-racer is one of the best ways to do that."

"I see," mused Marcus. "So has his effort been successful? Has his driver won many races?"

"Not yet," confessed Alexander, glancing back at the track. "He's still young, but he's getting better. He's being trained by a former driver who won many races in his time. But look, you're missing the next stage of the procession."

Marcus turned to face the gate and saw a pack of dancers entering the stadium. From their lively steps he guessed that they were echoing the cadence of a band of musicians not yet visible to the spectators. One group wore costumes that resembled military uniforms and carried small copies of the weapons commonly wielded by soldiers. Their steps mimicked the lunging and thrusting motions that soldiers used in sparring. Behind them came a second group dressed in shaggy coats and flowery mantles to look like satyrs. Some strutted in comic imitation of the military group while others mimicked the ribald behaviors associated with Dionysus and his arboreal companions.

The spectators clapped with the movements of the first group, but their attention quickly shifted when the second group appeared. People hooted and howled as the faux satyrs pranced and capered around the track. Here and there a viewer climbed up on his seat and copied the moves of the satyrs, eliciting laughter and applause from his neighbors. The group around Marcus was more sedate, clapping in time with the music but remaining seated.

Marcus would have liked to join in the fun, but he knew that such uncouth behavior would be viewed with disdain by his new peers. He wondered what Miriam and his new friends would say if they saw what was taking place around him. He certainly wasn't going to tell them about it.

His thoughts were interrupted by Alexander tugging at his sleeve. As he turned to look, he discovered that he had been so fixated on the dancers that he had failed to notice the band of flute-players and lyrists who had entered and were making their way around the track.

"Here come the gods," shouted Alexander, pointing to a small knot of men bearing smoking incense burners and gold serving vessels. Four others carried a portable altar that they set up in the middle of the track for the impending sacrifice. Behind them came images of the presiding deities, each riding on a wooden platform carried by four men. The statues were placed upright on the ground behind the altar. At the back of the line came several men with leashes leading the sacrificial animals to the altar. The offering, Marcus could see, would be a *suovetaurilia*, the Roman name for a sacrifice consisting of a boar, a ram, and a bull.

“It’s hard to see from here,” Alexander explained, “but the statues represent Tyche, the patron goddess of our city; Venus, divine ancestor of the Caesars whose name our city bears; Neptune and Mercury, the gods of sea and commerce whose favor is so important for a city like Caesarea; Portunus, the god of ports; and Mars, who as god of war presides over all chariot races. The rites at these races are performed for all the deities at once rather than separately for each one; otherwise we’d be here all day. The victims are slaughtered here and inspected for omens, then their bodies are dragged to a nearby temple to be cleaned and cooked.”

Marcus could only imagine the revulsion that Miriam and Benjamin would feel at this part of the festivities. But he understood their feelings now as he had not in the past. In his experience, sacrificial rites were simply the way one opened public events; there was no need to take them seriously. He certainly did not intend to let such matters interfere with his enjoyment of the races.

“How long do the rituals take?” he asked, eager for the races to begin.

“Not too long,” replied Alexander. “Perhaps half an hour, including the final procession. After that comes a short break to give the racing teams a final chance to check their chariots and prepare them for the opening of the gates. Trumpets will mark the commencement of the race—first a warning peal, then the starting blast. I’ll alert you before it happens so that you’ll be ready.”

“I’d appreciate that,” replied Marcus. “I don’t want to miss anything.” Alexander’s eagerness to explain things suggested that he had finally accepted Marcus’s claim that this was his first time at a chariot race. He hoped he had also given up on thinking he was a spy.

Everything happened as Alexander said it would, including positive omens from the entrails of the animals. The priests who presided over the sacrifices ordered everything removed, and in a short time the racetrack was empty.

A low hum filled the stadium as the spectators chatted in hushed tones about the impending race. All eyes were on the starting gates where the chariots would soon burst into view. Horses could be heard neighing and whinnying in their eagerness to escape their confinement, along with an occasional loud thump that resounded over the din.

“What are those clunking noises coming from the stables?” asked Marcus.

“Those are the horses banging against the wooden barriers that separate the stalls,” Alexander explained. “Slaves are in there stirring up the horses so that they’ll be ready to spring out when the gates are opened. There’s a mechanism inside that insures they open at the same time. After that, it’s chaos. You’ll see—the trumpets will sound any moment.”

Alexander squeezed Marcus’s arm in anticipation. Marcus was almost giddy with excitement. After what seemed like an interminable pause, Alexander pointed to the prefect, who was rising slowly to his feet.

“He’s the one who issues the command to start,” said Alexander as the noise died down. “He won’t do it until the stadium is quiet. He got that from Felix, who likes to bask in his power. It’s rather childish, but that’s what you get when you put a freedman in charge.”

“A freedman?” asked Marcus, incredulous. “Which is the freedman? The prefect or the procurator?”

“Not the prefect,” replied Alexander. “He’s from an old Roman family. I was referring to the procurator. I’ll tell you about it later if you’re interested, but not now—the race is about to start.”

So Felix had once been a slave! Marcus was stunned by the news. He could not imagine how any man could have risen so high in a single lifetime. He resolved to learn more once the races were over.

Turning back to the prefect, Marcus noticed that he had raised his fist above his head, where he held it until every tongue was silenced. Then he nodded to two trumpeters who had stationed themselves on either side of the gate and they sounded a warning blast. The prefect kept his hand in the air for another dozen heartbeats, then let it drop. The trumpeters played a short series of notes and the starting gates burst open.

The crowd roared as four teams of horses lunged onto the track. The drivers lashed their horses’ flanks furiously in an effort to gain an early edge on their competitors. Marcus was too far away to make out the details since the race began on the other side of the track. Not until the chariots reached the first turn did he gain a clear view of the racers, who were running so close together that he feared they would crash into a heap as they rounded the post. The cheers of the spectators were drowned by the creaking of chariots, the cracking of whips, and the pounding of hooves. The collision was avoided at the last moment as one of the drivers pushed his chariot so close to the post that his hub drew shards from the wood. The others dropped behind or moved to his side.

“Whoa!” shouted Alexander as the chariots surged down the track. “That was some driving! You don’t see that every day.”

Marcus hadn’t realized that he was holding his breath until he tried to answer. He exhaled in relief. “That was a close call!” he cried in return.

“The turns are the most dangerous part of the race,” replied Alexander with an indulgent smile. “We’ll see more than one pile-up before the day is over.”

Marcus turned back to the track, but all he could see was the drivers’ backs. He cursed as he realized that he had missed the chance to see them up close. He resolved to pay better attention the next time they came around.

The post at the other end of the stadium was too far away for Marcus to see what happened there, but by the time the chariots approached the turn for the second time two had fallen a length behind the leaders, reducing the danger of

a collision. This time the driver who seized the inside lane on the first turn was thrown off-balance when his right wheel rose precariously into the air, forcing him to slow down to avoid capsizing. The other driver roared past him.

The clamor of pounding hooves, churning wheels, and shouting men was deafening as the chariots whizzed by the second time. They passed so fast that Marcus was again unable to catch more than brief glimpses of the carvings on the chariots and the straining muscles of horses and drivers.

By the time the racers finished the third circuit, the driver who had taken the lead on the second lap had opened up enough of a gap between himself and his competitors to make victory a foregone conclusion. He was half a stadium ahead when he crossed the finish line after the seventh and final lap.

The crowd roared as the winner made a victory lap around the stadium, but Marcus felt cheated by the result. He had hoped to see a race where the outcome was uncertain until the end, but the suspense had been drained from this race long before it was over.

“So what did you think?” asked Alexander when the winner had exited through the main gate.

“It was... interesting,” replied Marcus diplomatically. “I had hoped for a closer race.”

“It’s often like this in the opening events,” explained Alexander. “The man who won the first race is one of the best in the city—it would have been a surprise if he had lost. He’ll face a greater challenge in the afternoon when the winners of the morning races meet.”

“So how long until the next race?” asked Marcus.

“Not long,” replied Alexander. “Maybe a quarter of an hour. It takes that long to get the next set of racers into the gates and their horses prepared for the race.”

The crowd noise settled to a low hum as everyone waited for the second race to begin.

“Would you like a drink?” asked Alexander, holding out a skin of wine from which he had just taken a draft.

“That sounds good,” said Marcus, taking a long swig and returning it to him. “While we’re waiting, perhaps you could tell me more about the procurator. It’s strange to think that he began life as a slave.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” said Alexander. “I had forgotten you wanted to hear his story. It won’t take long. Marcus Antonius Felix was indeed born a slave—he was just “Felix” back then—but he never labored on a farm or in a household. He and his older brother Pallas belonged to Antonia, the daughter of the great general Marcus Antonius who fought against Caesar and died in Egypt with Cleopatra. Pallas was a shrewd operator who won his freedom by performing

some kind of service for the emperor Tiberius. He asked that his brother be freed with him and his request was granted. That's how they came to bear the name of Marcus Antonius, their mistress's father."

Alexander paused to take another drink from the wineskin. "This heat makes one thirsty," he explained. "As I was saying, Pallas carried his brother along with him as he advanced in the imperial service. When Antonia died, both men entered the service of her son Claudius, who was named emperor after Caligula was murdered. Pallas was made imperial treasurer, and it was by his influence that Felix was appointed to his first and subsequent military commands."

"That's quite a story," observed Marcus. "But how did he come to be here?"

"Four years ago," replied Alexander, "his predecessor was shipped off to Rome to stand trial for mistreating some Jewish troublemakers. Why that should matter to Rome is beyond my comprehension, but that's what happened. Pallas took advantage of the opportunity to get his brother appointed to the open seat, and he has behaved with exactly the kind of barbarity that you would expect from a slave."

Alexander stopped suddenly and began peering around at the crowd. Marcus followed his gaze to see what had caught his attention, but he noticed nothing. After a short delay Alexander resumed his story.

"I shouldn't have said that so loud," he muttered. "Felix has spies everywhere. But from what I can tell, no one heard me but you."

Alexander stopped and stared at him. "Tell me the truth," he demanded. "You're not one of his spies, are you?"

Marcus laughed. "No, I'm not," he assured him. "I wish you'd get that idea out of your head."

"That's a relief," said Alexander with a forced smile. "I could have been in big trouble if you were. But I still need to keep my voice low."

"I understand," said Marcus. "You can stop if you wish."

"No, I was nearly finished," observed Alexander. "I was speaking about Felix's brutality. Brutality isn't necessarily a bad thing—the Romans have used it to good effect when rounding up and punishing troublemakers. But Felix has made a lot of enemies in the capital by his boorish and arrogant behavior toward men of our rank. No one hates him enough to murder him like they did Agrippa, but between those rebels in the countryside and his enemies here, I'll be surprised if he lasts much longer."

"I see," said Marcus. "If he's that difficult, I'm glad I'll be heading to Galilee where I don't have to deal with him."

"Distance makes no difference in this case," said Alexander, stepping gingerly over a pile of animal droppings. "But he's not the one you have to worry about."

Outsiders draw attention in the countryside, and word of your arrival is sure to reach the rebels. Even if you're not working with Felix, one of them might get it into his head that you are and decide to get rid of you. You should be safe as long as you watch your back and keep your distance from them. It might be easier if you were a Jew, but you wouldn't be watching the races on one of their holidays if you were."

"So you're not going to accuse me of being a Jew?" asked Marcus playfully, eager to distract Alexander from this line of thinking.

"No, I've learned my lesson," said Alexander, lifting his hands as if to defend himself. "You've still not told me why you're going to Galilee, but I'm sure you have reasons for keeping it secret. I won't ask you about it again."

As he was speaking, Marcus noticed that the prefect was rising to his feet. "Ssshhh!" he whispered. "The race is about to begin." He pointed toward the prefect.

A wave of relief swept over Marcus as Alexander turned his attention to the track. He had come so close to being discovered that he felt his heart pounding in his chest. He thought briefly about leaving and counting the day a success, but could think of no answer if Alexander should inquire where he was going. That would only make matters worse.

The second race proceeded much like the first one, and the third was similar except for a spectacular crash at the far turn that was too far away for Marcus to see clearly.

"The next one is our race," remarked Alexander as the noise died down after the third winner had made his circuit of the stadium. "There's a favorite in that one, too, but my father is hopeful that his driver can win this time. We had reason to think that the other driver might not come. But I saw him in the procession, so it looks like we'll have to beat him on the track."

"Why did you think he might not show up?" asked Marcus.

"Because he's a Jew," said Alexander disdainfully, "and today is one of their holidays, as I noted earlier. He's the only Jew who drives regularly here—racing isn't part of their culture. There are Jews who attend the races, but they're mostly the rich ones who aren't so allergic to our ways. In an out-of-the-way place like Galilee, you'll find Jews who reject all foreign practices as some sort of offense against their god. I've never understood it, but that's how they are."

"I see," mused Marcus, shifting nervously in his seat. "But where does this Jewish driver fit in? He wouldn't be racing if he were rich, and he wouldn't be here at all if he was serious about his religion."

"He doesn't have a choice," replied Alexander. "He's a slave like the others, and he races when his owner tells him to. But his owner treats him well enough, and he's a good racer. He'll be hard to beat."

“What about your father’s driver?” asked Marcus. “Now that I’ve seen a few races, I’d be interested in hearing more about what goes on behind the scenes.”

