

# **Divinity**

## **The Lost Years of Jesus Christ, #1**

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This book is historical fiction. Though many of the characters and events described within were real, nothing I wrote is meant to be taken as fact. In other words, don't have a cow man!

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Love you Mommy!

## Introduction

I hate introductions, so I'll keep this short.

There is very little information about Jesus Christ, herein referred to as Joshua of Nazareth, between his twelfth and thirtieth years. I have always had a burning curiosity about this unknown period of his life. How could someone with such an incredible destiny disappear for eighteen years? What was he doing? Who was he with? What events shaped him into the man who would eventually be recognized by over a billion people as the Messiah? These are the questions I had, and no one had the answers to satisfy me.

The last story of Joshua as a child shows him preaching to the Pharisees and Sadducees at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. That is where this book begins. I hope everyone enjoys reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. God bless!

## Prologue

*I'm almost there. I have to hurry before it's too late.*

Delilah pressed forward. Her limbs ached and sweat poured from her brow, but still she continued to crawl. Hours of effort brought her within thirty meters of the city gate.

"Please, help me!" Delilah called out.

*Someone must be standing watch. I just need to get a little closer.*

Delilah looked back from where she came. Darkness consumed the harsh landscape. There was no going back. She only found her way to the gates because of small torches that burned on both sides of the entrance. She crawled closer to the gate and cried out once again for help. As she moved forward, a jagged rock

tore her robe and cut deep into her shin. It was but the latest of many injuries she sustained that night. The hard and rocky road was as unforgiving as it was long.

The south gate of Jerusalem began to lift.

*Praise Adonai.*

It was Delilah's first bit of luck since the accident, and perhaps the only chance to save her father. Two spear wielding guards approached her. One was tall and stout, the other short and skinny. Both were decorated in the traditional attire for a Roman soldier: Bronze helmet, sword, shield, hardened leather breastplate, and pleated leather skirt. Delilah attempted to stand as the two men approached, but the pain in her ankle forced her back to the ground.

"What's the meaning of this, girl?" The shorter guard said.

"My father, you have to help him. He won't last much longer." Delilah's words were rapid and irate.

"You're talking too fast dear lady. We'll help you in any way that we can, but you must calm down first. What happened to your father?" The tall guard knelt and placed his hand on Delilah's shoulder. His kindness soothed her. Her tense shoulders relaxed and she recounted the horrible events of the day.

"My father is a trapper and skinner. We were on our way back to the city with a few fresh catches when a snake scared our donkey. The cart fell on its side, pinning my father beneath it. I couldn't lift it off of him. I ran for help as fast as I could, but I was careless and fell. I fear my ankle is broken. He's only a kilometer or two down the road but it took me hours to get here. Please, you must help my father." Delilah clung to her savior, crying into his breastplate.

"Of course we'll help you. First let's get you inside and have your ankle looked at. Then we'll mount a search party, right Fabian?"

"You're wrong on both counts. No one is to be allowed in the city after dark, and we certainly aren't going out into the black of night to search for some Hebrew." Fabian sneered.

"But sir, certainly this woman has nothing to do with the recent attacks. There is no danger in offering her refuge."

"Don't but me, Valeus. I wouldn't have even opened the gate if it hadn't been a woman calling out for help." Fabian then turned to Delilah and added. "The night watch gets so lonely, dear."

Delilah realized the horrible turn her situation had taken. She tried to stand, to run, but collapsed on her injured ankle as soon as she put her weight on it. She looked to Valeus, hoping he would protect her.

"You can't do that sir. It's against the rules, the law, and the gods."

"You don't tell me what the rules are. I'm your superior officer. You're new around here, so you better learn how things work fast." Fabian stood chest to pelvis with his gargantuan subordinate, poking Valeus in the chest as he spoke. "If you report me, who do you think they're going to believe? Not a grunt like you, that's for sure. I was even going to give you a turn when I was done, but now you can just go back to our post and stand guard while I have some fun."

Valeus stood firm for a moment, not speaking or moving. Delilah felt a twinge of hope. Fabian stood no chance against the monster of a man. Then, all hope vanished as Valeus turned and walked away.

"I'm sorry." He muttered as he went, not even looking back to say it to her face.

Fabian grabbed Delilah, threw her on her back, and climbed on top of her. She struggled and cried out, but he was far stronger than his petite frame suggested. He pulled out a dagger and held it to her neck.

“Now you’re going to be a good girl and stay quiet. Not that anyone will hear you, I just prefer a woman to be silent.”

Delilah stared at the knife and nodded, too frightened to speak. Just as Fabian began lifting his leather skirt Valeus called out.

“Someone’s coming!”

“Damn. I’ll be right back, dear.” Fabian stood and fixed his skirt, and then added with a laugh. “Don’t go anywhere.”

A man in a hooded cloak approached the two guards. His face was covered, only the black hair of his beard visible.

“You can’t leave the city.” Fabian said to the hooded man as he adjusted his skirt.

“Why not? The gate’s up.” The hooded man said, stepping closer with each word.

“We were just helping this girl out. She’s injured. Now get back inside unless you want to visit the cleric with her.” Fabian yelled. The two men were less than a meter apart.

“You’re a bad liar.” The hooded man laughed. He produced a short sword from inside his cloak and slashed Fabian’s throat. Fabian fell to the ground with both hands desperately trying to stop the river of blood that flowed from his neck. After a few seconds he became still. Valeus backed away and lifted his spear, though he could not hold it steady.

“You think you can hurt an innocent woman and there will be no repercussions. Adonai will pass judgment on you for your actions soon, I have already passed mine.” The hooded man said as he stared down at Fabian’s body. He then looked up at Valeus. “Your turn.”

“No, please. I wasn’t going to hurt her, I swear.” Valeus shook as the man approached, but managed to strike out with his spear. The hooded man evaded it and with one stroke of his sword he sliced the spear’s head clean off. Fabian dropped the useless piece of wood and backed away slowly.

“I heard everything. In truth, you’re even worse than this pile of filth.” The hooded man nodded towards Fabian’s body. “You knew it was wrong, yet still you followed his orders. You were content to look on as he violated this woman. Now it’s time to pay for your inaction.”

“I surrender.” Valeus said, unsheathing his sword and tossing it to the ground.

The hooded man smiled and continued moving towards the defenseless centurion. Valeus turned to run, but he was too slow. The hooded man impaled him from behind, causing blood to shoot in all directions. Delilah recoiled when she felt the warm fluid hit her face. The hooded man noticed her reaction, and he looked towards her.

“No, please don’t hurt me.” She covered her face like a child, hoping the monster would go away.

“I have no intention of hurting you.” The hooded man walked away, grabbed a torch from its mount outside the gate, and returned to Delilah’s side. “Get on my back, and point the way. We have to go help your father.”

# Chapter 1

Annas sat hunched over in his high backed chair studying the parchments that were scattered across his desk. He stopped only now and then to take a sip of wine from his goblet. The news troubled him.

*Every day there is more dissension and less tithing. Not just in the outlying areas of Galilee and Judea, but in the Holy City as well. The common man is succumbing to the radical ideas of the Pharisees.*

Tension between the Sadducees and the Pharisees steadily mounted for decades. The Sadducees represented the elite members of Hebrew society, controlling most of the wealth and power not taken by the Romans. The Sadducees believed the Torah to be the absolute will of Adonai, and that it could not be changed or contested. They didn't believe in life after death or the existence of supernatural creatures such as angels and demons. The Pharisees were formed to represent the common man and bring about changes that they deemed both necessary and willed by Adonai through the voices of prophets. Though they also worshipped Adonai, their core beliefs varied from that of their Sadducee brethren. Pharisees fought for the people's right to sacrifice in their own homes and synagogues, spend their money helping their own families and those in need instead of tithing to make the wealthy wealthier, and believed in life after death. Annas could not deny the allure created by their assertions, and it became increasingly difficult to combat them with words alone. After all, a man would have to be crazy not to want what the Pharisees promised.

*What is easy is not always right. The Word of Adonai is not alive and evolving, spoken through "prophets" of the day, as they propose. Adonai does not make mistakes that need to be corrected. His law is absolute and unchanging. However appealing their beliefs might sound, such blasphemy is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.*

"Moloch has called upon you, Sir. Shall I let him in?" Annas looked up from his papers. One of the servants had entered while he was lost in thought.

"Yes." Annas said. "Any distraction would be welcome right now, even him."

The servant vanished as quickly as he had come. Moloch, a red bearded man in golden robes, entered not long after.

"Welcome, brother." Annas said. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Moloch and Annas were not just brothers, they were also twins. It was nearly impossible to tell them apart by sight alone, though that was where the similarity ended. Annas came into the world a few minutes sooner than Moloch, and from that moment an invisible rift formed between them. As they aged the rift grew wider. Moloch resented Annas for being the first born, receiving most of their father's attention, and claiming the greatest position any descendant of Aaron could hope to attain. Though resentment was not an uncommon feeling between

brothers, Moloch took it to heart due to the incredibly small time difference between their births. Annas tried his best to be civil, but nothing seemed to help.

“I’m here about business, not pleasure. More bad news?” Moloch asked, staring at the parchments that lay unfurled on the desk. Annas poured a drink for Moloch and handed it to him before returning to his chair to look over the words once again.

“More every day. If this were a war, I’d fear we were on the losing side. Sit down and drink. Your pacing stresses me.”

Moloch stopped in his tracks, stared at Annas, and chuckled.

“You worry too much. The old ways will persevere as they always have, though it may require action. Adonai aids those who do his bidding.” Moloch didn’t sit, but he ceased his pacing.

Annas stood and walked over to a large urn on the floor beside his chair. He picked it up and placed it on his desk. The room was dimly lit, but it was easy to make out the epic battle being depicted on it. Young David slaying Goliath with a single stone. It was an amazing moment, frozen in time, meant to inspire and inform. It was also, unfortunately, destined for the pyre.

“I wonder. If we take these actions you propose, will we be David, slaying the evil giant and bringing peace to the land, or Goliath, a monster wreaking havoc on the weak and waiting to be put in his place?” Annas said.

Moloch joined Annas next to the urn. He stared at it while he drained his goblet, and then looked into his brother’s eyes.

“What is the meaning of this blasphemy?” Moloch looked from the urn to Annas.

“A Greek artist had this on display in the marketplace. He called me over to look at it, thinking I would be interested in buying it. The man heard the story of David and thought it would make for an intriguing work of art. It’s too bad he didn’t know more about our customs.”

It was forbidden for Hebrews to create, worship, or even look upon depictions of the human form. To do so was disrespectful to Adonai, the one true God.

“That doesn’t explain why you have it. Have you gone mad?” Moloch shook his fist above his head.

“When I explained our customs, the merchant asked me to dispose of it in an appropriate manner. He makes his living off simple pottery and feared retribution for having it on display. In a city like Jerusalem, he can’t afford to make an enemy of our people.”

With the exception of the Roman military stationed in the city, Jerusalem’s inhabitants were almost exclusively Hebrew.

“I told him I would burn it, and I will, but it does evoke concerns in me.”

Moloch looked upon the scene for a few moments.

“David was just a boy in this depiction. When it came time for the boy to become a man, for David to take the reins of leadership, he did what he had to do. Do you think every decision was easy? Leaders must sometimes do unsavory things for the good of their people. We have no King to lead us now, but we have you, High Priest.”

Annas grew pale. His position was the most prestigious and enviable among the descendants of Aaron, yet he would have preferred to be just another priest. Each

road set before him had its own perils and pitfalls, with no telling what horrible events might be triggered by his command.

"I know what you want, but as long as I am High Priest there will be no war among our people. Misguided as the Pharisees are, they are still our brethren." Annas said, placing a hand on Moloch's shoulder. Moloch pushed it away.

"Don't worry. I wouldn't waste my time trying to convince you again. I am here for a different reason. Do you recall the last Passover? A boy journeyed with his family to offer sacrifice at the temple. Afterwards he stayed behind with the priests and peasants, unknown to his parents. The priests spent hours talking to the boy and listening to his words before he was retrieved by his father. He had charisma, charm, and fervor that intrigued and inspired the common man and aristocrat alike."

"I recall the boy. He created quite a stir that lasted weeks after his departure. What of him?" Annas said.

"I would like someone to travel to his home and bring him to me. I have a peaceful plan to revitalize the Sadducee's grip on the populace and he is an integral part of it."

"Your schemes get more desperate by the day, though I must admit I prefer this to many of your other ideas." In recent years, Moloch had called for the extermination of the Pharisees, the Romans, and almost every other group of people whose interests clashed with those of the Sadducees. Suddenly, an idea came to Annas. "I see no issue with bringing the boy here to learn and preach, but I will not send any of my men to do the deed. If you want the boy, you must get him yourself."

"Am I some errand boy?" Moloch brought his fist down on the table hard, but composed himself with haste. "Anyone could do such a job. I have far more important matters here that require my attention."

Fetching a child was not suitable work for a priest, but Annas needed his brother out of the Holy City. He was a poisonous influence. Nothing peaceful could be accomplished with him present. He had a powerful following in the Great Sanhedrin and his presence could not be ignored. There was little hope that anyone else could get him to go for the boy, but Annas knew his brother's weaknesses.