Alexander proceeded to relate what he knew about the training and care of horses and drivers, including how they prepared for a race like the one today. Soon the time came for the fourth race to begin.

“As you saw earlier, our chariot is trimmed in green,” Alexander explained as the prefect raised his hand into the air. “The Jew—his name is Glaukon—drives a gold-colored chariot. It’s the only one like it in the city. His owner is one of the richest men in the city, and he reminds people of it every chance he gets.”

The prefect’s hand fell, the trumpets sounded, and the racers bounded out of their gates. From the very beginning Marcus could see that this race would be different from the others. In the prior races, the drivers stuck to their original lanes on the first straightaway while building up speed, then bunched together as they approached the turn. This time two of the drivers harassed the gold chariot from the start, driving their horses against him on both sides and lashing him with their whips. The driver of the gold chariot eased his reins momentarily to escape the trap and the other two surged ahead.

The two lead chariots drew together to prevent the gold driver from passing them. As they approached the turn, they slowed to allow the third driver to catch up, then formed a horizontal line across the lane rather than pushing for the advantage. The gold chariot had no choice but to run behind them.

“That’s the way to do it!” shouted a man to Marcus’s left.

“Gut the filthy Jew!” shouted another.

“Give him what he deserves!” cried a third.

Marcus cringed. He expected such behavior from the ignorant masses, but it pained him to hear men of standing hurling such insults. He offered a silent prayer for God to guard the Jewish driver from their stratagems.

The drivers held their line as they drove their horses down the side of the track closest to Marcus, around the far turn, and up the other side. The gold driver tried several times to squeeze by them on one side or the other, but the other chariots moved in unison from side to side to block him.

“That’s not fair,” shouted Marcus in Alexander’s ear. “They’re not trying to win; they’re just trying to prevent the gold driver from winning. There’s no honor in a victory like that. How can they get away with it?”

Alexander stared at him as if he were some sort of simpleton. “Everything’s fair in chariot racing,” he explained. “That’s half the fun. The first three races were boring, but this time we’re seeing some real strategy. How do you think it will turn out?”

“I can’t imagine,” replied Marcus. “But don’t you think the spectators will get bored with it after a while? Where’s the thrill in it?”

As if on cue, a few scattered boos began to emerge from the crowd. The number increased as the racers finished the third lap in the same formation. The gold driver appeared to have given up on trying to pass them and settled in behind them to wait for an opening.

By the time they entered the seventh and final lap, when the audience would normally be cheering their favorites to victory, the crowd had grown surly. Boos and curses rained down on the lead drivers, yet they stuck to their course. Marcus was as vexed as anyone, but he was also curious about what kind of ending they had planned. Someone must have bribed the drivers to keep up this odd dance, but who gained by it? If the winner was preordained, who would it be, and how would it come to pass? He knew too little about racing to hazard a guess.

As the chariots neared the far turn, a spectator suddenly clambered out of the stands and onto the track. Marcus was aghast; what could the man be thinking? Surely he would be crushed by the oncoming chariots. He couldn't bear to watch, but he could not look away. He squeezed his fists in anxiety.

At the last moment the three leaders veered to the inside lane to avoid the interloper while the gold chariot swept toward the outer wall. The spectators had only a moment to cheer the man's escape before chaos erupted. Two of the chariots had become entangled with one another on the curve and were now spinning together in a heap toward the wall where the gold chariot was running. A collision seemed inevitable, but the gold driver miraculously tugged his horses to the left in time to avoid them.

The tumbling chariots shattered as they banged heavily into the wall. Horses screamed, wheels flew off, and pieces of wood and metal leapt into the air. Marcus clapped his forehead in shock—he had never seen such a disaster. He craned his neck to discover what had become of the drivers. It took a moment for him to realize that one of them was being dragged through the dirt by his horses along with fragments of the chariot. The other lay inert on the track not far from where the collision occurred.

Marcus's horror was interrupted by Alexander slapping him on the back and pointing the other side of the track where the two remaining drivers were lashing their horses toward the turning post. Marcus had forgotten them in his shock. The accident had allowed the green chariot to build a substantial lead, but the gold driver was gaining on him.

Against his better judgment, he found himself swept up in the enthusiasm of the crowd. He wanted to cheer for the Jewish driver, but he restrained himself for fear of giving away his secret. When he heard others urging the man on, however, he joined their shouting. His voice grew hoarse as he willed the gold driver to win, but his efforts went for naught: his favorite was still a length behind when

the green driver crossed the finish line. The partisans of the winning driver burst into cheers while the losers—including Marcus—lowered their heads in dejection.

A voice close to his ear brought him back to reality. “Why were you cheering for that Jewish lout?” cried Alexander over the crowd. “You were supposed to cheer for our man!”

Marcus flushed as he realized his mistake. In the excitement he had forgotten that the green chariot belonged to his host.

“I—I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I got carried away by the crowd. I had been hoping all day to see a close finish, and I forgot that the green chariot was yours.”

He could see that Alexander doubted his explanation. He peered at Marcus for a long moment as if trying to read his thoughts, then shook his head and grinned.

“I understand,” he said. “You’re new here, and you got caught up in the moment. It happens to all of us. But you can’t do that this afternoon when the winners race against one another. Our driver will need all the help he can get.”

“I’ll be more careful next time,” Marcus assured him.

“You’d better,” replied Alexander with a sly wink. “But it will be hard to top that race. What did you think of it?”

Marcus paused before answering. What was he to say?

“The ending was exciting,” he answered judiciously. “But I didn’t realize that chariot racing was so dangerous. I can’t stop thinking about those two drivers who went down in the crash. I feel sorry for them and their families.”

“Oh, come now,” said Alexander, his voice dripping with condescension. “They’re just slaves; they don’t have families. I feel sorry for their owners—those were fine chariots that the idiots wrecked. But they can afford to replace them. Replacing the drivers will be harder, but they always have someone waiting in the wings.”

Marcus couldn’t believe his ears. Were the lives of two skilled and experienced slaves worth so little in this city? He knew that men of Alexander’s class held low opinions of slaves, but he had never witnessed such callous disregard for their lives. How could the God of Israel put up with such behavior?

“What matters is that we won,” Alexander continued, oblivious to Marcus’s discomfort. “Now our man will have a chance to prove himself against a better class of drivers. Not that the outcome of the previous race was in any doubt, of course.”

“What do you mean?” asked Marcus.

“You don’t think those drivers came up with that plan on their own, do you?” Alexander winked. “That blocking formation was my father’s idea. It cost him a fair sum to ensure that the drivers would follow it, but it was worth it.”

“Are you saying that your father paid the other drivers to help your man win?” asked Marcus, fighting to keep the annoyance out of his voice. “Why would he do that?”

Now it was Alexander’s turn to look incredulous. “To win, of course!” he laughed. “That Jew has beaten our man every time they’ve raced, and my father wanted to be certain that it wouldn’t happen this time. It’s not like we’re the only ones doing this.”

Marcus was confused. “Are you saying that other chariot-owners pay the drivers to make the races turn out the way they want?” he asked.

“Of course,” answered Alexander. “Everyone does it. It’s not always the drivers that you pay; sometimes it’s one of the men who equip the horses and tend the chariots. Sometimes it’s another owner. There’s no limit to the ways you can influence the outcome if you’re willing to pay. People bet a lot of money on these races, and it’s only natural that they would want to improve their chances of winning.”

“But that’s cheating!” objected Marcus.

Alexander smiled at him as if he were a child. “Not if everyone does it,” he replied. “It’s just an aspect of the competition. To win at racing, you need both strategy and luck. The same is true for gambling: thinking is important, but sometimes you just have to load the dice.”

Marcus paused to weigh his response. He knew that cheating was common in knucklebones and other street games—that was one of the reasons he avoided them. But he was shocked to hear that it was practiced so openly by men of Alexander’s class.

“And the lives of those drivers were just part of the cost?” he said at last.

“That wasn’t part of the plan,” Alexander admitted with a hint of regret. “They were supposed to slow down near the end of the race and let our man race ahead while they held the gold driver back. But that fool who ran onto the track spoiled it all. If anyone is to blame for those men’s deaths, it was him. What could he have been thinking?”

“I wondered also,” said Marcus. “It’s hard to fathom. Perhaps he was drunk and didn’t know what he was doing. Perhaps he was impelled by some evil spirit. Or perhaps he was just bored with how the race was going and wanted to shake things up.”

He glanced at Alexander to see if his words had struck home, but he could not read him.

“I guess we’ll never know,” replied Alexander. “As far as I could tell, none of the drivers touched him. He probably got away before the authorities could arrest him.”

Just then one of Alexander's friends called to him over the din and Alexander turned to shout back. Marcus was grateful for the interruption; he had no wish to prolong this conversation.

As he gazed around at the stadium, he felt a sudden desire to be home with Miriam. The races were exciting, but he was growing weary of Alexander's company. He didn't belong among these people, and he had achieved what he came to do by making friends with Isidoros's son. But his host would surely be offended if he were to leave before the final race was run. He had made his choice, and now he would have to see it through.

His ruminations were interrupted by the appearance of several slaves carrying baskets of food for Isidoros's guests. One of them gave him a full skin of wine while another handed him an enameled plate filled with a variety of meats, olives, and sweets. He took the plate and ate in silence.

He was almost done when Alexander tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the gate on their left, the one closest to them. "Something is going on over there," he noted. "It must be time for the midday festivities."

A number of soldiers were milling about in front of the gate, but Marcus saw nothing to suggest that they were preparing for any organized activity. "What are they doing?" he asked.

"Wait and see," answered Alexander mysteriously. "I don't want to spoil the fun."

As Marcus watched, a few more soldiers entered the stadium and joined the group standing around the gate, then several more. Soon a band of fifty or more had gathered there. Their armor gleamed in the midday sun.

Through the corner of his eye Marcus saw the prefect rise and lift his arm as before. This time the crowd seemed not to notice him. After a brief delay, the prefect nodded toward the gate and two trumpeters sounded their horns. The soldiers sprang to attention and the buzzing of the audience ceased.

The prefect gazed silently at the crowd for several moments. When he spoke, his voice echoed across the stadium.

"Citizens and honored guests," he began, "I stand before you today on behalf of our esteemed procurator, Marcus Antonius Felix, who is in Jerusalem keeping watch on the Jews during their festival. Soon after he reached the city, he was confronted by a pack of rebels who had the temerity to think that they could stand against the might of Rome. He defeated them handily, and as we sit here today he is executing their leaders before the city walls so that the people of Jerusalem can see for themselves the justice that Rome metes out to its enemies."

The prefect paused as if expecting a response. Following his cue, the spectators began applauding and shouting words of approval. Marcus thought that he heard

a few curses mingling with the cries, but he could not be sure. The prefect raised his arm to silence the crowd.

“In honor of the procurator’s victory,” he resumed, “the procurator has decreed that we in Caesarea should enjoy a similar opportunity to celebrate the justice of Rome. He has been waiting for a fitting time to punish a band of rebels whom he captured a few weeks ago in Galilee. They have confessed to their crimes, and they will be executed in this stadium to remind Jews everywhere of the futility of plotting against Rome.”

He paused again, and the round of cheers that arose this time seemed more spontaneous and enthusiastic. Marcus blanched—he had not realized that he’d be witnessing an execution, much less one involving Jews.

The prefect raised his hand again to silence the crowd.

“The procurator feels confident,” he went on, “that the Jews of Caesarea are innocent of the seditious sentiments voiced by some of their fellow countrymen. But he issues this warning to any who might be tempted to imitate them: Beware! Do not follow in their footsteps! Do not try the patience of Rome!”

Shouts of acclamation echoed across the stadium, mingling with scattered imprecations against the Jews. The cheering was so intense that Marcus wondered if he was the only Jew who had come to the stadium on this opening day of Passover. If that was the case, however, why deliver such a warning today? Why not wait until more Jews were present? All that the prefect had done was fan the flames of resentment against the local Jewish community.

Was the perhaps his intention? Benjamin had told him that the procurators normally kept out of the conflicts between Jews and gentiles over who should have preeminence in the city. Rome, they said, had sent them to watch over the people as a whole, not to settle petty disputes. If Felix had authorized the words spoken by the prefect, he was announcing a change of policy; he was taking sides. Marcus wondered if Benjamin would be surprised.

In the midst of the cheers, the prefect nodded toward the gate and sat down. Trumpets sounded, an officer barked a command, and the soldiers formed two parallel lines leading from the gate to the dignitaries’ platform. The audience was transfixed.

A few moments later the gate creaked open and a band of soldiers shoved half a dozen shackled men into the gap between the two lines. The prisoners paused and stared at the spectators. Suddenly one of the soldiers next to the gate struck the man closest to him with his fist and ordered him to keep moving. The prisoner yelped and staggered to get away from him, but the other prisoners were in his way. Soon all of the soldiers began beating whichever prisoner was closest to them and propelling them toward the platform. The gauntlet moved along

with the prisoners so that they were unable to escape the blows. The spectators bellowed encouragement to the soldiers and cursed the prisoners. Marcus winced and lowered his eyes.

“What’s the matter?” called Alexander over the cheers. “Don’t they punish rebels where you’re from?”

“We don’t have rebels in Anatolia,” said Marcus, fixing his eyes on Alexander to avoid looking at the track. “And we don’t use such brutal methods to punish lawbreakers, even slaves. This is barbaric.”

“So are those Jews,” countered Alexander. “They prey on our people and we punish them as they deserve. This land is teetering on the brink of insurrection, and if we don’t stop it now, we’ll soon be facing a full-scale revolt. Felix had to make an example of these agitators in order to dissuade others from following them.”

Marcus could tell that nothing would be gained by arguing with him. “If you say so,” he muttered, then went back to staring at his feet. He stayed in this position until the shouting ceased and curiosity moved him to look up. The prefect was on his feet again and preparing to speak. The prisoners stood in a line directly in front of him, surrounded by a ring of soldiers. Blood covered their faces and their garments were dirty and torn.

“These men wished to do battle with Rome,” shouted the prefect, “so we’re going to give them an opportunity to fulfill those dreams.” He nodded to two soldiers who carried what appeared to be crude wooden swords. They handed one to each prisoner, then stepped out of the circle. “Now fight!” he commanded, then sat down.

The Romans drew their swords and began creeping toward the prisoners, taunting them and challenging them to make the first move. The spectators took up the mockery. The prisoners huddled together as the circle closed around them.

Suddenly one of the rebels looked up at the prefect and lifted his sword. “Come down here and fight me like a man and I’ll show you what we Jews are made of!” he shouted. “I’ll match my sword against yours any day!”

A Roman whose dress showed him to be an officer stepped into the circle and slashed the man’s arm with his sword. The other prisoners rushed to seize the attacker, but a dozen soldiers stepped in front of them before they could reach him. The prisoners lunged at them with their wooden swords and a melee erupted. The air was soon filled with the clatter of weapons and the cries of the prisoners.

The battle did not last long. The soldiers, who heavily outnumbered the prisoners, piled onto them and pummeled them to the ground. When they were thoroughly subdued and disarmed the soldiers dragged them roughly to their feet. All were streaked with blood from wounds they had incurred during the skirmish. Marcus was amazed that they were still alive; he had assumed that the

prefect meant for them to be killed in the fight. Now he wondered what other humiliations he might have in store for them.

The soldiers arranged the prisoners into a line facing the prefect and forced them to their knees. The prefect stood and gazed down at them. The crowd grew silent.

“By your actions today you have shown yourselves to be enemies of Rome,” he bellowed. “You will therefore be punished in the manner that Rome prescribes for rebels: you will watch the remainder of today’s races from a tree.”

The prefect grinned as a squad of soldiers stepped through the gate carrying six large wooden beams. When they reached the space in front of the platform, they laid the beams end to end on the ground. Marcus gazed at them in an effort to divine their purpose, but nothing came to mind that made any sense. He did not want to ask Alexander lest his reaction should give him away. His instincts told him to avert his eyes, but his conscience compelled him to watch so that he could provide an accurate report to his friends at home.

The prisoners seemed to know what the prefect intended for them since they began shouting and wriggling in the arms of their captors.

“You won’t get away with this!” called one of them.

“God will punish you, you bastard!” cried another.

“You’re all doomed!” announced a third.

The prefect nodded and the soldiers muscled the prisoners to the ground beside the beams. The prisoners shouted and cursed as the soldiers lifted their shoulders onto the beams, stretched out their arms, and held them there. Other men stepped forward with ropes and tied their arms to the beams.

When all were secure, the soldiers hefted them to their feet and shoved them toward the center of the track, lashing them with whips whenever they staggered or swayed under the load. The spectators egged the soldiers on while hurling insults, trash, and food at the prisoners. A few of the prisoners shouted curses at their tormentors, but most looked too dazed to respond.

Marcus was disgusted—he had never witnessed such brutal and heartless treatment of helpless men. His revulsion deepened as he saw how eagerly the wealthy and educated citizens around him joined in the abuse. Such behaviors were normal at boxing or wrestling matches, but there the victims offered their bodies willingly to be pummeled in front of an audience. This was different. He could not imagine how cultured men and women could condone such wanton cruelty, much less participate in it.

As the men were herded toward the center of the track, he pondered what the prefect might have in store for them. Public executions were uncommon in Antioch, and he had seen nothing so far to indicate how these men were to die. His curiosity grew when the men were deposited one by one at the bases of several

tall posts that stood in the space between the lanes. He had seen the posts earlier and assumed they were there to keep the chariots from crossing the center line and colliding with oncoming traffic. Now he began to suspect a more sinister purpose.

The officer in charge shouted a command over the din of the crowd. A trumpet sounded and the prisoners were thrown roughly to the ground and muscled onto their backs so that the beams lay under their shoulders. As Marcus watched, two soldiers approached the man closest to him carrying hammers and metal spikes. While others held the man's arms in place, the men with the hammers knelt on either side of the beam and drove spikes through his wrists and into the wood. The same was done for the other prisoners. The pounding of six hammers echoed through the stadium. The prisoners screamed in agony.

Marcus dropped heavily to his seat and covered his ears, then lowered his head to his knees to keep from vomiting on the man in front of him. He tried to drive the image from his mind, but it was seared onto his eyelids. He prayed for God to relieve the men's sufferings, but he could tell from the cries and curses that pierced his clasped hands that his prayers were in vain. He wanted to race out of the stadium, but that would undo any good that he had accomplished this day.

As the initial wave of nausea subsided, he peered up to see what was happening. Two soldiers had climbed onto wooden boxes on either side of each prisoner and were staring down at them. Two other soldiers pulled the men to their feet and stationed him with their backs to the posts, facing the crowd. The soldiers on the boxes grasped the ends of the beams and hoisted them onto wooden blocks that protruded from the posts, leaving the prisoners dangling in the air. Shrieks filled the stadium as the full weight of the men's bodies was absorbed by their pinned arms.

Marcus was petrified. He wanted to scream along with the men, but his mouth would not work. He wanted to leave, but his limbs were frozen. He couldn't watch, yet he couldn't look away. He had entered a nightmare from which there was no escape.

But that was not the end. As he watched, pairs of soldiers seized the men's flailing legs and nailed their ankles to the sides of the post, evoking another round of screams from their victims. Other men clambered onto the boxes and hammered long nails through the crossbeams to hold them in place.

Now Marcus understood what the prefect had meant when he announced that the prisoners would "watch today's race from a tree." He meant to leave these poor wretches hanging there in the middle of the track until the final race was run, and perhaps beyond. The chariots would circle around them and the spectators would cheer for their favorites as if nothing unusual had occurred. The men would die slowly and painfully over the course of many hours, and their bodies would be left

there for days while the crows pecked out their eyes and vultures tore at their flesh. Killing men like this was worse than barbaric; it was evil personified.

Marcus couldn't stand it any longer. If he didn't leave now, he would blurt out something that would stain him forever in Alexander's eyes.

He tapped Alexander on the shoulder. His companion looked startled. He was so absorbed in the execution that he seemed to have forgotten that Marcus was there.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go," said Marcus, leaning close to be heard over the crowd. "Please give my respects to your father and thank him for inviting me. Tell him I enjoyed the races. And thank you also for all the kindness that you've shown me today. I hope to see you again before I leave for Galilee." The words spilled out in a rush, leaving no room for Alexander to interrupt.

"Too much gore, huh?" smirked Alexander. "I thought you Romans liked watching people fight and die in the arena. You're not feeling sorry for those criminals, are you?" He eyed Marcus as if attempting to read his mind. The screams of the prisoners had softened to moans, but Marcus still found them upsetting. He evaded Alexander's gaze.

"Look," he went on, "I know that this can be hard to stomach the first time you see it, but you'll understand it better once you've been here for a while. Don't let your emotions get in the way of a good time. We need you here this afternoon to cheer our man to victory." He grinned.

"I'm sorry," Marcus began, then halted. What else could he say?

"You're right," he resumed after a moment's reflection. "I'm not feeling well, and I'm afraid I'll make a mess and embarrass you if I don't leave now. Please try to understand. You can tell me about the race the next time I see you. I have to go."

He turned and began pushing his way toward the aisle before Alexander could answer. He rushed down the stairs and into the vaulted corridor through which they had entered. He paused for a moment to get his bearings and was suddenly overwhelmed by the stench. He fell to his knees and retched.

## CHAPTER 4

“YOU’RE BACK EARLY,” announced Benjamin as Marcus entered the walled courtyard where he, Judith, and Miriam were basking in the warm midday sun. Someone had brought couches from the house so that they could relax there in comfort. “I wasn’t expecting you for a couple of hours. Did the races end early?”

“No, I left before they were done,” muttered Marcus as he dragged himself toward the couch where Miriam was lying. She moved over to make room for him beside her.

“You didn’t have to come home for us,” added Miriam, taking his hand and giving it an affectionate squeeze. “We told you that we had accepted your decision to go.”

“It wasn’t that,” he countered, lowering his eyes to the paving stones. “It—it—it was horrible.”

Tears welled into his eyes and spilled onto his face. Miriam gazed at him for a moment in surprise, then extended her arms to embrace him. He leaned against her and sobbed.

Miriam glanced at Benjamin and Judith to gauge their reactions, but their expressions showed only puzzlement. She stroked Marcus’s hair and shoulders to comfort him as he fought to master his feelings. When he finally lifted his head, she wiped his eyes with a fold of her tunic and held his face in her hands.

“What happened today, my love?” she probed. “What upset you so? Can you tell me now, or do you need more time? We can go inside if you prefer.”

Marcus sniffled and scrubbed his eyes with his hand. He still couldn’t look her in the eye, but he knew he owed her an explanation.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last. “I didn’t mean to break down like that. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Judith comforted him. “Take all the time you need. You don’t have to talk now; you can wait until later if you wish.”

“No, no,” Marcus protested. “I need to tell you now. It relates to your community and its position in the city. You might not be safe here.”

Judith and Benjamin glanced anxiously at one another. “Don’t be upset on our account,” replied Benjamin. “We know there are people here who hate us. Remember what I told you about the fights that have broken out recently between our sons and theirs? I doubt you can tell me anything that I don’t already know.”

“I’m not talking about kids in the street,” Marcus insisted. “It’s much worse than that. A group of soldiers tortured and killed six Jews today in the middle of the stadium, and the spectators applauded! Everyone laughed and jeered as they watched those poor men being abused. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

His eyes clouded and he feared he might break down again. He paused to wipe away the budding tears. Miriam laid a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

“So they did that today, huh?” mused Benjamin, his face suddenly grave. “I’d bet it was some of those men that they captured a few weeks ago in Galilee. I knew that they didn’t have long to live, but I had no idea they would be executed today.”

He lowered his head briefly as if in prayer, then shook it slowly. “Poor fools!” he said. “They sealed their fate the day they took up arms against Rome.”

“The prefect said they were rebels from Galilee,” replied Marcus, “so you’re probably right.”

“And they crucified them right there in the middle of the track?” asked Benjamin, his brow furrowing into a field of wrinkles.

“They beat them and whipped them, then nailed their hands to heavy wooden beams and hung them on posts to die,” answered Marcus. “Is that what you mean?”

“Yes, that’s crucifixion,” Benjamin confirmed. “It’s how the Romans punish rebels and other people whom they see as dangerous. They do it to sow fear in the hearts of their supporters and dissuade others from joining them. It’s a brutal practice. I can understand why you would have been upset by it.”

“So you’ve seen it before?” asked Marcus, incredulous. “I thought it was some sort of cruel torture they dreamed up specifically for these men.”

“No, it’s standard practice,” explained Benjamin. “I’ve seen men hanging dead on crosses a time or two, but I’ve never seen it done. I can only imagine how dreadful it must be to sit there among those godless hordes as they clamored for the deaths of your countrymen.”

“They weren’t just shouting for them to be executed,” Marcus explained. “They egged the soldiers on as they beat the prisoners, then mocked the men for crying out. They seemed to think it was great fun. It was like watching a gladiatorial contest where one man is armed and the other has his arms tied behind his back. It’s not a fair contest.”

“No, it’s not,” agreed Benjamin. “It never is with the Romans.” He lowered his eyes and shook his head.

“But they didn’t go meekly,” Marcus continued, rousing from his grief. “The prefect had one of his men give them wooden swords and then ordered them to fight against a troop of soldiers armed with real swords. Several of the men hurled curses at the prefect, and one of them called for him to come down and fight him in person. That was a bold stroke! The prefect ignored them and ordered his men to attack.”

His lip quavered again as he recounted the events. “The fighting was over almost before it began. When the men had been subdued, the prefect declared

them enemies of Rome because they had the temerity to use weapons against Roman soldiers to avoid being slaughtered. That's when they were led off to be executed."

"That's enough," declared Benjamin as Marcus's voice broke. "We've heard all we need for today. Go in and get some rest."

"No," Marcus objected, wiping his eyes and forcing his mind to focus. "There's one more thing you need to hear. As he was declaring the men's fate, the prefect said something like 'let this be a warning to the Jews of Caesarea not to follow such rebels.' He claimed that the warning came directly from the procurator. He mitigated its effect somewhat by saying that he had no reason to think the Jews of Caesarea were engaged in such activities, but his tone suggested otherwise. He appeared to be suggesting to the audience that Jews are not to be trusted—that you might turn on them any moment. A statement like that from a Roman official is sure to increase tensions."

"But the procurator," Benjamin began, but Marcus cut him off.

"Let me finish," he insisted. "Judging from what I saw and heard today, I think you and your friends need to be prepared for more forceful attacks against the Jewish community and its place in the city. I can't guess what form they might take, but I wouldn't be surprised if you find an unruly mob gathering around one of your synagogues or even your homes one day soon. If you or your friends have any influence with the Roman administration, now's the time to use it. Someone needs to nip this in the bud before it goes any farther."