"As I recall, the boy's father was not very happy when he returned to the temple for his son. He may not be open to the idea of his son being taken away from him. You were always skilled at getting the things you wanted from our father, why not someone else's? I'll make the decision simple for you brother. Either you go yourself, or no one goes."

A devilish grin appeared between Moloch's flaming red mustache and beard.

"Family is easy, but strangers can be unpredictable. Besides, I had to learn how to manipulate father. It was the only way to pry him away from his golden boy for five minutes." Moloch grew silent for a few moments. "I suppose I could tell him we found his son so engaging we wish to make him a rabbi or some nonsense. He won't be aware what an uncommon occurrence such a thing is. I still say any servant could take on this task. Write a letter, mark it with your personal seal, and wait for the boy to show up. However, if I go we know it will be a successful

mission. Perhaps I can even do some good in that dreadful town of Nazareth while I'm there."

"Excellent!" Annas paused. "Did you say Nazareth? How interesting. In that case, I may have another mission that you will find more to your liking."

Nazareth, a city in northern Galilee, was a center of trade based around the large limestone deposits in the hills surrounding the city. Like most trading centers, it attracted all types of people, and became known only for its most unsavory inhabitants.

"Another mission?" Moloch asked. "Sure, why not load me up like a mule while you have the chance."

"There are one hundred and twenty kilometers between here and Nazareth, with many small and large cities scattered along the way. I wish for you to visit each town and discern what true presence the Pharisees have among the people. Stay nowhere for longer than a day, and do not let anyone know you are a priest." Annas searched through the parchments on his desk as he spoke, searching for one he had read earlier that morning. "Once you arrive in Nazareth, seek out this man." Annas handed the parchment to Moloch. "It is from a rabbi named Nathaniel who lives in Nazareth. He speaks of the terrible sin present within the city walls. Those who do not succumb to the lure of debauchery and violence are looking to the Pharisees and their heretical ideals with hopeful eyes. They think the Pharisees are their salvation. We can't allow that to continue. Learn what you can from this man and the people. Knowledge is the key to our survival."

This got Moloch's attention. Though Annas feared the actions his brother would take, it was an unavoidable risk. He needed to know as much as possible about the Pharisees plans, and better he cause disruptions in small outlying towns than where in Jerusalem it would be noticed by the Romans.

"What shall I do about the Pharisees I encounter along the way?" Moloch wanted explicit permission, but he wouldn't get it.

"You may speak out against them, tell the people the truth, and try to bring those who will listen back from their mistakes. Do not engage in any physical altercations. I want no blood spilled. Are we clear?"

Even as he spoke the words he knew they were in vain. Moloch could not be leashed any more than Annas could be forced to order the murder of his people. Everyone has their own burdens to bear in life, and Annas carried more than most. He was willing to accept a few casualties for the greater good if there was no other alternative.

"As the High Priest commands, so shall it be." The grin on Moloch's face said the exact opposite of his words.

## **Chapter 2**

Joshua walked down the deserted limestone road. The cool morning air washed over his smiling face as he neared his friend's home. He had toiled through the night with his father to make sure that the gift would be finished in time, and he



was excited to deliver it. The satchel draped over his shoulder held more than many nights of laboring, it also held hope. The sun was just breaking the horizon when he reached his destination. The square stone house, indistinguishable from those around it, was home to a local stonemason and his family. Joshua stood at the doorway and called inside, getting the attention of the man of the house. While most boys would be up starting their workday at dawn, Joshua knew Peter would still be sleeping, unaware of the surprise in store for him.

“Joshua, to what do we owe this morning visit? I could have sworn I paid your father in full last month.” Jacob gave a hearty laugh.

“You did. I’ve come to give Peter a gift. I made him something.”

“That’s very kind of you. Come in out of the cold.” Jacob turned to his wife as they entered the room. “Veronica, our son has a visitor. Fetch him, my dear.”

“Yes, Jacob.” Veronica hurried from the room.

“It may take a moment. He’s a bit slow in the morning, you know. How’s your father?”

“Very well, sir. I expect he’s at the market by now trying to sell some of our wares or hopefully taking new orders. Business has been slow of late. Most people only buy bowls and spoons.”

“Slow for all, not just him. What I wouldn’t give to go back and spend my youth as an apprentice blacksmith. Arms and armor seem to be the only indispensable goods in these times of turmoil.”

Veronica reentered the room followed by Peter. He was small for his age, not surprising with taxes and food prices so high. It isn’t easy for a man to provide for his family, and a boy who can’t work isn’t worth wasting much food on.

“Come Veronica, we have much work to do. Let the children talk.” Jacob said as he left the room.

“Good morning, Peter.” Joshua said.

“Morning, Joshua. What are you doing here?” Peter asked.

“I’ve got something for you. I think you’re going to like it.” Joshua said, placing the satchel on the table in front of Peter.

Peter opened up the satchel and peered inside. He looked puzzled as he pulled out a pair of sandals and held them in his hands.

“Thank you, but you know I don’t wear shoes. They only make it harder for me to walk.”

Peter was born with a rare deformity. His right leg was much shorter than his left, resulting in a severe limp. It may seem like a small burden, and it is compared to some, but for a boy there is nothing worse than being unable to run, jump, and play like everybody else. The other boys never let him forget for a moment that he was different, and it was unlikely that he would ever be considered an acceptable. Joshua always tried his best to cheer up his friend, but some problems require action, not words.

“These are special sandals. I made them myself. Try them on.”

Peter looked doubtful, but he did as he was asked.

“One is bigger than the other.” Peter said.

Joshua smiled. “Remember when we measured your legs a few weeks ago? It wasn’t just because I was curious about how much shorter your bad leg is.”

A wonderful feeling welled up inside Joshua as Peter stood up in his new shoes and began to walk around the house without the slightest limp. The idea had come to him when they were in the workshop. Joshua was showing off some of his father's newest creations when Peter walked along a piece of discarded wood that lay on the floor. It wasn't the right thickness, but his limp became much less noticeable as he walked on it. From there it was just a matter of figuring out the difference in his legs with absolute precision.

"This is incredible." Peter called out. "Mother, father, come quick!"

Veronica rushed to her son's aid, an instinctual response to his cries. This time it was not his distress she came to witness, but the joy she had always longed to see in her son.

"Look mother, I can walk." Peter said, walking outside into the street. "I can run."

It didn't look much like running, but it was the closest Peter had ever come. His arms and legs flailed wildly as he zigged and zagged down the road. He would get to do all the things he had missed in life, along with all the things he might have missed that were still to come. Jacob joined Joshua and Veronica in the doorway and watched Peter run.

"It's a miracle." Jacob said. "Now he can join in the family business. He can work, marry, and have a family someday. How can we ever thank you, Joshua?"

"No need for thanks. I did it because I wanted to. Seeing him run like that is more than thanks enough. I wish I could stay longer, but my father is expecting me."

Joshua began running towards the central bazaar of Nazareth. He enjoyed running in the early morning through the empty streets, but it also filled him with sadness. Every day he saw the same people doing the same things at the same time. He passed the baker, who was loading his cart with the same bread he sold every day. Next, he saw a father and son with tools in hand ready to start another day of limestone mining. Finally, as Joshua was entering the market, he came across an old beggar woman named Esther. She always wandered around the market asking for food and copper. No one ever paid much attention to her, except Joshua.

"Good morning, Esther." Joshua said.

"Good morning, Joshua. You look even happier than usual today."

"I am. I've got something for you." Joshua pulled a small hunk of cheese out of his robe and handed it to Esther. "I wasn't very hungry this morning, so I thought you might like my breakfast."

"You're such a good boy Joshua, thank you." Esther ate the cheese in one bite.

Joshua walked a few steps and then turned back to Esther. There was something he needed to ask, something that never crossed his mind before.

"Why do you live like this?"

"I have no other choice. My husband died many years ago, and none of my children survived to adulthood. Adonai kept me alive for some reason, so I continue on until he sees fit to let me pass."

Joshua thought back on everything he had just seen as he continued on to meet his father.

*Is that what my life is destined to be? Work, get married, have children, make them work, and eventually long for death? I want more.*

When Joshua arrived, his father was just about finished arranging their displays.

“You made it back quick, son. I wasn’t expecting you for another hour.” Joseph said through labored breaths. Sweat dripped from his forehead. “How did it go?”

Many men would not have supported their son’s desire to impart such a charitable gift. It took time away from the work that they were paid to do and used valuable materials, yet from the moment Joshua mentioned the idea Joseph uttered no word against it, and even assisted Joshua in creating the unique shoe. His mother’s reaction was much different. Miriam made her concerns known, claiming it was hard enough getting by without wasting time on something that might not work, but that was to be expected. A mother’s instinct is to be concerned about her own child’s well-being before that of anyone else.

“It was perfect. He could really walk, run even. It’s amazing to know that I did that for him.”

Joseph stopped working and sat down. He let out a sigh and beckoned Joshua to come to him.

“Do not let pride consume you, Joshua. We are all instruments of Adonai; here to do His bidding. You did a wonderful thing, but never forget why you did it. Not to boast of it, prosper from it, or relish in it, but to do good for someone else because it was in your power to do so. It is what every man should do.”

“Yes, father.”

Joseph was an anomaly, an honest man surrounded by thieves. It didn’t take long for Joshua to realize how lucky he was to be the son of such a man. Slow to anger, quick to forgive, eager to help, these were the qualities that defined Joseph. Even when business was slow and they barely had enough copper to afford a decent meal, his outlook was positive. While some men grew bitter with their stagnant positions in life, taking out their hostilities on their wives and children, Joseph never raised his hand or voice towards anyone.

Business was slow, even by recent standards. On most work days Joshua and Joseph traveled to Sepphoris, a Roman populated city ten kilometers from Nazareth, to do work. There was always work to be found for carpenters and masons there, but once a week Joseph brought his wares to market. They sold mainly small necessities on these days, occasionally receiving an order for something larger. By midday there had been only one man browsing and he had not purchased anything. It was clear there was no need for both of them to stay. Joseph told Joshua to go home and help his mother.

“Are you sure?” Joshua asked. He had no desire to stay, but something inside told him his father was not well. Joseph’s pale skin, excessive sweating, and labored breathing frightened Joshua. “Maybe you should go and I can close up?”

Joshua had never been allowed to work alone, and the glare his father gave him said that wasn’t going to change anytime soon. He knew it had nothing to do with his ability to do the job and everything to do with the apparent vulnerability of a child alone in the streets, but it still didn’t make him feel good.

“Go home, son. There’s nothing more you can do here. Besides, tomorrow is a big day. Your mother might need some help, especially with Elizabeth arriving today.”

Joshua had forgotten that his cousins were coming. The prospect filled him with dread. Family is important, but they can also be unbearable at times. Elizabeth and her son Yohan possessed a level of ignorance that bordered on absurdity. Every time they came together arguments and tension were unavoidable. Still, it would be rude of Joshua not to be there to welcome them. They were making the trip just for him, and if he had learned anything from his father it was manners. Joshua made his way home, mind shifting between the uncomfortable familial gathering to come and what it meant for him to no longer be a child in the eyes of Adonai.

*Tomorrow I’ll be a man, and everything will change.*

## Chapter 3

The pain in Joseph’s side was intense. He felt as if someone had their foot pressed against the right side of his abdomen. It started late the previous evening, and grew worse as time went on. Joseph mustered every ounce of his strength to behave normal. Between the agony inside of him and the upcoming conversation with his son, there was little time to think about anything else.

It was difficult for Joseph not to speak to Joshua about what was on his mind. He wanted nothing more than to explain everything to his son, but it was not the right time. Joshua would know all soon enough, but not until he came of age. Joseph believed his son was ready, but tradition could not be ignored.

*What if I don’t get the chance to speak to him? He could still find out the truth from the book, though he might not believe it. I have to seek help for this ailment.*

Joseph had not sent his son away just because things were slow. Seeking help was his only option, but he didn’t want his family to worry. Joseph packed up his goods and ventured to his friend Nathaniel, a rabbi and cleric who practiced out of a local synagogue. Nathaniel was busy looking over some parchments when Joseph arrived. As soon as he noticed Joseph he pushed the papers aside and rushed to welcome him.

“Joseph, it’s so good to see you. You’re not one to take a break on a workday. What brings you here?” Nathaniel asked.

His tone was as jovial as ever. Nathaniel welcomed all true believers with a warm smile and kind eyes, but Joseph always received a special greeting. The rabbi was a righteous and devout man who praised the good and condemned the wicked. He had no room in his heart or in his synagogue for those who followed the Pharisees teachings. More people converted every day, but Nathaniel remained steadfast in his belief of the Sadducees and tradition.

“I wish it were under better circumstances, my friend.” Joseph said. He explained his symptoms: fever, vomiting, and excruciating abdominal pain.

Nathaniel placed his palm against Joseph's hot, wet forehead. Then he pressed his hand into Joseph's side, causing him to grimace. The rabbi who was always so bright eyed and amiable turned pale.

"I have come across this ailment several times over the years, and heard about it far more. There is no consensus on its causes, but there is only one course of treatment: rest and pray."

"What are you saying?" Joseph knew his friend was being less than honest with him. The hair on the back of Joseph's neck stood up, and a chill went down his spine. Even as he asked the question, he knew the answer.

"I have never seen anyone survive this. While time varies from case to case, the end result is always the same. You haven't much time to live." Nathaniel kept his head down as he spoke, unable to look Joseph in the eyes as he gave him the news.

"Is there *anything* you can do?" Joseph's voice was barely a whisper as he begged his friend for help. "There must be an herbal remedy to alleviate the symptoms, if only to prolong my life for a few months, or even just weeks. I can't die yet." Joseph pleaded, not for his own sake, but for his son's. Joshua would need his guidance more than ever in the coming days. He knew all too well that learning about the family legacy could be a traumatizing experience.

"I'm sorry, Joseph. I have heard of rare, miraculous recoveries, but there is no way to know if the stories are true. Chances are you have two maybe three days at most, though it could happen anytime between now and then. I can give you some herbs that will lessen the pain, but that is all. Eventually you will feel a sudden sense of relief and the pain will vanish for a short time. That is how you will know your time is up." Nathaniel began crushing and mixing the herbs together before Joseph could respond.

"If it will not extend my life I won't take it. I'll not have a coward's death. The pain I am meant to feel, I will feel. Thank you for the truth." Joseph paused. "It would please me if you would preside over my funeral. Do not tell anyone of my affliction, Miriam most of all. After all, I do believe in miracles."

"You have my word." Nathaniel poured the prepared herbs into a pouch and handed it to Joseph before he left. "Just in case you change your mind, or wish for some relief while you say your goodbyes."

Joseph accepted the herbs, though he still had no intention of taking them.

The short walk home weakened Joseph. He walked a minimum of several kilometers every day of his life and worked until exhaustion each night before retiring. He was not one to tire easily, yet after no more than a kilometer he felt ready to collapse.

*Perhaps this is a test from Adonai. Many men have suffered far worse than this and survived. I must prove myself by not succumbing to fear and pain.*

Knowledge of impending death can bring clarity to a man that is otherwise unobtainable. He knew he would not be able to tell his son everything about their family history, but the book could do that. All he wanted was to be able to pass on their legacy as his father had to him.

*Please just let me last one more day.*

Miriam rushed to the door to greet her husband when he arrived home. Joshua, Elizabeth, and Yohan were all sitting around the table. There was a large plate of

fruit between them that Joshua was picking at and that Elizabeth and Yohan were devouring by the handful. Joseph did his best to hide his pain. He stood up straight, put on a smile, and welcomed his wife's family to their home before excusing himself.

"But you just arrived, Joseph. Dinner will be served shortly." Miriam said.

"I just need to change for dinner. We have company. I'll get out of my work clothes, put on my good robes, and be right back." Joseph said before leaving the company of his family.

There was nothing he wanted more than to take his son aside and explain everything to him right then, but he trusted in tradition and in Adonai. If he was meant to tell Joshua, he would survive to see another day.

He went to the room he shared with his wife. In the corner was a large cabinet. It was the first thing he built when they arrived in Nazareth years before. The common appearance did not do its contents justice, but inconspicuous is better than obvious in a city populated primarily by scoundrels and thieves. He removed the false bottom from the cabinet, revealing a hidden chest. Straining, he lifted the chest out and onto the floor.

Joseph became weaker with every passing moment. The pressure in his stomach was worse than anything he had ever felt in his life, but he persevered. Normal in most respects, there was one thing which separated this chest from other containers. The lock did not take a traditional key, but something much different. Joseph removed a pendant from his neck, a Star of David not unlike those many of his fellow servants of Adonai donned. He placed the star in the lock and twisted. The lid sprung open.

He took out the large, weathered tome that he had received from his father on the day of his Bar Mitzvah and looked at it for a moment. That and the chest itself were the only things that belonged to him. The rest of the items in the chest belonged to his son alone, given to him when he was a baby. They had been kept from him for thirteen years, but it would soon be time for him to accept them. Joseph placed the book back inside the box along with his own personal diary. Miriam was the only other person who knew of its existence, though even she did not know the truth about its contents. She would make sure that Joshua took possession of it if anything happened to him in the night.

"Your burden will be great, my son, but the world needs you." Joseph muttered before passing out on his bed of hay.

## Chapter 4

The one hundred and twenty kilometer journey from Jerusalem to Nazareth, one that should take no more than two days even on the slowest horse, took thirty days for Moloch and his companions due to their secondary mission. Daniel and Samuel, brothers and devout guards, were eager to accompany Moloch on his quest.

“Thank you for joining me on this journey Daniel, I know what a hardship it must be to spend so much time away from your wife and children.” Moloch said.

“Trust me. It’s much more of a hardship for him to be with them. That wife of his is a nightmare, and that’s being kind.” Samuel laughed.

To speak ill of another man’s wife was one of the greatest insults any man could give, yet Daniel laughed even louder than Samuel.

“Surely you must miss your boys though?” Moloch asked.

“I do, but I worry they have taken after my wife. They fight with each other constantly. They are selfish and spoiled and refuse to obey my commands. When this mission is complete I plan to take some time to teach them how to behave.”

“Not everyone can get along as well as you and I, brother.” Samuel said, wrapping one arm around Daniel’s neck and punching him in the arm.

Their relationship was far different from the one Moloch and Annas had. They supported each other as both brothers and friends, laughing and talking for hours at a time. The behavior seemed so strange and foreign to Moloch, but he tolerated it due to their fighting prowess and loyalty to Adonai. No matter what he asked of Daniel and Samuel, they did it without hesitation.

The three men stopped at each city along their route to examine the influence of the Pharisees amongst the townspeople. What they learned was disturbing. There were no Pharisees present, or at least visible, in any of the towns they visited, but the way the people spoke one might think they had just left the city.

“You know they’re right.” Moloch overheard one merchant saying to another in the small town of Nain. “Why should we have to travel all the way to the Temple to offer sacrifices to Adonai? He sees everything so he would know if we sacrificed in our own homes and synagogues.”

The people were spellbound by the prospect that their lives could be made easier and more pleasurable. Moloch remained calm and patient through it all, though the fire burning inside of him was rekindled with every word of heresy that he heard.

The rolling hills of Nazareth were a welcome and beautiful sight to behold after such a draining excursion. The city sat nestled in a valley surrounded by limestone cliffs that rose on all sides like an eggshell protecting it from harm.

Their first task was to find a room at an inn for the duration of their stay in Nazareth. Though Hebrew custom dictated that the people open their homes to travelers, Moloch preferred to stay somewhere that offered more privacy. They found a room at the White Horse Inn near the central marketplace. It was owned by a Roman with an unpleasant attitude and an unwashed face.

“How long will you be staying?” The innkeeper asked.

“Hopefully no more than a few days.” Moloch said as he gazed at the disgusting surroundings. Half eaten plates of food littered the floor at the innkeeper’s feet and the limestone walls were full of cracks and holes.

“If you don’t like it you can get out now. You won’t find a better inn in the entire city.”

“I’m sure that is true. I meant no disrespect. I simply meant that I have business in the city that I hope I can see to quickly.” Moloch said.

He did mean disrespect, but the innkeeper might be useful. Moloch had no idea where Joshua might be. Nazareth boasted a population of over fifty thousand

people. Finding one boy amongst so many seemed an impossible task at first thought, but Joshua was not an ordinary boy.

*A boy who can cause such a stir in the Holy City must be well known in his hometown. Possibly even to Roman scum like this.*

“Might I ask you a question, sir?” Moloch asked.

“You just did.” The innkeeper laughed.

“Too true.” Moloch gave a halfhearted chuckle. “I’m looking for a young boy named Joshua. He is the son of a carpenter named Joseph and lives somewhere in the city. Do you know of him?”

“Can’t say I do. Don’t have much use for carpenters, but there’s always a few in the marketplace. If you’re not picky about what boy you get I might be able to help you out. I know a few that will do anything you want, for a price.”

Moloch was disgusted by the insinuation. He wanted nothing more than to end the innkeeper’s miserable existence that very moment. Samuel placed a hand on Moloch’s shoulder before he could act.

“Remember the mission.” Samuel whispered.

Moloch calmed himself with a few deep breaths and walked to his room without another word to the perverted innkeeper.

The day quickly waned. While his men settled into their temporary home, Moloch took the time to write a note for Joshua. He planned to speak to Joseph first out of respect, but did not believe for a moment that the man would allow his son to join them.

Moloch was eager to find Joshua, but decided to leave that task for the following morning. Instead he set off towards the synagogue of Nathaniel, the rabbi who had written to the High Priest.

“May I help you?” The rabbi said as Moloch entered the synagogue.

“Are you Nathaniel?” Moloch asked.

“I am.”

“My name is Moloch, a priest from Jerusalem.”

“I knew my letters would not go unanswered. The people of this city grow more rebellious with each passing day. The Pharisees poisonous influence has taken hold of them. To think, the High Priest sent you here just because of my letter.”

“We will offer you any help that we can, but I can’t lie to you. I have another, far more important goal in this city. I need to find a boy.” Moloch said.

“A single boy is more important than saving the people of this city? What boy is this?” Nathaniel asked.

Visiting Nathaniel proved to be the best decision Moloch could have made. He learned the rabbi was a personal friend of Joshua’s father. Nathaniel shifted uncomfortably when Moloch asked for directions to Joseph’s home, but he didn’t deny the priest his wish.

“Joseph was here no more than half an hour ago. I’m sure he is home by now.” Nathaniel said, and then proceeded to tell Moloch how to get there. “I could just take you there if you like.” Nathaniel added when he was done.

“Thank you for the offer, but this is a private matter.” Moloch said. Nathaniel did not question him further.



Within an hour of their arrival in Nazareth, Moloch and his companions were at the doorway of a quaint little home on the edge of the city ready to complete their primary mission.

## Chapter 5

“How rude.” Elizabeth said. “We travel all the way here for his son’s Bar Mitzvah and he can’t say more than two words to us. I always said you married a classless brute, Miriam. By the way, when is dinner? I’m famished from our journey.”

Miriam rolled her eyes at her aunt.

*I’m sure crushing that poor horse under your girth for two days was exhausting.*

Elizabeth was never one to hold her tongue. Her words were as unforgiving as her waistline after consuming an entire lamb, which she did several times a year. Of the seven deadly sins, each of which Elizabeth committed on a regular basis, gluttony and pride were her most frequent offenses.

“I have to eat to maintain my figure. I’m a sturdy woman, you know. It’s how Adonai made me.” She would say if someone accused her of excess.

“It’s such a shame Zechariah couldn’t make it. I was looking forward to seeing him.” Miriam said, ignoring her aunt’s harsh comments. She wasn’t lying. Zechariah was the only one of them she could stand to be around for any length of time.

*He must have stayed behind to enjoy the peace of solitude.*

“Father can’t just take days off from work anytime he wants. He’s an important businessman. If he didn’t work we could end up poor like you.” Yohan said, receiving a hard slap on the back of his head from his mother as he finished.

“It’s impolite to boast about your wealth son, even if it is true.” Elizabeth had a way of correcting her son that was closer to agreement than admonishment.

Miriam normally would have remarked on their comments, but Joseph’s sudden and brief appearance diverted her attention. He didn’t look well, and she wondered what might be wrong with him.

“Joshua, would you check on your father?” Miriam asked.

“Yes, mother.” Joshua said.

“Yohan has been a man for almost six months now. Should I be preparing for his nuptials in the near future?” Miriam changed the subject while Joshua checked on Joseph. She knew the idea of Yohan taking a wife wasn’t something Elizabeth wanted to discuss or even contemplate.

“When we find a girl worthy of my darling boy you will know. He’s not going to settle for some commoner off the street.” Elizabeth ruffled her son’s hair. Yohan glared at his mother and swatted her hand away. Miriam had obviously touched on a sore subject. “I’m sure you and Joseph will accept the first offer you get, but I’ll not trade my boy for a fat lamb only to get a sow of a daughter in law in the exchange.”

“We haven’t discussed it yet. No need to rush things.” Miriam said.

“For once we agree.” Elizabeth finished her wine and held up her goblet to say she wanted more. Miriam obliged, though she began to worry how much her aunt’s visit would cost them in meat and wine.

Joshua returned a few seconds after their conversation ended with surprising news.

“He’s asleep.”

Everyone snapped their heads to look at Joshua.

“Sleeping this early? How lazy can a man be? It isn’t even dark out.” Elizabeth craned her neck to look out the window. The sun still shined down on the white limestone streets of Nazareth.

“I’m sure he’s just resting after a long, hard day of work.” Miriam said, though her thoughts betrayed her words. Joseph spent every day working from dawn to dusk in the market or Sepphoris and then far into the night in his workshop. If he was sleeping when the sun was still up, then something must be wrong.

*It’s nothing. A good night’s rest and he will be as good as new.*

A voice coming from the doorway caused her to jump out of her chair in fright.

*Who in the world could be calling on us at this time of the day?*

## Chapter 6

“Good day, dear lady. Is your husband home?” Moloch said when Miriam came to the door.

“I’m afraid he’s resting after a long day of work. If this is about business, you can come back tomorrow. Good night, sir.”