Benjamin waited to see if Marcus was finished before speaking. "I appreciate the warning," he said after a pause. "I'd be willing to bet that this is all the prefect's doing. Felix's wife is a Jew, as you know, and I can't imagine him demeaning us like that in public. He can be harsh toward Jews who disturb the peace or threaten his power, but I've never heard of him harboring negative feelings or suspicions toward our people here in Caesarea. But I'll share this with our elders and see what they say. Many heads are wiser than one in a situation like this."

"Do whatever you think is best," replied Marcus. "For myself, I'm happy that Miriam and I will be leaving this place soon. I don't know how you put up with living so close to people who hate you and plot against you. But I guess that comes with being a Jew, right?" He gave Benjamin a wry grin. Benjamin nodded, but Miriam looked embarrassed.

"Of course, I can understand them," he added, "because I held similar sentiments before I learned about my family history. I never imagined that I'd be looking forward to living in an isolated Jewish district like Galilee and not in a Greek or Roman city. But after what I saw today, I don't want to stay here a moment longer than necessary. I think I could have everything ready for us to leave by the day after tomorrow. What do you say, Miriam?"

Miriam gazed at him blankly for a moment. “I say,” she answered at last, “that your experience at the stadium has addled your wits. Have you forgotten what day this is?”

Marcus returned her blank look. He knew what month and day it was, but nothing about it struck him as special.

“Why did we have those arguments about you going to the races today?” Miriam challenged him. “What is today?”

Marcus thought for a moment. “I remember now!” he said sheepishly. “It’s Passover!”

“Yes, it’s Passover!” echoed Miriam. “You say that as if it’s a reason for lamentation and not a time of celebration. Our first Passover in the land of our ancestors! How could you forget something so momentous?”

“Be gentle with him, dear,” advised Judith. “He’s still learning, and he’s had quite a fright today. If I were in his shoes, I might have trouble remembering my own name.”

“Thank you for understanding,” said Marcus, ignoring Miriam’s icy glare. “I couldn’t have said it better myself. So how long before we can leave Caesarea?”

“The Feast of Unleavened Bread runs for eight days,” replied Benjamin. “The first and last days are Sabbaths, and this year there’s a regular Sabbath in the middle, so you won’t be doing any work on those days. That leaves you with four days to get organized and buy what you need for the journey. You could leave eight days from now if you wish.”

“That’s more than enough time,” remarked Marcus. “What do you think, Miriam?”

“I’m in no hurry to leave,” she answered curtly. “But we’ve imposed on Benjamin and Judith long enough. So if you think you can be ready by then, it’s fine with me.”

“Please don’t rush for our sakes,” said Judith. “It’s been a pleasure having you here—it’s like having our children home again. But we know you have important business in Galilee, so do whatever you think is best.”

“In that case,” replied Marcus, “we’ll enjoy your kindness for seven more days, then leave for Galilee.”

Marcus felt better. Organization and planning always took his mind away from unpleasant realities.

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FOR the next several days Marcus felt distracted and distressed. Memories of what he had seen at the stadium haunted his dreams and the spring rainstorm that blew in two days later cast a pall over the city. The heavy skies amplified his depression,

while the gusting winds made it impossible to keep dry when he went out to buy supplies for their journey. Even wearing a heavy cloak, he was drenched and frozen by the time he came home. He sat for hours beside a glowing charcoal brazier to warm his chilled bones.

The storm ended before the week was out, but his spirits remained low. He yearned to escape this accursed city and begin the search for his family, but he could do nothing until the festival was over. He grew resentful of the delay. He took little interest in the Passover festivities, and his only emotion when they were over was relief.

The necessity of preparing for their departure was the only thing that kept him going. He bought a sturdy mule-drawn wagon to carry their baggage to Galilee and rented a passenger carriage whose Greek-speaking driver promised to deliver them to Sepphoris in relative comfort. He also met a young man at the stable who filled his greatest need: a wagon-driver who spoke both Greek and Aramaic and was willing to serve as their translator and servant for as long as they needed him.

The man's name was Asher, and he was a couple of years younger than Marcus. He had been married, but his wife had died in childbirth a few months earlier and he was eager to escape the memory of his loss. He had been born in Galilee and lived there until he was twelve years old, so he knew the area and spoke the local dialect. If all went well, he might even stay in Galilee after they were done with him.

Marcus was thrilled—he could not have asked for a better guide. A slave would have been cheaper and easier to manage, but he and Miriam had resolved to abstain from owning slaves if possible after spending the bulk of their lives in that condition. Lucius's nursemaid Deborah was a slave in name only, and they planned to free her as soon as he no longer needed her milk.

As he was hurrying home to tell Miriam the good news, he was arrested by a familiar voice.

"What's so urgent?" drawled Alexander as he approached from a side street. "Got another execution to watch?" He grinned mischievously.

Marcus wanted to punch the smirk from his face, but a lifetime of servitude had taught him to manage his feelings. He decided to ignore the jibe. "Greetings!" he replied as pleasantly as he could muster. "I've been at the stable making arrangements for our trip to Galilee, and it took longer than I expected. My wife is waiting for me."

"When are you leaving?" asked Alexander.

"Two days from now," said Marcus. "I was planning to stop by your house before we leave." He hoped his face did not betray the lie.

"Well, now you have me!" announced Alexander, spreading his arms and smiling broadly. "Let's get a drink and you can tell me what's on your mind."

“Actually, it was your father I was coming to see,” he clarified, cudgeling his brain for an excuse to escape the conversation. “I wanted to thank him for helping me with my money and for inviting me to the races the other day. But I thought I might see you while I was there, in which case I would bid you farewell also.”

“I see,” answered Alexander dubiously. “I didn’t realize you were leaving us so soon.”

“I had hoped to leave earlier, but the rain...” His voice trailed off as he realized that Alexander was peering at the people around them and not at him. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing,” replied Alexander, turning back to face him. “I just wanted to make sure nobody was listening.” He peered around again, leaving Marcus to wonder what he was thinking. He waited for an explanation.

“Listen,” he said, looking suddenly abashed. “I want to apologize for what happened at the stadium the other day. Or rather, my father asked me to give you his apologies. He had no idea you’d take it so hard. We’ve gotten used to things like that in the last several years, so we forget what it’s like for a newcomer like you. My father wanted you to know that he doesn’t consider your early departure a breach of friendship and that he’d welcome you to our home when you return to Caesarea.”

Marcus was amazed—it was unusual for a powerful man like Isidoros to apologize to anyone, much less a man he might never see again. He wondered if their financial dealings had given him an inflated view of Marcus’s wealth.

“I’d like to add my apologies to his,” Alexander continued. “I acted like a boor that day. I get so excited on racing days that I sometimes forget my manners. I shouldn’t have baited you about being a spy, and I should have recognized how distressed you were during the execution. I could have helped you make a more graceful exit. I hope you’re not leaving with a bad impression of me.”

Marcus eyed him for a moment as he weighed how to answer. Now that the air had been cleared, he felt sorry for the young man. He looked like a boy who had been caught with his finger in the honey jar.

“I won’t lie to you,” he said at last. “I’m a peaceful man, and I was distressed by the level of brutality that I saw at the stadium. I wouldn’t have come if I had known in advance what was planned. But it wasn’t your fault—I was a stranger and you had no way of knowing how something like that would affect me. I was hesitant to leave for fear that your father would think ill of me, but you’ve relieved my mind on that score. So let’s forget about it and be friends.”

“That’s what I was hoping to hear,” gushed Alexander, seizing the hand that Marcus extended to him. “Believe it or not, I like you—I wouldn’t have teased you so much if I didn’t. I hope you’ll come and see us when circumstances bring you

back to our city. Perhaps then you'll tell me what took you to Galilee and whether your mission succeeded."

"Perhaps," agreed Marcus, knowing that he could never tell Alexander the full truth. "I'm glad we bumped into each other. Give my regards to your father and tell him that I look forward to seeing him again."

"I'll do that," said Alexander with a smile. "May Hermes speed your journey."

"And may he prosper your family's business," answered Marcus, returning his smile. Then he turned to go home.

*That was a fortunate encounter*, he thought as he threaded his way between piles of trash and dung. If the troubles that he feared should come to pass, such a friendship could prove invaluable.

At the end of the street he looked back to make sure Alexander wasn't following him. If he discovered that Marcus was staying with a Jew, even one known to his father, it could undo everything he had accomplished today. Seeing no sign of him, he picked up the pace.

When he told Miriam the events of his day, the eagerness of her response surprised him. "That just shows that God is with us," she exclaimed. "We're leaving Caesarea with a clean slate and we're heading to Galilee with all of our needs met. You see now how good it was that we stayed?"

"I guess so," replied Marcus, suppressing his doubts about her interpretation of the event. At a time when he was struggling to manage his own anxieties about what they might find in Galilee, her persistent confidence was annoying. He feared that her faith might be shattered if their mission were to fail. But he was still happy to have her with him. He would rather face the future with her by his side than alone.

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THE morning of their departure dawned gray and dreary, with a smattering of rain. Marcus peered down at the wet paving stones to keep from slipping as he paid a final visit to the stable to ensure that all was in order. Miriam and Deborah packed the last of their belongings while he was gone and Judith tended to the baby. Benjamin, given nothing to do, looked on in bemused silence.

Marcus returned to the house with Asher, four stable boys, and two carts to carry their baggage. He introduced Asher to Miriam, who took to him instantly. The boys made quick work of the loading, and soon they were all strolling together toward the stable. They stood and chatted as the baggage was shifted to the wagon and the vehicles received their final inspection.

"Write and let us know how things are going for you in Galilee," urged Judith

after the driver informed them that everything was ready. "You can always find people traveling from Galilee to Caesarea who will deliver a letter for you. And of course, you're welcome to stay with us whenever you have occasion to return to our city."

"We'll do that," agreed Miriam, "as long as you promise to come and visit us in Galilee once we're settled so that we can return the favor." Judith nodded as her eyes filled with tears.

"We'll never forget what you two did for us," said Marcus. "You took us in when we had nowhere to go, you tended to all of our needs, and you taught us what we need to know about the new land. You also put up with a crying baby." He glanced at Miriam and smiled. "It's hard to believe that we've only known you for a few weeks. You're like the parents that I never had." His voice cracked, but he suppressed his budding tears.

"And you've become a second set of children to us," echoed Judith. "We'll miss you and the baby. And you, too, Deborah," she added. "You'll be a good mother to your own children one day."

"Thank you, ma'am," replied the girl shyly. Miriam hustled Deborah and the baby into the carriage lest she burst into tears at this reminder of the child she had lost shortly before they met her. Marcus climbed in after them.

"You have that letter to my friend in Sepphoris who will assist you with your money?" asked Benjamin through the open window.

"Yes, I have it right here," Marcus assured him, patting the pouch at his waist.

"And you wrote down the name of that priest that Annas told you about?" he continued. "Eliashib, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that's it," said Marcus, smiling to hide his impatience.

"And you have the directions to my friend's house where you'll be staying this evening?" he added.

"They're right here with the letter," replied Marcus, pointing again to the pouch.

"He told my messenger he'd station one of his slaves by the road to watch for you," Benjamin went on. "I explained to your driver how to find the house, but I'm not sure he understood me."

"Everything will be fine," Marcus assured him. He knew that his friend meant well, but this was at least the third time he had asked him the same questions.

"Then may God prosper you and keep you safe," intoned Benjamin, raising his hand as he spoke.

"And may he do the same for you," echoed Marcus.

"Amen," added Judith and Miriam in unison.

"They're ready," Benjamin announced to the driver. "You can leave now."

The man twitched his reins and the mules stepped slowly out of the stable, followed by Asher with the supply wagon. Marcus heaved a sigh of relief, eliciting giggles from Miriam and Deborah.

“What’s so funny?” asked Marcus, puzzled.

“You should have seen the look on your face,” chuckled Miriam. “I thought you were going to explode!”

“Was it that obvious?” asked Marcus. “I hope he didn’t see it.” They all laughed.

They chatted about Benjamin and Judith and about what they might find in Galilee. The gray skies and fog limited their view of the surroundings, and what they did see was largely cultivated fields that varied little from plot to plot. After a while the rocking of the carriage lulled them to sleep.

A while later Marcus was jolted awake by a sudden thumping from below. He looked out and saw that they were climbing through a range of hills that lined both sides of the roadway.

“Sorry about that!” called the driver over the creaking of wheels and the clomping of hooves. His Greek was barely functional, so Marcus leaned out to hear him better. “The road’s always rough on this uphill stretch,” he explained, “but it’s worse after it rains. I’m doin’ my best to avoid the holes, but I can’t miss ’em all.”

“Keep trying!” Marcus shouted back. By now everyone was awake and the baby was crying. Deborah raised him to her breast while Marcus and Miriam gazed at the scenery.

“These must be the hills around Mount Carmel that Benjamin said we’d have to cross,” observed Marcus. “He said the road could be bumpy in this area. I hope we don’t run into any of those washouts that he mentioned.”

“I just hope this shaking doesn’t jar our teeth loose,” quipped Miriam. “But little Lucius doesn’t seem to mind it.” She reached over and patted the baby’s leg.