The woman waited for them to leave, but they didn’t.

“I must insist that you wake him. This is an urgent matter.” Moloch said.

She paused for a moment, and then gave in to his demands. “Wait here. I’ll see if I can wake him.”

Joseph came to the doorway a few minutes later looking more like a walking corpse than a human being. His face was pale and sweat poured down his long, brown beard.

“I’m very sorry to bother you, Joseph. My name is Moloch. I have traveled here from Jerusalem. You are obviously not well, but I must request a moment of your time to discuss your son.”

“My son? What about him?” Joseph eyes widened.

“Not here. It might be better if this is just between us.” Moloch gestured to the window where his entire family stood watching their interaction.

“Fine, but let’s make it quick.” Joseph said. He grabbed his walking stick and followed Moloch.

“Where are you leading me?” Joseph said after traveling a short distance.

“This should do fine.”

Moloch stopped in front of a tavern and ushered Joseph and his men inside. It was crowded and noisy. Men were drinking wine and beer to excess while women of no reputation circled them like vultures. Romans and Hebrews sat side by side

drinking and gambling as brothers. Vices are as wondrous as they are debilitating. They destroy the lives of those they afflict as well as their families, but can also bridge almost any social division. There was little chance of being overheard in such a place. The disapproving look on Joseph's face told Moloch that the man had never set foot in this place before and had no desire to be there.

*Good men are the easiest sway.*

"Let's make this quick. I'd rather not be seen in a place like this." Joseph marched to a secluded corner and sat with his tilted forward.

"Any man who is here would have no right to use it against you, but then again what one has the right to do and what he does are very different things." Moloch stared into Joseph's eyes. "For example: I don't have the right to take your son away from you, yet that is still a possibility."

He had not planned to be so blunt and forceful with his opening remarks, but they seemed to have a desirable effect. Joseph sat up straight and stared back at Moloch.

"What do you mean? Joshua is a good and faithful boy. He has done nothing wrong." Joseph's timid voice was barely audible against the din.

"Fear not. He is not sought for any wrongdoing. Do you recall your pilgrimage to Jerusalem several months ago?" Joseph nodded his head. "The priests were quite impressed by your boy before you hurried him away. He has qualities that are quite rare even within our ranks."

Moloch looked around to make sure no one was watching. He pulled down on the collar of his ordinary brown robe to reveal a second, more elaborate tunic of gold. The High Priest would not be pleased, but he need not know everything. Fulfilling the mission was Moloch's priority, and the ends mattered far more than the means.

"You're a priest?" Joseph spoke much louder than before, but with just as much surprise.

A priest in Nazareth was a rarity. Not only was a large portion of the city populated by pagans, but the increasing popularity of the Pharisees made it a less inviting city for staunch traditionalists. The places in most dire need of the positive influence of holy men were often the most neglected.

"I am, and as I said I come bearing word from the High Priest himself. He wishes for your son to become a rabbi, preaching the true word of Adonai to the wayward sheep who have been led astray by the false promises of the Pharisees. 'With his charisma, insight, and cunning he will be a great champion for our cause.' His words, not mine. I don't see what use a boy will be, but it is not my place to question the will of the High Priest. Nor is it yours. Do not fear. You will be compensated for losing your apprentice." Moloch tossed a bag of silver denarii on the table in front of Joseph.

Joseph sat in contemplation for several minutes. He did not even look down at the silver. Fresh beads of sweat rolled down his forehead and dripped onto the table.

"No." Joseph said, finding his voice. "I won't allow my son to get caught up in your war with the Pharisees, the Romans, or anyone else you see as your enemy. What you propose is work for a man much older than my son. Joshua will live out

his days as a carpenter like me and my father before me. I ask that you not trouble us with this again. And I don't want your money."

Joseph stood and moved slowly towards the exit. Daniel and Samuel looked to Moloch for instructions, but he motioned his hand for them to wait.

"He's not moving fast, and it would be best if our next conversation took place in a less crowded place." Moloch said to his men, and then got up to pursue Joseph.

They followed him through the streets and alleyways tracing their way back towards his home. They circled Joseph when he was only a stone's throw from his dwelling. Daniel and Samuel each grabbed a shoulder, preventing his escape without making it look like they were detaining him.

"I wish you no ill will, but we require your son. Speak to him about it. He may like the idea more than you. Don't his feelings count for anything? Think long and hard this time about your answer. Your next decision could have consequences you aren't prepared to accept."

As Moloch spoke his last words he noticed that Joshua stood in the doorway of his home, watching them as they confronted his father. Moloch gestured for his men to release Joseph as soon as he saw the boy. Joseph didn't speak, but his eyes pierced Moloch like a blade. He would not give up his son without a fight. Joseph turned and walked away from his assailants and toward his son. Joshua ran out to meet his father and help him inside.

Prepared for such a refusal, Moloch pulled a piece of parchment from his robes and held it up in the air as he stared at Joshua. He then placed it inside a nearby barrel before turning to leave. Joseph still had his back to Moloch, but Joshua watched his every move.

"He will not give us the boy." Samuel said as they walked away.

"He doesn't have much of a choice. The High Priest's wants the boy, and he will have him by any means necessary." Daniel said. He was unaware that Moloch was the one who truly wanted Joshua.

Moloch laughed at their comments.

"Don't be so negative Samuel, or so brash Daniel. I think it went rather well. This was just a courtesy. It's the talk with the boy that really matters."

## **Chapter 7**

Their eyes locked for only a moment, but it was enough. Even at fifty meters, Joshua watched as the man his father had left with placed the papyrus inside a barrel. He knew in his bones it was meant for him.

Joseph had seen none of this. The look on his face was grim, an uncommon affliction for a man who was always so happy and care free.

"What did they want?" Joshua asked.

Joseph did not answer. He pulled Joshua off to the side and watched as the three men retreated. When they were out of sight he turned to Joshua. "From now on, I don't want you out in the streets alone. Anywhere I go, you go as well. Understood?"

“Yes, Father. But...” Joshua started, but was not allowed to finish.

“No buts. Do as I say.” Joseph roared the command.

Joshua was not used to being snapped at by his father. He was frightened enough not to argue, but not frightened enough to ignore the letter that waited for him in the barrel.

Dinner was on the table when they went inside. Elizabeth couldn’t wait to start, or to criticize.

“This mutton is overcooked, Miriam. Fourteen years of cooking for your family and you still haven’t mastered it?” Then a few seconds later she said. “Pass me another piece of meat, and some bread as well. We can’t let anything go to waste.”

Joseph, who led the conversation most days, remained silent. No tales of obnoxious or eccentric customers or questions about his wife’s day, only a blank stare as he moved his food around his bowl and took an occasional sip of water. Miriam stared at Joseph throughout the meal, but did not say a word.

“May I be excused?” Joshua said. The tension in the air was stifling. Miriam looked down at his bowl, which was still half filled.

“You may.” Miriam said.

“You’re going to let the boy waste all of that Miriam?” Elizabeth said.

“Don’t worry mother, I’ll take care of it.” Yohan grabbed the bowl from Joshua and began shoveling the food into his mouth. He was working hard to become as large as his mother.

While everyone else finished their meal, Joshua went to his room. He lay on his bed of hay for what seemed like hours, wondering who the man was and what secrets the note might contain.

*I heard him say he wanted to talk about me before they left. Why would anyone want to talk about me?*

Elizabeth and Yohan left soon after dinner, and Joshua’s parents were asleep not long after that. It was time to make his move. Joshua snuck out and retrieved. He retreated to his room, careful not to make a sound as he tiptoed back through the house, and unfurled the letter.

*Joshua, if you are reading this, your father does not wish for you to know the truth. I have been sent by the High Priest to extend an offer to you. I did not wish to go behind Joseph’s back, but this is a decision he can’t make for you. I do not wish to divulge the matter in writing. If you wish to hear the proposition, I am staying at the White Horse Inn, room four, for the next three days. Please come visit me anytime.*

*Moloch*

It was almost too much to bear. Pride and anger fought for control.

*The High Priest wants to extend an offer to me? Why would father keep such a wonderful prospect hidden from me? Should I go?*

The night was difficult. Joshua struggled with his decision, tossing and turning for hours. He pulled out the letter every few minutes, reading and rereading it in the dim light of his oil lantern. In the end, there was only one thing he could do. Promise or no promise, he was going to at least listen to Moloch’s offer.

The next morning he set out at first light. No one stirred as he snuck out of the house for the second time. Joshua walked slowly down the deserted street. Every step he took was a betrayal of the promise he made to his father. He kept looking over his shoulder, thinking his father would be standing there ready to stop him. Joshua was ready to do whatever the High Priest wanted, or so he thought.

## Chapter 8

Joseph awoke the next morning before the sun rose. His pain worsened in the night, but the relief of surviving to see another day brought him great joy. He moved to the door, careful not to make a sound that might wake his wife. Elizabeth and Yohan were staying at a nearby inn, as they always did when they came to visit. The thought of sleeping in the workshop or in the back room dissatisfied Miriam's pampered aunt. Her arrogance provided the perfect opportunity to speak to Joshua, possibly his last opportunity.

When Joseph went to wake his son, he was startled to find that Joshua wasn't in his room. He walked out to the workshop, but there was no sign of Joshua there either. Moloch immediately came to his mind.

*Surely I would have heard something if they came in the night.*

He searched for any sign of a struggle or possible clues. Nothing was broken or displaced in his son's room, but on the floor he found a note signed by the priest.

"Damn you, Moloch." Joseph said after reading it through.

"What are you doing, Joseph? Where's Joshua?" Miriam appeared in the doorway. "Where's my boy?"

"He's gone to run an errand for me, but wouldn't you know he forgot the list I gave him." Joseph held up Moloch's note. "I guess I'll have to go after him. Don't worry. We'll be back in no time."

He knew he must go after his son at all costs, but the debilitating illness cared not for his needs, and he wasn't sure if he could walk the entire way. Going against his initial judgment, he retrieved the herbs Nathaniel gave him and took them all at once. Joseph hoped they would take effect quickly. Not waiting to find out, he rushed towards the White Horse Inn as fast as his weakened body would allow.

## Chapter 9

There was no one manning the front desk at the inn when Joshua arrived. Not surprising, given the hour. Joshua wandered down the hallway until he saw a man standing guard outside the last room. He was one of the two who were with Moloch the previous day. As Joshua approached, the guard's hand moved to the sword at his hip.

"What are you doing here so early boy?" He asked.

"I'm here to see Moloch." Joshua jumped back.

The man looked him over for a moment, and then his eyes shot open. "Wait here for a moment. Let me wake him."

Joshua stood alone in the dark hallway wondering whether or not he made the right decision in coming. He started to walk away, and then stopped.

*I've come this far, I can't turn back now.*

Moloch appeared in the doorway a few seconds later. Groggy but cheerful, he beckoned Joshua into his chamber.

"I'm so glad you decided to come. It's a bit early for my taste, but no matter." Moloch's laugh put Joshua more at ease and he entered. "If I were a betting man I'd say your father has no idea that you're here. Am I right?"

The weight of his guilt doubled at the accusation. Not only did he fail to get permission, but he had gone against Joseph's explicit order not to go out alone. He dropped his head and stares at the floor.

"Not to worry. You will receive no chastisement here. Sometimes small transgressions are necessary to accomplish a greater purpose. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I've never thought about it like that. I suppose it makes sense, though that isn't what I've been taught." Joshua said.

"Daniel, Samuel, would you leave us for a moment. I'd like a private word with Joshua."

The two men nodded and walked out. Moloch poured two goblets of wine and handed one to Joshua.

"Some might say it's too early to drink, but I say it's never too early or late for wine." Moloch took a small sip and smacked his lips. "Wonderful wine you have here in Nazareth."

"I shouldn't. My parents only let me have wine on special occasions." Joshua said, placing his goblet down carefully. "Thank you for the offer."

"You come from a very good family to teach you such propriety, but it is not necessary in my presence. In this world there are leaders and there are followers, or shepherds and sheep as I call them. Each has their own rules and customs. You have been taught the ways of a sheep. I wish to make you a shepherd."

"Me?"

It was an exciting thought. All his life Joshua felt special, different in some way from the people around him. He understood things easier, saw simple solutions that eluded others, and was never satisfied with his work as a carpenter. Joshua gave in to his fate as a woodworker, but he did not desire it nor was he very good at it. The carving skills Joseph possessed were not passed on to his son. When he cared enough about something, like Peter's sandal, he could create passable items. But most of the time he found the work tedious and unrewarding, and the quality reflected his effort. To be given the chance to live up to his potential and express himself in a way he considered far more meaningful was something he never imagined possible.

"Who are the sheep I am meant to shepherd?" Joshua asked, half joking. He was still not convinced that Moloch was serious.

Moloch beckoned him to the window. The sun was still rising, shedding light on the quiet streets and bringing about a new day. A day filled with unlimited possibilities for some and never ending sameness for others.

“The wayward sons of Adonai will be your flock. You will preach to those who have been lured away from the righteous path by the false promises and outright lies of the Pharisees, just as you preached to the people in the Temple. You are familiar with the Pharisees, of course?”

“Yes I am, sir.” Joshua had encountered them both in Nazareth and on his visits to the Holy City. They often made a spectacle of themselves in the market, drawing in crowds with their eccentric garb and wild, if somewhat alluring, propositions. Some were even rabbis and ran their own synagogues.

“Then you must realize the danger they pose. Dividing our people, withholding tithes necessary for our day to day operations, and committing acts of violence in no way helps achieve our goal of freeing the Holy Land from Roman control. We need to bring the people together. Unite them for a common cause. Will you join us?” Moloch placed his hands on Joshua’s shoulders and stared into his eyes. Joshua wanted to believe what Moloch was saying, but something about those eyes frightened him in a way he couldn’t explain. They were a shade of brown so dark they almost looked black.

A noise from the doorway startled Joshua. There his father stood, breathing heavy and glaring at Moloch. The paper Joseph held in his hand told Joshua how he was found.

*Why did I leave it lying on the floor in my room?*

There was no time for words. Joseph rushed Moloch, burying his fist deep in the holy man’s stomach. Moloch threw Joseph to the ground. He stood and tackled Moloch. Both men were on the ground, striking one another with fists and knees. Joshua could not believe what he was seeing. His father had never given in to violent impulses before, yet now he attacked with the ferocity of a wild animal.

Joshua rushed over and pleaded for them to stop, but neither man seemed to hear. The brawl only lasted a minute, but to Joshua it seemed like a lifetime. Daniel and Samuel must have heard Joshua’s cries, because they returned a few seconds later to end the fight. They pulled Joseph off of their master and held him tight until Moloch could stand and compose himself.

“What shall we do with him, sir?” Daniel said, holding one of Joseph’s arms as he fought to break free.

“Let him go. Under the circumstances I would expect no less a response from a loving father.” His voice hardened as he lifted Joseph’s head. Their eyes locked. “But lay a hand on me again and it will be the last thing you do. I’ve done your boy no harm. He came here of his own will. Speak to him and he will tell you.”

The walk home was torture. Joshua wished his father would do something. Yell, threaten, punish, or even hit him. Anything would have been better than the silence. Joseph trudged forward without even a glance sideways to see if his son was still with him. He favored his right side as he walked. Joshua wanted to apologize, to beg forgiveness, but he wasn’t truly sorry. Moloch’s words had already begun to take hold. He liked the idea of becoming someone important, moving to the Holy City, and spending his days speaking instead of hammering.



*How do I tell my father I don't want to follow in his footsteps after all that he has done for me?*

Miriam ran to meet them halfway up the road from the house.

“Joshua, just because you're a man now doesn't mean you can go wherever you want without telling us.” Miriam said, and then shifted to her husband and stiffened. “Yes, I know he didn't run an errand for you. I run all your errands so I know nothing needed to be done. We'll deal with his actions tomorrow, and I'll deal with you later. Elizabeth and Yohan will be here soon. Today's celebration will be pleasant and fun for everybody.”

With everything that happened since he read that note, Joshua forgot that it was his birthday. Not just his birthday, but his Bar Mitzvah, the day when he became a man in the eyes of his people. It didn't matter what his father thought about Moloch or his offer, as a man the decision was his to make.

“No.” Joseph stood and glared at his son. “We have to talk now. Go to the workshop and wait for me. I'll be out in a minute.”

Without a word, Joshua did as he was told, eager to accept his punishment and attempt to make his father understand his actions and his wishes.

## Chapter 10

The anger that had taken hold of Joseph because of his son's disobedience did not linger, but his fear remained. The curiosity of a young boy is not easily satisfied, and what is more curious than a proposal from the High Priest? Joseph believed that he might have been tempted by the priest's letter if he was still a lad, but the idea of his son being taken away disturbed him.

*The High Priest wants another pawn to aid in his idealistic battle with the Pharisees, but my son won't be that pawn. Verbal warfare always gives way to violence when neither side is willing to compromise. And if they find out who I am, who my son is, they will stop at nothing to get their hands on him.*

A lone voice in his head cried louder than all the others.

*Perhaps this is part of his destiny? Do not forget what happened shortly after his birth. Maybe his life is not meant to be spent in the shadows.*

There was no time to consider the possibilities. Joseph retrieved the chest from his room and went to speak to his son. The priest could wait; Joshua's Bar Mitzvah present could not.

“What's that?” Joshua stared at the box as Joseph placed it on his workbench.

“This chest holds a secret that our family has been keeping for generations. I know you were expecting me to scold you for what you did today, and you do deserve it, but there is something more important I need to talk to you about.” Joseph unlocked the chest with his pendant and took out the large, weathered tome. “Your life is a lie, as is mine.”

Joshua stared with narrow eyes, unsure of what to make of his father's claim. Words eluded him.

“This book has been passed down in our family for almost one thousand years. It details the life of our great and noble ancestor. There is no easy way to explain this, so I’ll just say it. We are the last living descendants of King David.”

Joshua’s mouth fell open and his eyes grew wide. Silence pervaded the air for over a minute. Joseph wanted to give Joshua time for the news to sink in before continuing.

“I had the same reaction when my father told me of our lineage. It’s not an easy thing to understand.” Joseph laughed, causing his pain to get worse. He shrugged it off. The temporary relief the herbs had given him was gone, but there was still much more he needed to say.

“If we are descendants of David, why are we carpenters? Why do we live in this little house, in this awful town so far from the Holy City?” Joshua stared into his father’s eyes. “Why aren’t we kings?”

“I asked the very same question, and will give you the same answer I received.” Joseph took a deep breath before beginning his story.

“For hundreds of years after David’s rule, his descendants warred with surrounding countries for the right to govern all of Israel and expand its territories. Some were great leaders, others were not, but as long as there was a blood relative of David the people gave their lives to secure the throne in his name. Countless men gave up their lives in pointless struggles for power, land, and wealth.

“When the land was conquered by the Persian Empire, our ancestors remained in power as puppet kings for several generations. One of our ancestors, Zerubabel, refused to play the part. He faked his own death and went into hiding with his wife and child. From then on, every man in our family has spent his life as a humble carpenter serving the people we once ruled, always waiting for the Messiah to be born and lead our people to salvation.”

Silence again.

“So I’m just supposed to live my life knowing where I come from and never telling anyone? Never amounting to anything more than a simple carpenter?” The wonder on Joshua’s face melted away only to be replaced by anger.

Joseph smiled, remembering the similar reaction he had when he learned the truth.

“That was the plan. I wasn’t happy about it at first either. To know you come from such a noble ancestry, yet must resign yourself to the simple life. It feels as if the truth would be better lost than passed down. The plan, however, has changed.”

“What do you mean?” Joshua asked.

Joseph reached back into the box, pulling out a smaller ornate wooden container and two silver decanters. Memories of the night they came into his possession flooded his mind. The three men who bestowed the gifts were unexpected visitors bearing a message that changed the course of their lives. Not unlike Moloch, their presence and words were unwelcome at the time. Joseph still wasn’t sure whether or not to believe what they told him so many years ago, but Joshua needed to know.

“When you were born, we lived in the town of Bethlehem. One day, soon after your birth, three scholars arrived at our door. They...” Joseph felt relief for the first

time in days. All the pressure and pain inside his abdomen evaporated. The brief sensation ended as quickly as it began, and the pain returned worse than before. Joseph collapsed, unable to bear it any longer.

“Father?” Joshua ran to him, kneeling beside Joseph and lifting his head off the hard earthen floor. “What’s wrong. Get up. Father!”

“Never forget.” Joseph said, still clutching the Star of David in his hand. He held it out for his son to take. The moment Joshua grabbed it, Joseph’s arm, along with his entire body, went limp. He did not wake again.

## Chapter 11

The smell of earth filled Amara with renewed energy and purpose as she glided noiselessly across the harsh landscape. Most would be lost in the blackness of the barren roadways after nightfall, but Amara’s eyes were akin to an owl’s after years of twilight excursions. Those eyes now searched for something to eat as her empty stomach cried out to be filled. It had been days since her last proper meal. There were no nearby streams to fish, large game was scarce, and small game even scarcer.

Amara hated resorting to thievery, but at times it was an unavoidable necessity. She spotted a fire in the distance and moved towards it with her bow drawn, ready to strike at the first sign of trouble.

*They must be weary travelers taking a break from the Roman Road.*

Built during their campaign to seize Judea and dozens of other provinces, the road provided the safest and most direct route between Rome and Jerusalem. Merchants were its primary travelers, along with the bandits who took full advantage of their vulnerability on the open road. The fire provided the peddlers with warmth and protection from all manner of creatures, but it also led Amara right to them. She saw them and they didn’t see her. Stealth was her ally, darkness her comrade.

*Only take what you need, Amara. No god will fault you for that.*

The voice of her grandfather’s echoed in her mind as she drew closer to her target. Two years deceased and he still influenced her every move. The dead never truly leave the world until they are forgotten.

Though the fire was burning low, even a few embers would give away an encampment in the black void. Two men lay sprawled out on the rocky floor, their snores audible from a great distance. Amara crept up to their wagon to search for anything of value, longing most for any crumb of food. She slung her bow across her back to free her hands and began rummaging through the wagon’s contents, careful to keep one eye on the sleeping victims. The wagon contained mostly carved stone idols of Roman and Egyptian deities. They weren’t worth much, enough for a few meals at most. One of the men was likely a stone worker, traveling from village to village peddling his creations with the help of his apprentice.

Filling her satchel with the ones she thought would fetch the most in trade, Amara stopped when she came upon an idol of the Egyptian god Anubis. She remembered all the stories her grandfather had told her about the gods, but Anubis held a special place in her heart. As guardian of the world of the dead, it was his duty to take the deceased before the gods for judgment.

*How were you judged, grandfather?*

She thought of all the wonderful and terrible things they had done together, of the mother she had never known, and the homeland she had never been able to visit. Whatever his fate, she knew it was her fault. Lost in thought for several minutes, she had taken her eyes off of her would be victims.

“What do you think you’re doing?” A hand latched onto Amara’s wrist. It pulled her down from the wagon and dragged her to where the second man lay sleeping on the ground. “Wake up, Creet, you idiot. You were supposed to be keeping watch. It looks like we’ve got ourselves a little thief, and a pretty one at that.”

The man holding onto Amara smiled. At first look, he seemed more animal than man. Thick black hair covered his arms, face, and the part of his chest not covered by his robe. His few teeth were crooked and discolored an unnatural brown. An overwhelming stench emitted from his mouth, so vile it caused Amara to gag at arm’s length. Creet got to his feet, still groggy and half asleep. He was much younger, with a lean build and smooth face. Amara was in trouble, and she knew it. If caught stealing in the city one would have Roman justice to face, but out on the road there was only death for thieves and worse than death for female thieves.

*Never let your guard down, even for a moment.*

“What’s going on, Barba?” Creet asked.

“This girl was helping herself to some of our goods. Not a very nice thing to do. I’ll not work my fingers to the bone all day to have some succubus swoop in and steal my creations.” His voice echoed off the rocks and boulders.

“Don’t hurt her, she’s just a girl.” There was fear in Creet’s eyes as he went against his master. Barba’s eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared.

“Oh I won’t hurt her much, if she cooperates that is. As long as she plays nice I’ll let her live. Ever been with a girl Creet?” Creet did not answer. “Of course you haven’t. This one’s a fine wench. Maybe we’ll make a man out of you when I’m done.” Amara struggle to break his grip, but he held tight. “Don’t fight me girl, unless you enjoy the thought of a sword through the gut.”

Amara nodded. Barba ripped open her cloak.

“You can’t, master. It isn’t right.” Creet grabbed hold of Barba’s arm.

Amara seized the opportunity, grabbing the dagger concealed in her robe with her free hand. In one swift motion she cut Barba’s arm, freeing her from his grip. Another upward swing with the blade failed to meet its mark. The powerful cut was meant to maim and mutilate Barba, but he jumped back in time. Unable to balance on the uneven ground he leaned forward, and the blade cut deep into his cheek and right eye.

“Agggghhhh.” He cried.

Amara ran for the road as fast as her legs allowed. Creet stood motionless, mouth agape, as she fled. She stopped at the edge of the clearing and looked back at the scene.

“Get back here you little bitch. You’re dead, you hear me? I’ll hunt you to the ends of the earth.” Barba cried, still clutching his eye as his blood pooled on the forest floor.

*Never leave an enemy alive.*

Barba got a good look at her. There was only one option if she didn’t want to spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder. Amara pulled the bow from her back and drew an arrow from her quiver, her last arrow. Barba continued to scream, embers from the fire illuminated him as Amara aimed her shot at his heart. She took a deep breath and released. A perfect shot, yet it did not hit its mark.

“No!” Creet stepped in front of Barba, shielding his master from harm. The arrow pierced his body, and he dropped to the ground with a dull thud.

Amara stood still, looking at the carnage she caused. Barba got to his feet and began running in her direction, ignoring the pain as blood continued to flow down his face. There was nothing more Amara could do without risking her safety, so she scurried into the darkness as tears ran down her cheeks.