The mood in the carriage turned sour as they bumped and jostled up the hill for another hour. Their vexation increased when they were forced to stop at a spot where some paving stones had been displaced by a freshet that flowed over the road. Marcus and the drivers were able to repair it using some nearby stones, but the work took over an hour and they were drenched and muddy by the time they finished. Even after changing into a fresh set of clothes from one of the chests, Marcus felt dirty and bedraggled.

By the time they reached the peak, the fog was so thick that they could not see the valley floor below. The driver warned them that he’d have to ride his brakes down the hill to keep the wheels from slipping on the wet stones, and the passengers fumed and fretted all the way down. The bumping was less noticeable

at this lower speed, but between the jostling of the carriage and the whining of the baby, they were all exhausted by the time they reached the bottom.

The sky darkened as they entered a wide valley that matched Benjamin's description of where his friend lived. Marcus peered over the fields searching for the landmarks that Benjamin had described, but everything looked the same in the fading light. He began to worry that they had missed the turn and would have to sleep in the carriage, so he called for the driver to stop so they could talk. The man assured him that he knew where he was going.

A quarter of an hour later the carriage ground to a halt. Marcus climbed out and found the driver talking in what he took to be Aramaic with a man whom he hoped was the slave who was supposed to watch out for them. The driver nodded as he and the other man climbed up to his seat on the front of the carriage. Almost immediately the carriage turned into a long driveway that led to the door of a large but simple country house.

A middle-aged man named Nathan who proved to be the owner of the house came out to greet them, and before long they were seated around a low table covered with steaming bowls of soup, bread, olives, cheese, and heated wine. When they had eaten their fill, Nathan's steward led them to their rooms, and soon everyone was asleep.

The sky was still gray when they awoke the next day, but the fog had cleared enough for Marcus to survey the surroundings. The fields burgeoned with barley that was well on the way to harvest, and here and there workers could be seen trudging toward the fields. The valley was ringed by low hills whose slopes were covered with olive trees and forest. The view reminded him of the fields around Antioch.

"Sepphoris is that way," announced Nathan, sidling up to Marcus and pointing eastward. "It's a steady climb to get there, and the hills are bigger than the ones you crossed yesterday. I expect the skies to start clearing this afternoon, but the roads will be wet and muddy. The drive will be faster and easier if you wait here a day or two, and you'll have a better view of the scenery once the fog is gone. Galilee is a beautiful country, and the road that leads into the hills is a delight to see, especially this time of year."

"Thank you for the advice," replied Marcus as he continued staring in the direction Nathan had pointed. "I need to discuss it with Miriam, but I can guess what she'll say—she'd enjoy a day's rest after the ride we had to get here."

"You're welcome to stay as long as you like," Nathan assured him. "Any friend of Benjamin is a friend of mine."

Miriam was delighted to have a day to recover from the prior day's stress, and she thought it would be good for the baby, too. It would also give them time to learn a few words of Aramaic from Asher before they reached Sepphoris.

When their host proposed the next day that they should give the roads another day to dry out, they agreed. But by the third day Marcus was ready to commence the final leg of their journey.

The sky glowed a radiant blue as they began their climb to the city where Marcus's grandmother had lived. The road ran directly toward the morning sun, hindering their view of the hills ahead, so they spent the first hour admiring the lush valley with its patchwork of wheat, barley, grapevines, and olive trees.

To relieve the tedium, Marcus related to the others what Nathan had told him about the growing season in Israel, which was opposite to that in Antioch. In this land, farmers plant their crops in the autumn and harvest them in the spring when their Anatolian peers are just beginning to till their fields. They do it this way because of the climate: the summers are too hot and dry for plants to grow, while the winters are cool and wet, perfect weather for starting seeds. All signs pointed to a good harvest this year, but not every year was so fruitful. Sometimes the rains did not come and the crops were stunted or even died, producing famine. Only a decade had passed since the last such disaster.

Marcus found the information fascinating, so he was disappointed to see that Miriam and Deborah did not share his enthusiasm. He thought they'd be pleased to learn more about the land where they might settle for life, but he had been wrong. He lapsed into silence.

By the time they reached the foothills, the fog had burned off enough for them to see where they were going. The hills that surrounded them were green and lush. Some were wooded while others were striated by long stone terraces on which farmers had planted olives and grapes. Still others were too rocky for anything but brush, but even here they saw goats nibbling on the foliage. These people really knew how to use their land.

As they moved higher up the road, Marcus began to wonder why Nathan had spoken so highly of the scenery. The hills were attractive enough, but none were as tall as the mountains that Marcus had seen during his trek across Anatolia, and their gentle ridges could not compare with the rugged peaks of his own land. The views were impressive, but the incline wasn't especially steep—not enough to cause problems for the mules. He could see how people bred in the flatlands might appreciate the region's beauty, but it was no match for the scenery around Antioch.

In early afternoon they caught their first glimpse of Sepphoris. The hill on which it rested looked like all the other ridges they had passed that day. They would have overlooked it if the driver had not pointed it out during a rest stop, a gray smudge on a distant ridgeline that caught the reflection of the declining sun.

Marcus's stomach fluttered at their nearness to the place where he would learn what had happened to his mother. For all he knew she might still be living

there, though he had worked hard to suppress such hopes. He assured himself that he could be happy if they found someone who knew where she had gone and whether she had family in the area. The possibility that they might have come so far in vain was too painful to consider.

As they drew closer, Marcus was struck by how closely Sepphoris resembled his home city of Antioch. A cluster of large buildings huddled on the hilltop, surrounded by a hodgepodge of smaller dwellings that rolled like barleycorns down the side of the hill. Beneath the mound stood a gray stone wall that appeared to encircle the city. Outbuildings of various types lined the base of the wall, while the valley beyond was filled with crops. A small gate marked the place where their road pierced the wall.

As in other cities that Marcus had visited, they found a stable just inside the gate. Everyone tumbled out of the carriage as soon as it stopped, stretching their legs and rejoicing that they had finally reached their destination. The mules brayed their agreement.

While the driver was making arrangements to store the vehicles, Marcus called Asher over to discuss their plans.

“This is where you prove your worth,” he said with a smile. “I need your help locating two men I was told to meet here. The only Aramaic words I know are the ones you taught me during the trip, so I’m relying on you to find where they live. I’ll come with you so that I can see the city.”

“You can count on me, sir,” replied Asher.

“Let’s go, then,” said Marcus. “We’ll leave the others here until we know where we’re staying. There’s no use dragging them around the city after such a tiring ride.”

Miriam argued briefly when Marcus explained his plan, but she relented after Deborah pointed out that the baby had just fallen asleep and would be fussy all day if they woke him.

Marcus decided to begin with Benjamin’s friend Micah since he knew Benjamin better than Annas, who had only given him Eliashib’s name. He also guessed that Micah would have a bigger house since Benjamin had described him as someone who could help him with his money.

The first person that Asher approached for directions pointed to a road that ran straight up the hillside. This is exactly where Marcus would have expected a wealthy man to live—the best homes were invariably built where the air was fresh to avoid the stench of the city. Other than the paving, however, this road was different from any that he had seen in Anatolia. There were no honorific statues lining the street, no temples or images of the local deities, no scantily clad women hawking their wares to new arrivals, no toga-wearing dignitaries forcing their way through the crowds. In fact, the buildings were mostly devoid of decoration, as if

a windstorm had blown through and stripped the walls of all but the plaster, or in some cases the bare stone.

His bafflement only deepened as they reached the hilltop. In every other city he had visited, the acropolis was the focal point of civic life, the site of the public forum and the principal temples of the city. No expense was spared in their construction; every building was a model of form and beauty. Nothing like that was evident here—the buildings were as dull and drab as the houses below them. The roads, too, were different: narrow like those of a residential area, not broad as befitted a public space. Only one edifice looked notably bigger than the others, and it bore the features of a private home, not a civic facility. To Marcus's eyes, Sepphoris looked more like an overgrown country village than the former capital of Galilee.

Asher approached a young man loitering on the side of the street and asked if he knew where a man named Micah lived. He offered to lead them to the house, and soon they were knocking at Micah's door. Asher stayed long enough to confirm that the porter spoke passable Greek, then returned to the stable.

The porter disappeared with the letter that Marcus had brought from Benjamin, leaving him waiting at the door. Time passed and no one came. Marcus grew annoyed. He was on the verge of knocking again when the man returned and led him up a flight of stairs to a flat, open roof that was surrounded by a low wall. Several chairs were arranged near the far wall. A man around Benjamin's age rose from one of them and greeted him.

"So you're here at last!" the man exclaimed. "I expected you earlier based on what Benjamin's messenger told me. My name is Micah and you must be Marcus Coelius—or do they call you Felix? Those Roman names always confuse me. I've never seen any rhyme or reason in the way you people want to be called."

The man's garrulity took Marcus by surprise, but he recovered quickly. "My friends call me Marcus," he replied, "and Benjamin tells me that I would be wise to count you among that number."

"Certainly, certainly!" agreed Micah with a genial grin. "Benjamin's friends are my friends. His messenger didn't tell me much about you except that you were newly arrived in our country and had family business in Galilee. We can talk about that later, but first we need to get you settled into your rooms. You will be staying with us, won't you? How many of you are there?"

"Your kindness overwhelms me," replied Marcus, dipping his head momentarily as a token of respect for the older man. "I wasn't aware that Benjamin had sent a messenger to you, so I wasn't expecting such a hearty welcome. If you have room for us, my wife and I would be happy to accept your offer. It's just the two of us, our infant son, and his nursemaid. The baby and the maid can share a room."

“We have plenty of space,” Micah assured him. “Ours is one of the largest houses in Sepphoris. I can even give you and your wife a room with a view. It’s beautiful, is it not?” He swept a hand across their field of vision.

The house stood on the edge of the plateau, where it gave a sweeping vista of the surrounding countryside. “You can see this from the room where you’ll be sleeping,” he added. “I like to sit out here in the afternoon this time of year and watch the shadows creep across the valley. The color change is remarkable.”

“I’d do the same if I owned your house,” agreed Marcus. They stood for several heartbeats admiring the scene.

“Forgive me,” said Micah at last. “I distracted you from the task at hand. Where is your family? I’m sure they’re worn out from their travels. You stayed last night with Nathan, right?”

“Yes, and the two prior nights as well,” explained Marcus. “It had been raining and Nathan said it would be better if we gave the road time to dry. Now that I’ve seen it, I don’t see why he was so concerned—we didn’t encounter any problems.”

“That’s because you waited,” remarked Micah. “Animals and pedestrians can climb those hills in any weather, but I’ve heard numerous reports of carriages sliding off the road after a bad storm. It’s not uncommon this time of year for mud to wash over the stones and make them too slippery for wheels to gain traction. You did the right thing.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Marcus. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I should go and get my family. They’ll be wondering what happened to me.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry to detain you,” said Micah apologetically. “I had rooms ready for you two days ago, but I’ll send a slave to freshen them up. They’ll be ready by the time you get here.”

Marcus thanked him and retraced his steps to the stable. By the time he arrived, Asher had made arrangements for himself and the carriage driver to sleep in the stable where they could keep watch on the cargo. He also borrowed a small cart to carry a few days’ supplies up to Micah’s house. Miriam was busy sorting through the chests and packing what they would need when he arrived.

“My, you two are industrious!” he exclaimed when he heard what they had been doing. “But it’s good that you’re doing that since we now have a place to stay.” He gave Miriam a quick summary of his meeting with Micah and she hugged him with joy. In half an hour they were trudging up the hill with Asher in tow.

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“Now tell me what brings you to Sepphoris,” demanded Micah that evening when they had finished the first course of what promised to be a luscious meal. Only Micah and his guests were present as his wife was visiting one of their children.

Marcus and Miriam told their story in full, holding nothing back. Micah's geniality had persuaded them that they could trust him, and they needed his help to find someone who might remember Marcus's family.

"I'm sorry to say that I have no memory of a woman arriving here from Anatolia," said Micah when they were done. "But that doesn't mean anything. She would have arrived—how long ago? How old are you?"

"The best I can figure, I'm twenty-seven or twenty-eight," said Marcus. "No one records the birthdates of slaves, so I had to figure it out from bits and pieces of what my master told me."

"That's what I guessed," said Micah. "That's a long time ago, and our city is big enough that no one can possibly see everyone who comes and goes. But if your mother did settle here for a while, it's possible that you'll run across someone who knew her. Finding someone who remembers your grandmother is less likely. Sarah is a common name among our people, and it's been sixty years since that Roman legion came here to suppress the insurrection that arose after Herod's death. Many people were killed or enslaved and others have died since then, so there aren't many people left who lived through that time. Even the older people are mostly late arrivals who came here after Antipas rebuilt the city. It's possible that you could find someone who was here that long ago, but I wouldn't count on it. You should focus on your mother."

"I'm grateful for your observations," replied Marcus. "Even dead ends are helpful at this point. Was your family one of those who arrived later?"

"We were," replied Micah. "My father moved here from Magdala a few years after Herod Antipas built the walls and made Sepphoris his capital. The large building that you passed on your way here is Antipas's palace, though he never spent much time here. He preferred a more urbane environment after spending his formative years in Rome where his father sent him and his brothers to be educated. Caesarea would have suited him better, but his brother Archelaus lived in his father's palace after his father, the first Herod, changed his will to favor Archelaus over Antipas. He never got over the slight; he could not bear to be in the same city as his brother. But Sepphoris was too much of a backwater for him—no public baths, no theater, no stadium—none of those entertainments that Greeks and Romans believe are essential."

Micah paused to take a drink. "I've been told that he intended to build those kinds of facilities here but never got around to it—he wasn't a great administrator. He spent much of his time with his friends at the hot springs near Lake Ginosar, and he traveled often to other lands. Years later he developed a grandiose scheme to build an entirely new capital on the lakeshore near the springs with all the trappings of a Roman city, including an elaborate palace that puts the one here to shame. You've not seen Tiberias, have you?"

Marcus shook his head. “It’s a magnificent city, if you like that kind of thing—everything looks so grand and new. It’s too foreign for me, but you might like it. The hot springs have made it a popular spot to vacation, and we’ve lost a number of our young people to its attractions. One of my daughters lives there—she married a relative of my wife whose parents moved to Tiberias when the city was built. We’ve visited them a few times, but we prefer to stay close to home. All our friends are here, and we own lands and businesses that have to be tended. Sepphoris is really a nice place to live—you should consider settling here once you’ve finished your investigations.”

“I appreciate the suggestion,” said Marcus diplomatically, “but I can’t think about that right now. My mind will be fully occupied until I discover what happened to my mother. I had hoped that you might be able to help me, but you can’t tell me what you don’t know. I’ll have to look elsewhere.”

“I understand,” said Micah. “First things first. You mentioned that you intended to visit Eliashib; his family has been here since the time of the Hasmoneans, long before the Romans came. Between that and his stature as a priest, he’ll be a good resource. He knows everybody.”

“I plan to visit him tomorrow,” said Marcus. “Perhaps he’ll remember something.”

“If not, I can tell you some other options,” said Micah. His face suddenly lit up.

“I know what we can do!” he shouted excitedly. “If your mother spent any time here, she probably went to the synagogue. The Sabbath begins this evening, so we can ask about her in the morning when we gather at the meeting house. There are some older people in the congregation who might remember her.”

“Great!” cried Miriam, who had been listening to the conversation between the two men. They stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said sheepishly. “I was just excited by Micah’s idea. If there’s any place where somebody will remember your mother, it’s the meeting house.”

“I agree,” said Marcus. “But I’ll need somebody to translate—it’s unlikely that we’ll find anyone there who speaks Greek. I’ll go to the stables and tell Asher to join us in the morning. I need to make sure everything is alright anyway.”

“There’s no need for that,” interjected Micah. “I can serve as your intermediary. Everyone here knows me, and they’re more likely to speak to me than a stranger. People get suspicious when an outsider starts nosing into people’s business. The Romans like to use spies to gather information about troublemakers, and the rebels have retaliated more than once against people who talked to them. Ours is a peace-loving city; people here just want to be left alone.”

His face grew somber. “Striking a balance between the Romans and the rebels is a daunting task, and it’s easy to make a mistake. Our leaders have tried to stay above the fray, but that’s hard when you’ve got people on both sides pushing you to take action. I don’t know what would happen to us if those fools should lead us into a war. God help us all.” He lowered his head as if in prayer.

“Let’s pray that it doesn’t come to that,” agreed Marcus. “That would be a disaster for everyone.”

## CHAPTER 5

THE NEXT MORNING they went early to the synagogue so that Micah could speak to the leader about making an announcement regarding Marcus's mother. Marcus, Miriam, and Deborah found seats on a bench facing the door where they could signal for Asher and the driver to join them. Marcus's attention, however, was on Micah. He watched as his host approached a man on the other side of the room and began talking to him in tones too low for him to hear. The conversation took longer than Marcus would have expected for such a simple request, but Micah finally turned toward him and nodded.

"Everything is arranged," he said, slipping into a seat next to Marcus. "I'll speak on your behalf and invite anyone who might remember your mother to meet me after the blessing. Stay close in case anyone has questions that I can't answer. May God bless our efforts."

"Amen," echoed Marcus as the man stood to address the crowd.

Marcus was lost from the moment the service began. It was hard to stay focused on the speaker when every word was in a language that sounded to him like gibberish. He did his best to copy the actions of those around him, but his mind soon drifted to other things.

As he gazed around the room, he found himself imagining what it would have been like for his mother to sit in that very seat so many years earlier. Not only was the people's speech incomprehensible, but the room itself was unlike anything he had encountered in Anatolia—a plain, square space with high windows, tall columns, and rows of stone benches built into three sides. The people looked different, too—men with dark, curly hair and beards, women wearing flowing robes and head coverings. A woman from Anatolia would have felt as out of place here as he did.

He searched the room for someone who appeared to be around the same age his mother would have been when she was here. His eyes rested on one woman, then another and another. His lids began to droop.

Suddenly he felt a sharp jab in his ribs. "Sssh!" hissed Miriam. "You were snoring."

She gave him a withering look that forced him to sit up and listen. A middle-aged man was giving some sort of speech, and he did his best to focus his attention in that direction. But soon he was peering again around the room, searching this time for someone who looked to be old enough to remember his mother. He gazed intently at an elderly woman as if trying to read her mind, but he learned nothing. He finally gave up and turned back to the speaker.

“Amen!” declared the congregation in unison. Marcus’s spirit leapt at this sign that the service was near its end. The speaker added a few more words and the people responded on cue.

The speaker then motioned for Micah to rise and make his announcement. Marcus understood none of it, but he smiled and waved when Micah gestured in his direction. He scanned the crowd for signs of recognition and noticed several people nodding as he spoke. Was it possible that they all remembered his mother?

When Micah was done, the leader pronounced a final blessing and the crowd rose from their benches. Some left immediately while others gathered in knots around the room to chat. Time passed and no one spoke to Micah except to offer curt greetings. Marcus began to feel worried. His hopes rose as an older woman stopped and chatted for a while with Micah, but he learned afterward they had been speaking about an unrelated matter.

When the room was nearly empty, Micah motioned toward the door. “It looks like my idea wasn’t so great after all,” he lamented. “I could have sworn that we’d find someone here today who knew your mother. I’m sorry to have aroused your hopes.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Miriam, laying a comforting hand on his arm. “I’m surprised, too, but there are plenty of other avenues that we can pursue. Our driver has to leave tomorrow, but we can stay here for as long as it takes.”

“You’re welcome to remain in my house,” Micah assured her. “My wife will be back this week, and I feel certain that she’ll agree with me.”

“We truly appreciate your hospitality,” replied Miriam. “But if we don’t learn anything in the next week or so, we’ll have to start looking for a place of our own. We don’t want to be a burden to you, and there’s no way to know how long we might be here. Perhaps we’ll even settle down here as you suggested.” She flashed a winsome smile.

“Whatever you think is best,” said Micah, returning her smile. “I’m at your service.”

Micah and Miriam continued to chat as they made their way toward Micah’s house. Marcus trudged dejectedly behind them, brooding over the day’s failure. He had hoped against hope that this was the day when he would finally learn something about his mother, and those hopes had been dashed. He felt like he had fallen into a bottomless pit. The voice of reason assured him that there were other channels they could pursue, but a darker, louder voice shouted that his quest was hopeless. His heart felt like a lump of stone in his chest.

He hurried to his room and threw himself onto the bed as soon as they entered Micah’s house. He brushed away Miriam’s efforts to comfort him, insisting that he wanted to be left alone. He could see that she was hurt and annoyed, but there

was nothing he could do about it—he did not feel like talking. He knew that he had treated her badly as soon when she stomped out of the room, but he would apologize tomorrow.

A good night's sleep and a clear, sunny morning revived his spirits. He reached out for Miriam but she was no longer there. He found her and Micah sitting in the dining room gazing at baby Lucius, who lay babbling and cooing on a blanket in the middle of the floor. Deborah sat next to him.

"Good morning, everyone," he said with a sheepish grin. They all looked at him uncertainly. Miriam rose and stepped toward him, then paused as if to gauge his mood.

"I'm sorry I behaved so badly yesterday," he said before she had a chance to speak. "I just couldn't face the world after that debacle at the synagogue. But the world looks brighter today, and I'm famished."

He reached out to embrace Miriam and she melted into his arms. "I'm happy to see you're feeling better today," she said, reaching up to kiss him. "I was worried about you."

"It was just a momentary fit of pique," Marcus explained. "I was disappointed by what happened—or rather, what didn't happen—at the synagogue. But I'm not going to give up because of one setback."

"I apologize again for getting your hopes up," said Micah. "I would have been more cautious if I had realized how it would affect you. I, too, was surprised by the result, but don't judge our efforts too soon. It's possible that someone who was present yesterday will tell a friend or neighbor what I said and the word will eventually reach the right person. These things can take time."

"I know," agreed Marcus. "Meanwhile there are other avenues I can pursue. I just let my emotions get the better of me yesterday. Being here in Sepphoris has stirred up all sorts of feelings in me, and I have to learn to manage them. Deep down I expected a speedy resolution, but I see now how foolish that was. For all I know, there might be many twists and turns in my road before I reach my destination."

Miriam nodded sympathetically and gave him another hug.

"As soon as I've broken my fast," he added, "I'm going to find Eliashib. You said that his family had lived here for generations and that he knows everyone in the city. Even if he doesn't remember my mother, he might point me to someone who does. It's worth a try. My connection with Annas should be sufficient to secure his attention. And don't worry, I won't get my hopes up too high this time."

"You took the words out of my mouth," chuckled Micah. "But first let's get you some food."

AN hour later Marcus was sitting in a small reception room waiting for Eliashib to join him. As his eyes wandered around the room, he was struck by how bare his and Micah's houses appeared when compared with the wealthy homes he had visited in Anatolia. The pattern was the same in both houses: the furnishings—tables, chairs, couches, desks, and similar pieces—were crafted from fine materials, but the surfaces were virtually devoid of ornamentation. There were no mosaic floors, no marble walls or columns, no paintings of gods or nature, no coffered ceilings. Everything was whitewashed plaster. Here and there a wall or floor had been burnished with geometric patterns or monochrome paint, but most bore no decoration. If the furniture were removed, the house would look more like a working-class guildhall than the residence of a man of means.

The same was true for the tableware they used at Micah's house. Wealthy Greeks and Romans ate from lavishly painted ceramic dishes and drank from equally elaborate vessels of silver, gold, or glass. Micah's table service consisted of unpainted clay pottery and mugs carved from some sort of gray stone that Micah identified as chalk. Materials like these were used only by poor people in Anatolia.

As he pondered these things, a small, stern-looking man entered the room and introduced himself as "Eliashib, a humble member of God's holy priesthood." The man eyed him suspiciously from head to foot. Marcus squirmed, realizing for the first time how strange he must look to the people of this rural district with his short hair and beardless face. Not until he mentioned Annas did the man offer him a seat.

"So you know Annas," he replied in a scratchy voice. "He's a good man. We shared a Greek tutor when we were young, but our paths diverged after I returned to my family's home in Galilee. We still see each other occasionally when I travel to Jerusalem for the festivals, but he's never come here to see me despite repeated invitations."

The priest's Greek was acceptable, though marred by an odd accent that Marcus found hard to understand. "So how did you come to know Annas?" he asked.

Marcus told him about the time they spent together on the boat and later in Caesarea.

"I didn't know his brother had been ill," observed Eliashib. "I hope he's better now."

"He was well enough for Annas to return home for Passover," answered Marcus. "That's all I know."

Eliashib nodded thoughtfully. "So what brings you to Sepphoris," he asked, "and why have you come to see me?"

Marcus gave him a brief overview of how he had grown up in Anatolia, discovered the secret of his ancestry, and embraced his Jewish heritage under Miriam's tutelage. He said nothing about having been a slave.

"The man who told me about my mother said he had received a letter from my mother years ago saying she had moved to Israel and was living in Sepphoris with a cousin. She promised to come and get me when she had the money, but she never returned. I've come to find out what happened to her."

"So your mother was from Sepphoris?" asked Eliashib.

"Not exactly," replied Marcus cautiously. "My grandmother was here during the insurrection after king Herod's death and one of the Roman soldiers who came to put down the rebellion took her captive. He carried her off to Syria, where she bore him a daughter who became my mother. My mother was quite young when he left the army and took them both to his home city in Anatolia, so she never lived in Israel. Years later she got involved with a married man who sent her away after she bore me. She had nowhere else to go, so she came here. That was twenty-seven years ago, and nothing has been heard from her since."

"Twenty-seven years?" echoed the priest. "What took you so long to come looking for her, and what do you hope to learn?"

Marcus had anticipated this question and had an answer prepared. "I was an infant when she left," he replied, "so I have no memories of her. No one told me about her when I was growing up. They had no idea where she had gone, so they thought it was best to tell me she had died giving birth to me. I learned the truth only recently from the man I mentioned earlier. I was newly married when I heard the news and I had the means to travel, so I decided to make a pilgrimage to the land of my ancestors and see if I could find anyone who knew her." He paused to make certain he had not said anything that would give him away.

"So you think she might still be in Sepphoris?" asked Eliashib doubtfully.

"I know it sounds like a vain hope after all these years," Marcus admitted, "but I couldn't rest without trying. I doubt she's still here—no one at the synagogue seemed to know her—but I'm hoping to find someone who knows something about her. Even if she's passed on, I'd like to finish the task that brought her here: finding her family."