## Chapter 12

Heracles walked slowly down the long, shadow filled halls of the palace. He clutched the missive that informed him of his meeting with Captain Dreyfus. They knew each other long before Dreyfus became a captain, fighting alongside one another in many battles as equals, but it had been years since they had spoken. Officers rarely found time to mingle with common soldiers, and Dreyfus was no exception. The minute he received his promotion he forgot all about the men who risked their lives protecting his.

“The captain is busy at the moment, Heracles.” The guard stationed outside of the throne room said. He was the last man who stood between Heracles and the great hall where King Herod once held court.

There was no more king to rule, only a governor. After the death of Herod the Great, his land was split between three of his sons. Archelaus ruled Judea, but his reign did not last. He wanted all of his father’s land for himself, but proved quickly he wasn’t fit to rule even the portion he received. The Roman province of Judea was nearly torn apart by his inept leadership. Never before had the diverse inhabitants of Judea united as when they pleaded that Caesar Augustus end the suffering they endured under the tyrannical rule of the Archelaus. Caesar’s solution was simple, but effective. If the ruler could not keep his people in line, there would not be a Hebrew leader. Instead, a governor was installed to oversee tax collection and maintain peace. The governor in charge of Judea had many obligations in multiple lands, and only visited Jerusalem during religious holidays and times of crisis. While he was away, the captain of the guard assumed the leadership role in his stead.

"I've got some business to take care of and my relief doesn't come by for a few hours, do you mind watching the door for me while I take care of it?" The guard asked Heracles as he danced from one foot to the other and scrunched his face.

"Fine, but you better hurry back, Dreyfus won't be happy to see me standing watch." Heracles said. The guard scurried away as fast as he could manage with his legs pressed together.

Heracles overheard voices inside the hall, and curiosity took hold. He snuck inside the doorway and, concealed from view by a large pillar, eavesdropped on a conversation between the captain and his lieutenant, Kacius.

"There has been another attack. Two more of our men are dead." Dreyfus said.

*That makes five in all.*

"Were there any witnesses this time?" Kacius asked.

"No, they are not foolish enough to be seen, but you and I both know who is responsible. Those priests have resented us for decades. In the past, there were public displays of dissension. Now they have chosen to go against us in the shadows in an attempt to cast doubt, but it will not help them escape retribution."

It was common knowledge among the soldiers that Dreyfus held no love for the Hebrews or their leaders. He felt the priests did not deserve to keep their mock leadership roles or lavish lifestyles, and that the allowance of their own personal guard, however limited in number, was a threat to the peace and stability of the Roman Empire in Judea. Kacius never seemed to care much about the privileges they had as long as they stayed in line. He was a practical man above all else, and could see the dangers on the road the captain's thoughts were traveling.

"There can be no retribution without proof. More than half the population of this city serves the god Adonai. To act against their leaders would bring about large scale rebellion. Thousands of lives sacrificed to avenge a few? It seems imprudent." Kacius said.

The Hebrews had been trampled underfoot for years, pushed so low on the social ladder that most could not make an honest living. More were turning to thievery and violence every day. Once an animal is backed into a corner it has no choice but to fight its way free, and people are no different. To attack their figureheads might be a catalyst for full scale war.

"That's why I've requested your presence. The priests have long argued that the small contingent of personal guards we allow them is not sufficient for their protection. Not enough for an uprising is what they mean. I've heard rumors that they often recruit additional men in the streets. Anyone handy with a sword and able to hold his tongue for coin suffices, but why not a disgraced Roman soldier thirsty for vengeance, one that can provide them with useful information on their enemy." Dreyfus paused, and then added. "I wish for you to take on this task for on behalf of your fallen brothers and the entire Roman Empire. Find proof of their treachery and bring it to light so that we can stamp them out like the rats they are."

*A fool's errand, don't do it Kacius.*

There was a long pause before Kacius responded. Heracles stuck his head out from behind the pillar to see what was happening. Kacius was looking at the ground, his thumb and index finger rubbing his chin.

"It will be done."

“Excellent. I’d trust no one else with this task. Your cover story will be provided, but I can offer you little other assistance. Good luck, my friend.” Dreyfus said.

“I won’t need luck.”

“Very well, you are dismissed, for good.”

A few seconds later Kacius strode out the door, oblivious to Heracles’ presence behind the pillar.

“Damn guards always leaving their posts.” Heracles heard Kacius mutter as he walked down the hallway and out of sight.

Heracles didn’t care much about Kacius’ mission, only what it might do for him. He knew he wasn’t meant to know about it, and knowledge can be more valuable than gold in the right circumstance. His time to speak with the captain had arrived. He waited a few moments and then walked up to Dreyfus as if he just came in from outside.

“You summoned me, sir?” Heracles approached the throne where Herod the Great once sat. Dreyfus sat in it now, though he did not hold the same authority. “The chair suits you. It’s such a pity that the governor will return before long.”

“That fool has three provinces to govern, and spends as little time here as possible. Who would want to be in Jerusalem when they can spend their days in Caesarea?” The captain sneered as he rose to his feet. “I wouldn’t trust him with one province, but Caesar is emperor and he has a sharper mind than I when it comes to such matters.” Heracles laughed at the captain’s comment.

*False praise is such a poor way to hide resentment.*

“I hear you had quite the night. You made a scene in a local tavern again. Cut down three men and wounded two more, all while drinking more than a horse could endure. I’ve suffered your antics long enough. You are a disgrace to the city watch.” Dreyfus moved closer to Heracles with each word.

“As I recall they attacked me first. I couldn’t help but defend myself.” Heracles replied.

His head was still foggy from the excessive amount of ale he consumed, but he remembered the incident well. A group of men came up to him and demanded money. When he refused they grabbed him and took him outside. They thought they could beat it out of him, but they were no match. He had been called before his superiors for similar offenses with no repercussions in the past, and felt no reason to deny his actions.

“Because you owe a large gambling debt that you have failed to repay. Do not think for a moment I don’t know the truth. I have tolerated you as long as possible, given our history, but that tolerance is at an end.”

Like all men Heracles had his vices. Drinking and gambling led to many close calls in previous years. Gambling was barred by Roman law, though that didn’t prevent anyone from partaking in the activity.

“What do you mean?” Heracles said, his hand not yet clutching his sword but at the ready.

“You have no need to fear for your life. That’s not why I called you here. There is no value in your death, quite the opposite. Too many of our men owe you their lives. Your execution would be detrimental to already declining morale.” Dreyfus juggled a gold coin between his fingers as he spoke.

“Then why am I here?”

“I am relieving you of duty, effective immediately. I don’t need a drunken fool killing civilians and causing problems for me. You may keep your life for past deeds of valor, but the rest of your personal effects are to be turned over at once. Keep your nose clean, Heracles, or the next time I won’t be so kind.”

Heracles took his armor off and tossed it at Dreyfus’s feet. Helmet, breastplate, gauntlets, greaves and shield were cast aside one by one. He turned to leave, calling back over his shoulder.

“I’m keeping my sword.”

## Chapter 13

Joseph grew hot and pale after he lost consciousness. Joshua’s screaming alerted his mother.

“What’s wrong?” Miriam said as she rushed into the workshop. She then saw her husband lying on the floor. “Joseph!”

“He collapsed, I don’t know what happened.” Joshua said.

Miriam ran to get Nathaniel while Joshua stayed at his father’s side. Remembering his father’s words about keeping their secret, Joshua packed up his inheritance and hid the box inside an unfinished coffin in the corner of the workshop, a place no thief would ever think to look.

The rabbi was unable to do anything more than help make Joseph a little more comfortable with a blend of herbs to ease his pain. Miriam and Joshua did not leave his side until he died the following day. The events after that were a blur to Joshua. He covered his father’s body and stood guard, as was custom. Yohan, after some protest, relieved him so that he could prepare the coffin.

As carpenters, they always had a few caskets ready. It was impossible to tell when they might be needed, and tradition dictated that burial take place within one day of death. Joseph was buried in a casket of his own making, something Joshua knew he would have been pleased about. He loved all of his creations, even those meant for such grim tasks.

Shame and grief came in waves to the young carpenter, one replacing the other as fast as the ebb and flow of the tide. It seemed impossible to feel both at once. He had seen the bruise on his father’s side and the pain he was in, despite his attempts to hide it. Joshua believed that one of the blows Joseph suffered at the inn caused his passing. Tears cascaded down his cheeks as he thought of it. Joshua wished he was dead, not his father. Joseph’s words, spoken while preparing a child’s coffin the year before, were clear in his head.

“It is a fate worse than death when a father must bury his son. No man deserves that pain.”

*Would you still feel that way now, after what I did? I killed you, Father. I don’t deserve to live.*



## Chapter 14

Joseph's death complicated matters for Moloch. Staying in Nazareth for several weeks was not in the plan, and the High Priest would wonder what became of him. Paranoia, or caution as he preferred think of it, prevented Moloch from sending word to his brother. Trust was not something he gave to just anyone, and there was little to report other than the delay. The second part of his mission proved fruitless. They failed to run into a single Pharisee during their first few days in the city. Regular trips into the streets had yielded no results, and it became a more tedious and disheartening trek each time.

"What a disgrace. Once upon a time a priest was welcome everywhere he went in these lands. Now, I have to hide who I am from the world as if I have leprosy." Moloch said to his men as he got ready for the funeral.

"If you want to wear your golden robes it won't bother me. Let someone make an attempt on your life and see what happens. My blade hasn't had any fun for too long." Samuel said, running his hand along the edge of his sword.

"I'm afraid it will have to go without amusement a little longer. I'll not need your protection at the burial site. You two may have the day off to enjoy yourselves. How long has it been since you did that?"

"Do you really think that wise?" Daniel chimed in. "Besides, this is what we enjoy."

"Funerals are not known for their dangers." Moloch laughed and went on his way.

It was Nathaniel who informed him of Joseph's death. Moloch was worried that he was responsible at first, knowing it would make things much more difficult for him. Despite his threats, he never had any intention of harming Joseph. Nathaniel assured him that the death was natural. Their quarrel certainly didn't help his situation, but the result was inevitable. Moloch met with Nathaniel at the synagogue and they journeyed to the burial site together.

"You're not wearing your priest's robes?" Nathaniel said.

"I feel it is best not to make a scene. I only wish to go to pay my respects to the family. No one else needs to know who I am." Moloch explained.

The burial site was several kilometers outside the city. Leaving his men behind was essential. It would be disrespectful to carry weapons at a funeral, and his men would never relinquish them while they drew breath.

When they arrived at the site, Moloch was astounded by the people gathered in the area. The number alone was impressive, several hundred were present by his estimate, but it was the diversity of the mourners that astonished him. Not only were there members of the Hebrew community, but by their garb he could identify Samaritans, Romans, Greeks, and even some Egyptians. It was a highly irregular occurrence to see groups that by rule hate, or at the very least look down on one another to come together for a funeral.

The simple wooden casket sat on a hilltop next to a pile of freshly dug earth. It was closed to prevent anyone from seeing the deceased, a custom many Romans could not comprehend.

“Would you want someone to look at you if you couldn’t look back?” Moloch once responded when asked about the tradition by an ignorant heathen in the Holy City.

Joshua and Miriam stood close to the coffin, their garments torn on the left side just above their hearts. This signified closeness to the deceased. An older woman and a boy Joshua’s age also had torn robes, but theirs were on the right side.

There were several readings from the Torah by Nathaniel, accompanied by the customary psalms. Then the time came for the family to speak. Miriam did not speak, nor did she seem capable. There was not a single moment during funeral when her eyes were dry. It was Joshua who spoke. He stood on the hilltop next to his father’s casket and spoke what was in his heart to the crowd of mourners. He held Moloch’s attention from the first word to the last.

“Thank you all for coming. With times so difficult, I know what even a few hours away from work can create hardships for you and your families. My father loved this spot. He would spend hours here every Sabbath under this olive tree reading and writing. As his second home, it seemed fitting that he be laid to rest here.” Joshua scanned the audience. “As I look out at you all I am reminded of all the good my father did in his life. He worked hard every day, often for less than fair prices or sometimes even for free, and he never once complained. He taught me how to read, write, and count at an early age, even though most of the other children were already hard at work learning their trades. Knowledge and wisdom were more important to him than any amount of strength, influence, or money. ‘Knowledge is merely a collection of facts and ideas, but wisdom is the ability put it to good use.’ was one of his favorite sayings. My father was the wisest man I ever met. For his sake, I hope the Pharisees are right about life after death. If any man deserves to be with Adonai in paradise, it is my father.”

The blasphemy enraged Moloch, but he couldn’t show it. There was something more pressing on his mind. Throughout his entire speech, no eye had strayed from the boy. His words were nothing special, but the way he spoke them caught the attention of every man and woman in attendance. The performance in the Holy City was no fluke. Joshua wielded the power to captivate the people with ordinary words. His eloquence and poise were second to none, and he made it feel as if he were speaking to each person as an individual instead of a crowd. The realization only increased Moloch’s desire to acquire Joshua. The boy’s softness towards heretical views would need to be stamped out of him, but that would be easy enough in one so young and impressionable.

The casket was lowered into the ground. Each mourner dropped a handful of dirt on top to help bury Joseph. It was a final act of pure kindness, generosity, and love; one that could not be repaid.