"A noble task," agreed Eliashib. "You're not the first foreigner who has come to this land hoping to reunite with his ancestors, nor will you be the last. One day all of God's scattered children will return to their homeland and enjoy its fruits under the righteous rule of the Lord Messiah. Men like you are the first fruits of that return, the sign that his coming is near. Those zealots who exhort our people to rise up and throw off the yoke of Rome are another sign that the redemption of Israel is near, the day when God will send his Messiah to judge the wicked and

reward the righteous. Settle here in the land of your ancestors and you will see it come to pass.”

The priest’s face beamed as if in rapture. His fiery eyes gazed at Marcus as if demanding his assent. Unsure how to respond, he muttered a weak “Amen.”

“Amen, amen!” echoed Eliashib, lifting his hands toward the ceiling and closing his eyes in prayer. The interlude gave Marcus time to gather his wits. This was his first encounter with a Jew who supported the resistance, and he had no idea what to do. He knew that such talk was dangerous, especially the part about the rebels being agents of God’s judgment. He marveled that the man would speak so openly with someone he had just met. He was glad now that he had not mentioned being a Roman citizen. He decided to change the subject.

“Annas and Micah told me that your family lived in Sepphoris at the time of the first insurrection,” he ventured, interrupting the priest’s reverie. “Do you know if anyone from that era is still alive?”

Eliashib stared blankly as if he had forgotten he had a guest, then recollected himself. “My family?” he echoed. “Why, now that you mention it, my mother was here at the time. She never talks about it, though. She lost a husband and a son to the Romans, and her house was burned down to the stones. She and her daughter—my sister—struggled for years to rebuild their lives. She’s over seventy now, and frail. I doubt she’d talk with a stranger about it.”

“Could you ask her?” pleaded Marcus. “Does she live with you? Is she here now?” He glanced around in the vain hope that she might be listening to their conversation.

“No, she lives with my sister and her husband,” replied Eliashib. “She and my wife don’t get along. But they’re here in Sepphoris, so I could ask her if you wish. But don’t get your hopes up—I can’t imagine she’ll agree. Come back tomorrow and I’ll tell you what she says.”

“Tell her I’d be eternally grateful if she would meet with me,” urged Marcus. “I won’t take much of her time, and I’ll be careful not to weary her.”

“Tomorrow, then,” agreed Eliashib. “Now if you don’t mind, I have other business to attend to. I’ll show you to the door.”

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MICAH and Miriam were sitting on the rooftop basking in the morning sun when he returned. They greeted his report with cautious optimism.

“I know that woman,” remarked Micah. “He’s right about her health, but she still has her wits. Whether she’ll speak with you about her past is another matter. If she refuses, I’ll ask my wife to visit her when she gets home. She can be very persuasive.”

They chatted for a while about this first stroke of luck and what might come of it, then lapsed into silence.

“I’ve been wondering about something since I met Eliashib this morning,” said Marcus, turning to face Micah. “He and Annas are both priests, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” replied Micah.

“And priests work at temples, right?” he pursued. “That’s where they present sacrifices and offerings to the gods. Or is it different for Jews?”

“No, that’s what our priests do also,” Micah affirmed, furrowing his brow in puzzlement.

“So what does a priest do in a place like Sepphoris?” asked Marcus. “Miriam tells me that Jews have only one temple, the one in Jerusalem. How can Eliashib be a priest if your city has no temples?”

Micah gave him a bemused smile. “That’s a good question,” he said. “You’re right that we have only one temple, but priesthood works differently for us than for Greeks and Romans. From what I’ve heard—please correct me if I’m wrong—anyone can be appointed a priest at their temples, and the priests serve fixed terms. For us, on the other hand, priesthood is a hereditary office; only certain families can serve at the temple. The details of who is eligible and the types of sacrifices they can and cannot offer are laid out in our Scriptures.”

“I’m aware of that,” observed Marcus.

“Over the years,” Micah continued, “the number of men qualified to serve as priests exceeded the number needed at the temple. So our ancestors devised a system whereby the priests take turns performing the sacred rites. Each man goes to Jerusalem for a week or two every few years to help with the sacrifices, then returns to his hometown. The rest of the year they live with their families and pursue whatever occupation they were trained to do.”

“But some of them stay in Jerusalem, like Annas,” Marcus added.

“That’s right,” agreed Micah. “Annas belongs to one of the families that manage the daily activities of the temple. They live in Jerusalem all year so that they can instruct the other priests—the ones who come for a week or two—how to perform their duties. They’re aided by Levites, a quasi-priestly clan that handles practical tasks like cutting up the animals, cleaning the altar, and watching over the building and its precincts. Some of them also work as singers during the daily sacrifices. There are other officials as well, but it’s too complicated to explain in a few sentences, and you won’t remember it anyway. You’ll understand it better after you visit the temple.”

“I look forward to it,” smiled Marcus. “So what does Eliashib do when he’s not in Jerusalem?”

“His family was part of the first wave of settlers who moved to Galilee after

the Maccabees took the area from the Greeks, perhaps a hundred and fifty years ago,” Micah explained. “One of his ancestors was an officer in the army, so he was given prime farmland close to the city. That’s where Eliashib gets his income. He doesn’t manage his lands as I do—he has stewards who do that for him. He devotes his time to studying and teaching the scriptures.

“It’s valuable to have a man like him in our community, but his knowledge makes him insufferable at times—he’s always reprimanding people for being too lax in observing the laws of Torah. He’s particularly anxious about ritual purity—he has two ritual baths in his house, and he immerses himself every time he encounters something that might make him unclean. Our laws require priests to be ritually pure when they enter the temple, but not at other times. He takes everything to extremes. I don’t know how his wife puts up with him.”

“That fits what I saw of him,” agreed Marcus. “Does that also explain why his house looks so—so plain?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” answered Micah.

“Annas tells me you’ve been to Attalia,” said Marcus. “Have you visited any wealthy homes there?”

“A few times,” replied Micah.

“So you’ve seen how bright and colorful they can be,” said Marcus. “The walls are painted in exquisite patterns, the floors are coated with mosaics, and the public spaces are filled with marble columns, statues, and other decorations. I’ve seen nothing like that in your home or Eliashib’s, and his was particularly drab.”

“I see your point,” replied Micah. “I forget how different things are here compared to what you grew up with. Even our nicest houses look plain beside the homes of rich gentiles.”

Marcus flushed. “I didn’t mean to insult you,” he began, but Micah cut him off.

“There’s no need to apologize,” he said with a flick of his wrist. “You’re right—our houses are quite plain. Like you, I find the colors and textures of a Greek dining room or the stately columns of a Roman atrium attractive. But most of our people have only seen such things in the homes of foreign intruders or their allies, like the Herods. They associate ornate décor with idolatry, wickedness, and foreign domination. They’re not entirely wrong, you know.” He paused for a sip of wine.

“What do you mean?” asked Marcus.

“You’ve spent so much time in that world that you probably don’t even notice all the idolatry that’s depicted on the walls and floors of gentile houses,” replied Micah. “Think of how many paintings and mosaics of gods, goddesses, and temples you’ve encountered during your years in Greek and Roman houses.

They're everywhere you look, even on their dinner plates! Think also about how many acts of worship, big and small, are performed every day in their homes. Aren't gentile houses a bit like temples?"

Marcus thought for a moment before answering. "I never thought of it that way," he said at last. "I was so deeply immersed in that world that I took it for granted."

"You know the Ten Commandments, don't you?" Micah asked. Marcus nodded. "How do they begin?"

Marcus took a drink to give himself time to think. "I can't recite them word for word," he said, "but I know they begin with a command to worship only the God of Israel and no others."

"I am the Lord Your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage," replied Micah, citing the original Hebrew text. "You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself any graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them, for I, the Lord Your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation."

Marcus stared at him uncomprehendingly. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand Aramaic," he said.

"That wasn't Aramaic," said Micah. "It was Hebrew, the language in which the Lord uttered those words to Moses. You're right that he tells us not to worship any god except him, but it goes on to say that we must not create images of 'anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth' lest they become objects of worship. Most of what you see in Greek and Roman houses comes under that heading to a greater or lesser degree, so we avoid it all."

"But you at least apply paint to your walls and floors," observed Marcus. "You even have floral patterns in some of your rooms. Eliashib uses nothing but white plaster."

"Yes, his house is dreadfully plain," agreed Micah. "It used to look more like mine, but he had it whitewashed as he became more rigorous in his legal observance. People like him don't just follow what the laws say; they create their own rules to keep from getting anywhere close to violating the laws. They call it 'building fences around the law.' I don't care what they do in their own houses, but I do mind when they try to force the rest of us follow their lead. They seem to have forgotten those verses of scripture that call us to be merciful and compassionate toward one another."

"Has he not been to Anatolia?" asked Marcus. "I was in several Jewish houses during my travels, including one where I stayed for several weeks while my master

was ill, and they had lots of paintings and mosaics in their houses. But now that you mention it, I don't recall seeing images of gods."

"I've witnessed the same," said Micah. "One of the things you'll understand better after you've been here a while is that we Jews disagree about how to interpret and apply God's laws. Jews outside our homeland tend to construe the laws about images differently than we do. A man like Eliashib would condemn the people who live in those houses as law-breakers."

"I had no idea Judaism was so complicated!" said Marcus with a laugh. "Before I came here, I thought Jews agreed on everything; now I'm beginning to think that you fight over everything."

"That's not far from the truth," agreed Micah. "We agree on the main points like the nature of God, his election of Israel, the authority of the scriptures, the role of the temple, and the necessity of following God's laws in our daily lives. But there are many points on which the laws are either silent or give conflicting guidance, and our teachers have to figure out what we should do in those cases. Sometimes they reach different conclusions so that some of us behave in one way and others in another. I can see how that would be confusing."

"You've got my head spinning," declared Marcus, dropping his arms to his sides in a gesture of defeat. "I think I've had all I can handle for one day, and I'm afraid we're boring my lovely wife." He glanced at Miriam.

"Not at all," she said. "I'm just listening and taking it all in. But I do need to go and check on the baby."

"I'll come with you," offered Marcus. "We can go for a walk afterward."

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THE next morning a messenger arrived from Eliashib inviting Marcus to visit him so that they could go together to where Eliashib's grandmother was staying. Eliashib met him at the door.

"She agreed to meet you," he said as they walked down the cobbled street, "but all she knows is that you're a guest of mine from Anatolia. I said nothing about your grandmother—I was afraid she'd reject such a request out of hand. You'll have to figure out how to bring it up on your own."

Marcus halted and stared. "You could have asked before placing me in such an awkward position," he objected. "She's going to think I'm some kind of duplicitous interloper who entered her house under false pretenses. Once she learns the real reason I've come, she'll throw me out and I'll never learn what she knows. I'm going home. I'll come again when she knows who I am and why I'm visiting her." He turned to go.

“Don’t be in such a rush,” urged Eliashib, grabbing his sleeve. “I thought you’d be happy I found a way to get you into her presence. I didn’t know you’d be such a stickler about how I did it. Let me go in first and I’ll prepare the way for you. You can wait outside her door and listen to what she says.”

“I’ll wait in the street if I go at all,” Marcus retorted. “I want to know what’s going on before I enter the house.”

“As you wish,” said Eliashib. They reached the house a short time later and Eliashib entered without knocking. Marcus paced up and down the street while he waited. The priest returned a quarter of an hour later.

“She’ll see you,” he announced. “I told her you were trying to learn more about your grandmother who lived here many years ago and that you hoped she might remember her. She asked for more information, but I told her that was all I knew. I think you’ve piqued her curiosity. She said to bring you in. Please be gentle with her.”

“I will,” replied Marcus, taking a deep breath. “Take me to her.”

“I’ll stay and translate since she doesn’t know Greek,” said Eliashib as they made their way through the house.

“I appreciate it,” answered Marcus with a pang of guilt. He wished now that he had told Eliashib the truth about his past. He’d know soon enough that he had been deceived, and doubtless he’d be angry and refuse further help. This might be his only chance to speak with the woman.

Eliashib led him to his mother’s bedroom, where he found her sitting on a padded chair beneath a small window. Two more chairs stood in front of her. A pair of palm-shaped lamps cast a faint flicker over the half-lit space.

“This is my friend Marcus from faraway Anatolia,” he said in Aramaic. “And this is my mother,” he said, turning to Marcus and shifting to Greek. “You can call her Savta—that’s Aramaic for ‘grandmother.’” He took a seat and motioned for Marcus to do the same.

The woman looked just as Eliashib had described her. Her frame was as thin as a corpse, but her face retained some of its youthful color. Her expression was grave, almost regal, yet with a touch of warmth. She was dressed in a plain white tunic, and her long gray hair was pulled back in a simple bun. *She might have been pretty when she was young*, thought Marcus. He smiled.

“I’m grateful you agreed to see me, Savta,” Marcus began, pausing for Eliashib to translate. “I arrived in Sepphoris a few days ago looking for someone who might recall my grandmother and Eliashib told me you might be able to help. I have only vague memories of her from my childhood, and I’d like to know more about her and her family.”

Marcus proceeded to give her the same selective version of his story that he

had told Eliashib, stopping repeatedly for Eliashib to render his speech into Aramaic.

“Her name was Sarah,” he concluded, “and she was taken by a Roman soldier to Syria after the insurrection. Does that sound like anyone you might have known in those dark days?”

Eliashib paused and stared at him before translating the last part. “You didn’t tell me about the soldier,” he hissed. “You said she left with a friend. I can’t mention Roman soldiers—it will upset her.”