Several hours passed before Moloch was able to speak to the widow and offer his condolences. An older woman held onto her, supporting her while she accepted the regrets of the masses. Such things were not often done at the burial site, but with such a large group it was necessary.

“My sincerest regret goes out to you my lady.” Moloch greeted Miriam with a bow.

“Thank you, sir. Do I know you?”

“I only met you and your husband briefly. I’m not surprised you don’t remember. I had a discussion with him regarding your son’s future, one that I hope to continue with you.”

“My niece can’t entertain such nonsense right now. I’ll ask you to show some respect and leave business for much later.” The older woman interjected.

“Not now, of course, but after the Shiva has ended I’ll call upon you. It is a matter of some urgency. I apologize for my inappropriate timing.” Moloch said.

If Miriam heard his words, it did not show. She nodded and moved onto the next man waiting to share in her grief. Remaining in Nazareth was an inconvenience, but Moloch could not interrupt the Shiva under any circumstances.

The Shiva is a seven day mourning period following the burial of a loved one. The immediate family is unable to work, partake in any joyous activity, or even prepare their own meals. During this time, the extended family and community are responsible for making sure that the needs of the grieving are met.

Moloch surveyed the area, searching for Joshua, but did not find the boy. He had hoped to speak with him far more than his mother. It mattered little. They could not leave until the mourning period ended. Seven more days in Nazareth gave him a chance to fulfill the second part of his mission, and perhaps satisfy the bloodlust of his men as well.

## Chapter 15

Elizabeth sent word to Zechariah that her visit would be extended for the duration of her niece’s grieving. She took on the role of caretaker for the family during Shiva. Though it was obvious she held no love for Joseph, she was not one to shirk her obligations. It proved both a blessing and a curse. The food she prepared was wonderful, but her attitude proved insufferable.

“What are you going to do Miriam?” Elizabeth prodded every few minutes. “Your husband could barely provide for your family as it was. Now you only have Joshua, and we all know he’s a poor substitute for Joseph. His woodwork is disgraceful.”

“Now is not the time to talk about that.” Miriam said.

Miriam and Elizabeth had an unorthodox relationship. To the casual observer it would appear that they were mother and daughter, not aunt and niece. Elizabeth was advanced in age, while Miriam had yet to reach her thirtieth year. Miriam’s parents died while she was still a young girl, so Elizabeth and Zechariah took her in and raised her as if she was their own. It wasn’t until Miriam married Joseph that Yohan was conceived. He and Joshua were born only a few months apart.

“Death is always hard, but there are tough decisions ahead.” Elizabeth pressed on.

“I said not now!” Miriam said as she slammed her fist onto the table. Elizabeth shook her head and left the room.

Though they were family, Miriam and Elizabeth rarely saw each other. The stark differences in their characters led to many ugly disagreements, and those differences had been passed onto their children. Where Joshua was humble and reserved, Yohan was boisterous and rude. As Elizabeth's late in life miracle child, Yohan could do no wrong and only the best of things were good enough for him.

Miriam grieved for her husband first and foremost, but in the back of her mind she wondered if she could survive a week with her aunt.

## Chapter 16

Joshua's guilt consumed him for two days after the burial. He was unable to eat or sleep, and couldn't bear to look at his mother as she wept. On the third day Nathaniel stopped by to check on the family, having no idea about the burden the young boy carried.

"Losing a parent is one of the most devastating things you will ever go through. There is little I can do to ease your pain. Just know that it will lessen with time." Nathaniel placed his hand on Joshua's shoulder.

"No, it won't. How can it ever lessen when it was my fault?"

"It's not your fault child."

Joshua explained everything: His disobedience, the fight, and his father's bruises. He trembled horribly as he recited the tale.

"Listen to me very carefully, Joshua." Nathaniel grabbed hold of Joshua's shaking body, forcing their eyes to lock. "Your father was sick. He came to me the day before that fight and I told him he didn't have much time. This was not your fault."

The knowledge washed over him, absorbed in waves.

*It's not my fault? It's not Moloch's fault?*

"You're sure?" Joshua asked.

"On my honor as a rabbi, your father could not be saved."

The new knowledge did not help ease Joshua's grief, but it did alleviate the majority of his guilt.

On the final day of Shiva, Joshua's thoughts began to roam back to the last conversation he had with his father. He still wasn't sure he believed it. Joseph had never lied to him before, but the idea that he was descended from King David was too fantastic to fathom. Despite his still heavy heart, Joshua's curiosity didn't allow him to rest until he learned more. He snuck out to the workshop to examine his inheritance when everyone else was occupied. Elizabeth and Yohan were at the market gathering supplies for dinner. Miriam refused to accompany them despite Elizabeth's urging.

"The fresh air will do you good. This small house is stifling." Elizabeth said.

Miriam agreed to get out, but not to go with them. Instead, she visited her friend Marta who lived a few houses away. Elizabeth didn't invite Joshua to go with them, but that didn't bother him. He had no desire to associate with his cousin any more than was necessary, and didn't want to waste his first opportunity to

explore the contents of the box. Joshua needed to know what Joseph had tried to tell him before he died.

*Who were the three men? How did they change my path? What am I supposed to do?*

The workshop seemed different to Joshua. He looked at the few unfinished projects around him, wondering how he would ever be able to finish them without his father. Joseph had been a master carpenter, but Joshua never considered himself to be more than mediocre. Perhaps with a few more years of guidance he would have improved. As he was there was little chance anyone would pay for his work.

Joshua cleared a spot for the chest on the workbench and retrieved it from its hiding place. He took the necklace his father had left him, placed it in the slot, and turned it. His hands shook as he lifted the lid. Even though he knew what was inside, its significance remained a mystery.

One by one he took out each item, examined them carefully, and placed them off to the side. The first and second seemed to be a twin pair, two small decanters of silver. He opened each of them. One contained an amber resin, and the other a red resin. Each had its own distinct earthy smell. Joshua had no idea what they were. The silver containers that held them were thick and heavy. He could not believe his father owned something so valuable.

The next item was a small chest. It had tremendous weight for such a tiny box. The ornately carved wood hid some intriguing and unknown treasure, but he could not open it. There didn't appear to be a lock, yet the lid would not budge. Not wanting to break it, he set it aside and decided to worry about it later.

The last items seemed much plainer than the rest. Joshua grabbed two books from the bottom of the chest. The newer one, his father's journal, was in good shape. It was no secret that Joseph kept a journal, but Joshua never thought it contained anything beyond mundane daily happenings. The other, the one his father said belonged to David, was not in good condition. The pages were discolored, the ink was faded, and there was a deep gash in the cover. Joshua couldn't resist. He had to know if it was actually written by David.

## **Chapter 17**

*A strange man visited our home today. He said his name was Samuel. He was dressed in rags and a terrible odor emanated from him. Any normal man would have turned him away on sight. But my father, having been very successful all of his life, always tries his best to show compassion to the less fortunate. The servants bathed Samuel, clothed him, fed him, and attempted to send him on his way. The man refused to leave until he met with my father and his sons. Not wanting to have the man harmed by forcible removal my father agreed. What the vagrant said shocked him.*

*"I am a prophet of the Lord, sent to anoint the future King of Israel." Samuel told my father.*

*It would sound like a ludicrous claim to most people, but my father is a superstitious and faithful man. The idea that one of his sons was destined for greatness did not surprise him in the least. When I first heard about this claim from my brother, I assumed Samuel was a con man, trying to pry open my father's coin purse. False prophets are not an uncommon sight, men who make a living preying on the kindness and faith of others. I didn't want to cause a commotion, so I held my tongue and waited.*

*Samuel met with each of my older brothers first.*

*"No."*

*"Not him."*

*"Definitely not him."*

*Samuel dismissed them all one by one. When none of my brothers were deemed worthy, my father reluctantly introduced him to me. I have always been the black sheep of the family, preferring to tend my flock and play my lyre instead of learning my father's business. To everyone's surprise, Samuel claimed that I would be the future king. I put no stock in the ramblings of a crazy old man, but I have felt very strange since he rubbed that oil on my forehead. I'm sure it's just a coincidence.*

• • • • •

*My heart is racing. I can hardly believe what happened even as I write it down.*

*A lioness came upon my sheep as they grazed in the field this afternoon. I had no weapon with me, having grown complacent and carefree after several months without incident. All I had with me was my lyre. The animals never stray as long as I play the music, but it is no substitute for a staff or sling in dangerous situations.*

*I watched over the flock, playing them a merry tune, when the lioness appeared on the hillside. It set its sight on my flock and rushed towards us. I wanted to run away, but something took hold of me. I ran in front of my sheep to meet the beast head on. It stopped only meters from where I stood, staring me down and waiting to pounce. I used my lyre as a shield when it lunged. The beast's powerful bite destroyed the instrument, but the lioness paid a high price. Blood poured from the animal's mouth. The strings had dug deep into its jaw. I seized the opportunity. I grabbed a rock and bashed in the creature's skull while it was distracted. My sheep had scattered while I was risking my life to protect them. It took me hours to round them all up without the aid of my lyre, but at least we are all safe. I think I'll take a sling with me from now on.*

• • • • •

*King Saul passed through Bethlehem today. The war with the Philistines draws ever closer to our home, and our brave king searches for able bodied young men to join his ranks. He plans to join the defense against the invading hordes himself after recruiting enough men. My brothers were among those recruited. I pray that they remain safe in the coming battles. How I long for the day when I can join them.*

• • • • •

*The King's love for music is no secret. When word of my skill with a lyre reached Saul, he requested a private performance to judge my ability. I was so nervous to be in the presence of our great leader, yet the music flowed with ease. It came from a*

*place deep inside. Though the situation was very different, it reminded me of my encounter with the lioness. As if something unknown took hold of me and used me to do something I could never have done on my own.*

*Saul was so impressed with my performance that he called me before him every day he remained in Bethlehem. On the day of his departure he called my father and me before him and requested that I accompany him as his personal musician. My father pleaded against it, not wanting another son going off to war so young, but I told him that I would do as my king commanded. Saul promised that I wouldn't be allowed near the battlefield, so my father consented. It's not how I planned to contribute to Israel's defense, but I will serve the king in any way he wishes.*

## **Chapter 18**

“Joshua?” a voice called out, disrupting Joshua's concentration.

His family had returned while he was engrossed in the incredible details of David's youth. Joshua packed everything back inside the chest and tucked it away as Yohan came into view.

“There you are. It's time for dinner.” Yohan looked at Joshua and the unfinished woodwork around him. “Were you working? You know it's forbidden so soon after a death in the family. I'd hate to have to tell your mother.” He finished with a smug grin.

A fire burned inside Joshua. Most times he was more calm and docile than anyone his age ought to be, but something about Yohan always irritated him. He was a catalyst for anger that only family could provide.

“I wasn't working. I just needed some time to think.” Joshua said as he pushed Yohan out of the entrance and walked towards the house.

“How dare you put your hands on me? I'm going to be a priest soon.”

“You're going to be a priest?” Joshua asked, a short laugh escaped after the last word.

“Mother says so. While you toil away in your workshop as a lowly carpenter like your father, I'll be sitting on high in Jerusalem. Such a waste of your mother's...” Yohan said. Yohan insulted Joshua, his father, and his mother in the same breath. Joshua's fists clenched when Yohan mentioned his father, and his right hand flew forward when Yohan brought up his mother. Joshua's fist met Yohan's face before he could say the last word, but there was no doubt that it was going to be “blood”. Elizabeth could never stop talking about blood. Good blood, bad blood, rich blood, poor blood, whatever any of that meant. Her son's blood now trailed behind him as he ran to his mother for help.

“A carpenter's hands hurt, don't they?” Joshua called after him, still red in the face but already wishing he could take back his actions.

## **Chapter 19**

Up a few hours after dawn, Moloch began his day as he always did. Just because he was away from his home did not mean he could stray from his routine. He and his men ventured beyond the city walls and trained for hours. They sparred in the open field bare handed, and then with a variety of weapons including sword, spear, and dagger. Moloch came out on top in all respects.

“Come now you can do better than that!” Moloch said as he danced between their swinging blades. Not wanting to truly harm each another, one was considered defeated when they received even the smallest cut on any part of their body. By the end of the morning Samuel and Daniel were covered with tiny cuts, but Moloch remained unscathed. Samuel and Daniel were well trained, but they were still no match for a priest.

It was essential for priests to stay in the best physical and mental shape. In days long past, priests were not just figureheads who governed over rituals and sacrifices. They were also generals in the army of the chosen. Not all Sons of Aaron felt it necessary to uphold the traditions of old, but those who wished to be a candidate for High Priest someday were among the fittest. The High Priest, a symbol of the strength of Adonai’s influence and power, had to be the strongest of the strong and the brightest of the bright. Moloch trained even harder than most, wanting to be faster, smarter, and stronger than his brother Annas.

*If I had fought harder as a baby I would be the one ruling right now, and this land would be back in our control.*

Upon returning from their morning workout, Moloch gazed out the window of his chamber. He scanned the streets of the city he had come to know so well over the previous days, but saw nothing beyond the huddled masses. Moloch could not approach Joshua again until the following day, so he set his mind to another task. Though his body ached from the intense physical exertion, he forced himself to go out and look once more for any sign of Pharisee activity in the city. Venturing into the streets again seemed futile, but he was no stranger to sacrifice. He donned a fresh robe over his golden garb and beckoned his two guards to accompany him. They followed him out of the inn without question.