“Tell her exactly what I said,” Marcus insisted. “That piece could be vital for distinguishing my mother from other Sarahs. If it upsets her, I’ll leave.”

Eliashib glowered, then said some words in Aramaic that Marcus hoped were close to the ones he had spoken.

The woman’s expression had been inscrutable since they entered the room, but her face lit up when she heard the end of the story. She jabbered for a while in Aramaic before Eliashib could get her to stop and allow him to translate.

“It looks like you’ve come to the right place!” declared Eliashib. “Not only did she know your grandmother, but they were good friends. The part about the Roman soldier was what sealed it—Savta cried for days after she was taken away. It turns out that you were right about that part being helpful.”

Marcus leapt from his chair in excitement. “I can’t believe it!” he cried, clapping his hands to his temples. “After all this time....” His voice trailed off and tears welled in his eyes. He wiped them away.

“What more did she say?” he prodded. “What was my grandmother like?”

The woman gave him a warm smile. She evidently welcomed the pleasure that her words had given to her visitor. Eliashib translated Marcus’s questions, then listened to her answer.

“If I understood her correctly,” he said, “they only met a year or so before the Romans arrived. Your grandmother wasn’t a native of Sepphoris—she was sent here from Magdala to marry a man of our city after their parents arranged the union. My grandmother knew the man’s family and felt sorry for the girl—she was only fifteen and terribly shy. Savta took her under her wing and they became fast friends. Their bonds deepened when they became pregnant at the same time. That’s as much as she’s told me so far.”

“That explains why no one else could remember her,” observed Marcus. “If she wasn’t from around here and was shy about making friendships, she wouldn’t have left made of a mark in the year she was here. What happened next?”

The question elicited another stream of words in Aramaic. Her voice cracked and her eyes grew wet with tears, but she soldiered on until she reached the end of her story.

“This is the part I knew would upset her,” explained Eliashib. “I told her we could stop and return another day, but she insisted on telling the whole story.”

Marcus looked at the old woman and smiled his approval. Eliashib paused, then commenced his translation.

“Both of their husbands joined the revolt soon after Herod’s death in a bid to secure freedom for our people. They seized control of Sepphoris and the movement quickly spread to other cities. They felt certain that the time had come for Israel’s liberation.

“But their joy was short-lived—the Romans sent a legion from Syria and crushed them. Both men perished in the battle for the city. The survivors were either slaughtered or sold to the slavers. Many of the women were raped, and the most attractive ones—including your grandmother—were taken away as bed partners when the Romans left.”

Eliashib paused to gauge Marcus’s reaction, then continued.

“Savta survived by hiding in a cistern, but her baby son died from an illness that he picked up from the damp. She knew nothing of your grandmother’s fate until a letter arrived a year later stating that she was in Syria and doing well. She had given birth to a healthy daughter whom she named after Savta. That was the last she heard from her.”

Marcus listened intently until the closing sentences, when he was assailed by doubt. “How can that be right?” he objected. “My mother’s name wasn’t Savta. Maybe it’s not the same person after all.”

“You’ve forgotten what I told you earlier,” Eliashib chided him. “Savta isn’t a name; it’s the Aramaic word for ‘grandmother.’”

“So what is your mother’s name?” asked Marcus, confused.

“What was your mother’s name?” countered Eliashib.

“Her Greek name was Anna,” answered Marcus. “But I seem to recall that her name was originally Hannah.”

“Now listen as I ask my mother her name,” Eliashib smiled. He spoke a few words in Aramaic, then paused for her to answer.

She gazed at Marcus for several moments before answering. Then she smiled and said one word: “Hannah.”

Marcus was overcome. This wrinkled little woman sitting in front of him had known his grandmother! The story she had told him was about his family! His senses reeled. So many questions clamored for attention that he could no longer think straight.

“Are you alright?” asked Eliashib, laying a hand on his shoulder. The touch jolted him back to reality. He was astonished to discover that he had been weeping. The woman’s face was likewise streaked with tears.

“I’m sorry,” he said, wiping his eyes and nose on the cloak he had thrown over his shoulders to guard against the morning chill. “It’s just too much to take in. I’d like to hear more, but my mind is racing so fast that I’m afraid I won’t remember it. Could you ask her if I can return another time with my wife? I’m sure she’d love to meet your Savta. While you’re at it, tell her how grateful I am that she was willing to share her memories with me. I’ll never forget her.”

Eliashib did as requested, then relayed her response to Marcus. “She’d be delighted to talk with you and your wife at any time,” he announced. “She’s thrilled to finally meet Hannah’s grandson.”

Marcus smiled and rose to leave, then sat back down. He had forgotten to ask the most important question of all. “Before I go,” he said to Eliashib, “could you ask if she met my mother when she came here twenty-seven years ago? I know she was here but I have no idea what she did or how long she stayed. Could you ask her this for me?”

“Of course,” said Eliashib. Marcus watched her as he relayed the question and needed no translation to interpret her response.

“She’s sorry,” said Eliashib, “but she knows nothing about such a visit. You’re the first person from Sarah’s family she has met.”

“That’s what I guessed,” replied Marcus. “If she had met my mother, she would have known that my grandmother died in Anatolia. So my search isn’t over. But this news is enough to keep me going. I can never repay you for what you’ve done for me today.”

“It’s been rewarding for me as well,” remarked Eliashib. “I never knew any of what she told you today. My parents always warned my sister and me not to question her about those times because it would upset her. But she certainly wasn’t reluctant to talk with you today. Now that the door has been opened, I should learn what I can from her before she’s gone. Her memories must be preserved for posterity.”

“I agree,” said Marcus. “But we need to let her rest. It’s been an emotional day for all of us. How would I say ‘thank you and goodbye’ in Aramaic?”

“*Yishar veshlamlek*,” answered Eliashib.

Marcus turned to face the woman. “*Yishar veshlamlek*,” he said, giving her the broadest smile he could muster. He stood and took two steps toward the door, then turned and gave the old woman a hug. Her face was glowing with delight when he glanced back at her from the doorway.

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MIRIAM was overjoyed at Marcus’s news, and Micah rejoiced along with them.

That night Micah had his cook prepare a special feast in celebration of Marcus's discovery.

"So now you can think seriously about settling down here in Sepphoris," teased Micah as the dishes from the first course were being cleared away.

"Not so fast," objected Marcus. "This isn't the end of our journey, though it's certainly a step in the right direction. I still need to find out what happened to my mother—that's the main reason I came here. For all I know, she might still be alive somewhere in Galilee. I'm not stopping until I find an answer."

"So what's your plan?" asked Miriam.

"I'm going back to that woman's house tomorrow to find out what else she remembers about my grandmother," said Marcus. "You'll come along, of course. While I'm there, I'll ask her for the names of anyone who might remember my mother. The man whom my grandmother married—he'd be my grandfather, wouldn't he?—was from Sepphoris, and she knew his family. If any of them are still here, she'll know about it. I'll follow whatever leads she gives me until I either learn what happened to her or reach a dead end."

"That sounds like a sensible strategy," observed Micah. "May God prosper your efforts."

Marcus and Miriam went to see Hannah the next morning, but the daughter with whom she was staying insisted that Marcus's earlier visit had upset her health and she needed time to recover. They tried again the next two mornings and met a similar response. They walked up to Eliashib's house and told him what was happening and he immediately got up and went with them. His sister tried to stop him at the door, but he pushed past her to see for himself whether his mother was too weak to receive guests.

As he expected, she had heard nothing about their prior attempts to see her and was indignant with her daughter for keeping them away. She insisted that she would her old friend's grandson again even if it killed her. She took an instant liking to Miriam and began quizzing her about her family. Unsure how to respond, she glanced furtively at Marcus who rescued her by asking for more information about his grandmother.

Hannah was effusive in her praise of her friend Sarah. She described how nervous Sarah was in the days before her wedding, how devoted she was to her husband, how much she wanted children, and how kind she was to everyone. The more she talked, the more she remembered from their time together. Marcus told her the few scenes that he recalled from his childhood, including the episode in the Ephesus synagogue where he experienced a vivid recollection of his grandmother teaching him to recite the Shema. Several times she and Marcus shed tears together over the years that they had missed.

Seeing that she was growing tired, Marcus reiterated his interest in uncovering what had happened to his mother and asked for her help in locating members of his grandfather's family. He was dismayed to learn that she was ignorant of their whereabouts. The family had taken a leading role in the revolt, and several of the men had perished fighting the Romans. The survivors had either been sold into slavery or left the city in fear. As far as she knew, none had ever returned. She had no idea where they had gone or how to find them.

Marcus thanked her for the information, but his smile faded as soon as they left the house. "I thought we were onto something," he muttered as they trudged together toward Micah's house. "I never considered the possibility that my grandfather's entire family might have left."

Miriam reached a comforting arm around his waist. "So where do we go from here?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "Do you have any ideas?"

"We know your mother came to Sepphoris," she observed, "and there has to be somebody who remembers an unaccompanied Jewish woman arriving from far-off Anatolia and asking about her family. We just have to find them. But how? The city is too large for us to speak to everyone. Perhaps Micah can help us devise a strategy."

Micah wasn't surprised by their news. "Those were hard days," he explained. "Nearly every family lost someone, and many fled the city. Some returned, but most did not. If you want my advice, I think you should end your search for your grandfather's family. I don't think they're here."

"So what can we do?" asked Marcus, looking dejected. "We don't know your city and we're out of ideas."

Micah thought for a bit before replying. "We can take your search to another synagogue," he suggested. "There's one in the lower part of the city that's attended mostly by poor people. I don't know the leaders there, but I can check into it. You might also try the agora—a lot of people gather there on market days and you might stumble onto another old person who remembers your grandmother. It's a long shot, but you don't have many options at this point."

"Both of those ideas are worth trying," agreed Marcus. "The Sabbath begins tomorrow evening, right?" Micah nodded. "Do you think you could arrange before then to make an announcement after the morning service?"

"I can try," said Micah.

"And when is the next market day?" asked Marcus.

"There's one today," answered Micah. "You could run down there this afternoon if you like. The next one is two days after the Sabbath."

"I'd rather try the synagogue before I start questioning random people in the

market,” replied Marcus. “I’d need a translator, and from what I’ve heard, people here don’t like foreigners. They’d probably just ignore me.”

“What about that servant of yours who brought your baggage from the stable?” asked Micah. “He speaks Aramaic, right? Why not send him to the market in your place?”

Marcus realized with a start that he had not thought about Asher or his Aramaic instruction all week. “I don’t know,” Marcus hesitated. “I’ve not told him our story, and I’m afraid he might leave me if he learned I was a slave.”

“He’ll find out eventually if you keep him with you,” observed Micah. “But you don’t have to tell him that part if you don’t want to. Just explain that you need his help finding information about your mother, who came to our city many years ago and disappeared. Tell him what you know about her and what kinds of people he should approach. He struck me as an intelligent young man and it’s not a difficult task. Give him a chance. You might as well get some work out of him rather than paying him to hang around the stable and do nothing.”

“Alright, you convinced me,” said Marcus. “I’ll go down to the stable after we rest and tell him what to do. I’ll be surprised if it gets us anywhere, but there’s no harm in trying.”

As it happened, neither of Micah’s suggestions yielded any useful results. No one came forward to talk with them after the synagogue service and Asher found no one in the agora who remembered Marcus’s mother or her relatives. He did urge the people with whom he spoke to ask their friends and hinted at the possibility of a reward, but he said nothing to Marcus about this until later.

Several days passed and Marcus grew dejected. Asher volunteered to renew his efforts on the second market day, but the results were the same. Miriam proposed that they explore other parts of the city where people gathered, but Marcus dismissed it as a waste of time. He did, however, offer to assist Deborah with the baby while Asher and Miriam went out. He was taking a nap when the porter entered and announced that someone wanted to see him.

“Who is it?” he asked groggily.

“She didn’t tell me,” said the porter. “She just said that she had some information for you.”

Marcus perked up. Was it possible that their efforts had borne fruit at last?

“Take her to the reception room,” ordered Marcus. “I’ll meet her there.”

He leapt up, adjusted his tunic, laced on his sandals, and ran his fingers through his hair. He stepped slowly down the stairs, his senses tingling with anxiety.

A bony, middle-aged woman was standing next to Micah’s desk humming a tune. Her tunic was simple and worn and a few strands of gray hair had slipped

out of the scrap of cloth that covered her head. She could be a kitchen slave in a wealthy household, he thought, or perhaps the wife of a small shopkeeper.

“Greetings!” he announced as he entered. The woman’s face brightened and Marcus could see that she had once been pretty.

“My name is Marcus,” he said, slipping behind the desk and waving her to a chair opposite him. “I was told that you wanted to see me?”

“I do,” she replied. “I have some information that I think you’ve been seeking.”

Marcus was taken aback by her flawless Greek that belied her appearance. Who was this strange woman?

“What do you mean?” he asked warily.

“My name is Martha,” she said, “and I’ve been told that you’re looking for a woman named Hannah who visited our city a couple of decades ago.” She paused and looked expectantly at him.

“I am,” said Marcus eagerly. “Did you know her?”

“I did,” she replied. “May I ask why you’re searching for her?”

“She was my mother,” said Marcus. “I learned a couple of months ago that she had not died in childbirth as I had been told. I came all the way from Anatolia to find her.”

“That’s what I thought,” she replied, her thin smile broadening into a grin. “I can help you with that. I’m the woman who took her in all those years ago. I’m your cousin Martha.”