It was midday. The sun loomed high in the sky casting its rays on the limestone streets of Nazareth. The beauty of the streets was marred by the presence of beggars and orphans, dressed in rags and visibly malnourished, scuttling through their lives in search of physical and mental sustenance. The scene might evoke sympathy in some men, but Moloch felt nothing other than contempt for the street urchins.

*If they weren’t so lazy and stupid they could help themselves. We can’t carry the weak on our backs and hope to remain strong.*

He entered the market followed closely by his protectors, on their guard for any sign of trouble. Merchants were advertising their goods, attempting to draw out what little coin resided in the pouches of the passersby.

“Even this town is overrun with Roman merchants.” Daniel said.

It was true. Since the occupation by the Romans began approximately seventy years before, there was a steady influx of merchants and craftsmen from other provinces. The result was lower profits shared by more vendors. It wasn’t at all



surprising that tithes had fallen in recent years. The coffers of the Temple could not be refilled from the pockets of the poor. Ten percent of nothing is still nothing.

There was a large crowd gathered near a canopy in the far corner of the market. A man in crimson robes shouted and waved his fists in righteous fury, receiving mixed reactions from the onlookers. Moloch's excitement and anger knew no bounds when he heard the words being spoken.

"How can they expect us to tithe ten percent on top of the Roman taxes when we can barely feed our children with what we earn? We starve while the High Priest and his chosen elite sit on high in the Holy City feasting and drinking to excess at our expense. They have sold out our people to the Roman scum that hold us down and defame Adonai with their heathen gods. They aim only to keep their power and live lavish lifestyles while we wither and die. How can they be trusted?"

Many people were cheering, some looked at one another and shook their heads, but none spoke out against the man. Nearly everyone still made the trip three times a year to offer sacrifices at the Holy Temple and most attempted to tithe the required amount. This far from Jerusalem there was little fear of retribution from the Sadducees, but the words he spoke against the Romans were enough to see him crucified. Moloch motioned for his men to follow him to a secluded area where they could listen, unnoticed by the crowd or the speaker, as the rant continued.

"The word of Adonai is evolving with his people. Why would he wish for his chosen to suffer? I tell you this, and you may take it as truth. There is a life after this one. We will be judged for our actions and our immortal soul will face reward or retribution. Honoring Adonai is essential, but it does not need to be done in Jerusalem. It can be done in your own homes and synagogues. These changes will only happen if we all work together!"

More people nodded in as he finished his speech. Eyes fixed on the heretic, Moloch moved forward to the center of the crowd.

*This serpent is feeding the people a poisoned apple of untruths and false hope. The poison must be extracted, and who better to do the job.*

"You would have us believe that Adonai makes mistakes?" The contempt and genuine curiosity in his voice could not have been faked if he wanted to. "If what you say is true, then you must hold that the commands and laws that He gave us to follow were wrong. The Almighty does not make mistakes that need correction, and to say that He does is blasphemy. Do you deny it?"

The crowd cleared a path as Moloch made his way closer to the Pharisee. Everyone remained silent and attentive. All eyes had been on the priest as he spoke, but they now turned to the Pharisee who stood motionless. He was clearly not used to being challenged during his speeches, but it didn't take long for him to regain his composure and refute the allegations.

"You say Adonai is infallible? Do you recall a man named Noah? Of course a man as learned as you must remember him. Adonai chose him to build an ark, collect animals, and survive the great flood with his family. When it was over, Adonai looked upon the devastation He had caused and wept because it had been a terrible thing to do. The Lord promised to never destroy the world by flood again. What is that if not an admission of error?"

"Your lack of understanding is laughable..." Moloch began.

“We are made in Adonai’s image. Just as we often err in new ventures, so does our Father. It is only through experience that we, and He, can come to know the proper course. That is why He has chosen to speak through me and other prophets of the day. He has seen where the current course has brought us, and He does not want it to continue. Adonai wants his chosen people to be free once more. We are little more than the slaves we were in Egypt two thousand years ago. The Promised Land has become our prison, but we will take it back! If you’re not with us you’re against us.” The Pharisee said, pointing at Moloch.

The crowd roared with applause. A lone voice cried out “Get him!”, and they began closing in on the Moloch. There was little time to react. He and his men might have been able to defend themselves against such a horde, but the carnage would draw too much attention. Moloch chose a different path. Tearing away his tunic, he revealed the golden garments hidden beneath. The mob stopped at once. Some ran, some looked to their crimson leader for counsel, but most just stared. The Pharisee was frozen in place.

“Still plan to have your mob execute me?” Moloch said, his confidence returning.

“I did not mean for them to get so out of hand. Had I known you to be a priest...” Words failed him.

*Had you known me to be a priest you would have tried to have me killed discreetly, as opposed to out in public.*

“Go on.” Moloch demanded.

“It is not often that we see Sadducees this far from Jerusalem. I stand behind my words. I will not submit to the tyranny of the High Priest or the Romans.” The man looked from side to side as he spoke, as if waiting for unseen assailants to drag him away in chains or take his head. It was not uncommon for men to be killed for less.

“You’re a brave man, I’ll give you that. Not many would say such a thing to my face.” Moloch took a step towards the man, who winced as the priest approached him. “You’ve nothing to fear from me. We are not all as vengeful and hate filled as you assume. I do sincerely hope you will turn from your sinful ways, back to the true path Adonai has set for all of us. Now, if you will excuse me, I have other matters that require my attention. Good day.”

The Pharisee stood still for a moment, clearly confused by Moloch’s quick forgiveness. He tried to exit the market as quickly as possible. The mob disbanded, turning back into individuals and remembering the myriad of things they had to do in their own lives.

“Samuel, I’d like you to follow that man.” Moloch turned to his guard. “Find out where he resides, and return to me as soon as possible. Do not be seen. Daniel, you will remain by my side in case there is any more trouble.”

“As you command.” Samuel disappeared in the crowd. A few moments later Moloch was startled by a booming voice from behind.

“The arrogance of that fool is unbelievable. These commoners would sooner deny their lineage and lay with sinners than do an honest day’s work and pay their dues. Never listen to such lies Yohan, and never betray your heritage like your cousin.” A woman said to a young boy as she approached Moloch. “That was

a barbaric display. I'm so relieved to see you are alright. To meet a priest in Nazareth is as much a shock as it is a treat." She said.

"It is important for us to visit all places where servants of Adonai dwell. It's a delight to hear that at least one person can see through the treachery of the Pharisees. Might I ask you name, dear lady?" Moloch asked.

"I am Elizabeth, a true servant of Adonai, unlike many of these imposters. And with good reason, my family is old and distinguished. You and I are kin, you know. I am a Daughter of Aaron just as you are a Son." Elizabeth said, her face beaming.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Elizabeth." Her face was familiar. "Have we met before?"

"I doubt it." She said. "I live in Hebron. I was only visiting for a family celebration, and remained for a family tragedy. My niece's husband passed recently."

"Joseph? Yes, that's it. You were with the widow when I offered my condolences." Moloch stared. The wheels in his head were turning at lightning speed, making all the necessary connections.

*If this woman is truly a Daughter of Aaron, it is possible that the Joshua could be a Son of Aaron. So many descendants do not follow the path to priesthood, but if I have any say in the matter Joshua will.*

"What an honor this is for me as well. Does your son plan to join the ranks of the priests in the Holy City?" Moloch asked.

"His father insists that he follow in the family mercantile business. A practical idea, but not one I fancy. I wish he would take up a nobler calling like yours." Elizabeth said and her smile widened.

"We need young and exuberant members to help win back the people's loyalty and trust, but merchants serve an important purpose as well. Tell me, what path will Joshua be following?"

The smile faded from her face and her eyes narrowed as she responded.

"He has apprenticed with his father as a carpenter for many years. I presume he will continue on that path, though he isn't very skilled in the art of woodworking...or anything for that matter."

"I thought he showed off his speaking skills at the funeral quite well. It is such an awful thing for a young boy to lose a parent, but his words were a beautiful testament to his father's life." Moloch said.

"The boy likes to make speeches, but he is sorely lacking in manners. Perhaps I can teach him some during my stay." Elizabeth said.

"I assume you will be staying until the end of the Shiva to help your family?" Moloch said.

"Indeed. My niece is in dire need of my assistance in all respects, not just because of the recent tragedy. I will provide her aid as any honorable Judean would expect."

"I'm sure she will greatly appreciate any help you can give. I wonder if I might have the opportunity for a word with the boys before I leave the city. Becoming a priest, or not, is a very serious and important decision and I think they might benefit from the words of someone who has been where they are now."

Elizabeth's eyes lit up. One might think she just found a bag of gold in the street. She grabbed Yohan by the collar and kissed his forehead.

“That would be wonderful. Yohan would be honored to receive your sage wisdom, though Joshua will undoubtedly take it for granted. Say thank you, son.” Elizabeth said, elbowing Yohan hard in the ribs.

“Thank you, sir.” He replied, rubbing his side.

“You’re very welcome child. You may reach me at the White Horse Inn.” Moloch said, pointing in the inn’s general direction. “I look forward to our next meeting.”

“Let’s go Yohan.” Elizabeth grabbed Yohan and scurried into the crowd.

“Could this day get any more exciting?” Moloch said when they were out of sight. “Come Daniel, I feel the need to train again.”

## Chapter 20

The food smelled delicious. Elizabeth had brought back fresh fish from the market, which she promptly cleaned and cooked for lunch. Miriam, not for lack of trying, was never able to cook as well as her aunt. It was the first time since Joseph’s death that she had any appetite, and she couldn’t help but rip off a small piece of flaky fish to try. As she did, a wooden spoon came down on her hand with a crack.

“Honestly, where are your manners?” Elizabeth said. “Wait for the children. I sent Yohan to find Joshua. They’ll be back any minute.”

The hit didn’t leave a mark, but a dull ache persisted for several minutes. Childhood memories of admonishments and critiques came flooding into Miriam’s mind. Her aunt always cared about appearances and propriety, things which meant even less to Miriam as an adult than they did in her youth. As soon as she turned twelve she tried to find a man that would marry her and take her away from her aunt’s tyranny. Elizabeth tried equally hard to dismiss any man she deemed unworthy for her niece and family.

Miriam met Joseph during a pilgrimage to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Already in his twenties and never married, he was somewhat reluctant to believe such a young maiden was interested in him. The idea of subverting her aunt’s will didn’t sit well with him, but Miriam persisted. Elizabeth was furious when she found them together and tried to stop them, but Miriam ran away with Joseph to his hometown of Bethlehem. It was there that they were married and, shortly thereafter, Joshua was conceived.

In an attempt to repair their broken relationship, Miriam traveled to see Elizabeth only to find that she was also with child. An uncommon occurrence for a woman so advanced in age, but a development which helped to mend their broken ties.

With her own child to coddle and smother, Elizabeth “forgave” Miriam and let her live her life in peace.

“You won’t believe who I met in the marketplace, Miriam.” Elizabeth said, as she placed fresh baked bread on the table.

“Who was that aunt?” Miriam indulged.

“A priest, Moloch is his name, visiting from the Holy City. You might remember him from the funeral. He offered his condolences. I can’t believe the way I spoke to him. If only I had known who he was at the time.”

“I have some memory of him. He asked to speak to me, but he didn’t mention he was a priest.”

“Yes, I’m sure he didn’t wish to call attention to himself at your husband’s funeral. I told him all about Yohan and our family. He seemed very interested in Joshua too, though I can’t see why. Something about his eulogy, I think.”

Miriam and Elizabeth were both descendants of the original High Priest, Aaron, who served under King David. Only men descended from his bloodline were allowed to become priests. Not all descendants became priests, but it was encouraged. In the thousand years since Aaron’s death, his family expanded so much that it became difficult to discern the true descendants from those falsely claiming his ancestry.

Miriam’s eyes narrowed and her fake smile faded as her aunt brought up their family. She hated the way Elizabeth spoke about blood and lineage. If being descended from Aaron meant she needed to treat others poorly and spoil her child, Miriam wanted no part of it. She knew her remarks would start an argument, but refused to hold her tongue.

“Must you always go around boasting about our family? There are thousands of Sons and Daughters of Aaron roaming the land, yet somehow you think we’re special.”

“Perhaps that little carpenter of yours wouldn’t qualify as special, but my Yohan will be High Priest one day, you’ll see.”

“Ha. If we want a High Priest who seeks his mother’s approval in everything he does, Yohan would be perfect.” Miriam said.

“Obedience and respect are admirable qualities.” Elizabeth said, waving her spoon above her head like a mace. “Why do you always try to hurt me so? I took you in, raised you and loved you as my own.”

“I’m sorry, aunt.”

That was how their disagreements always went. Elizabeth made an unkind remark, Miriam rebuked it or retaliated, and Elizabeth played the role of the unjustly accosted victim. Even though Miriam just lost her husband, their irregular dynamic hadn’t changed.

“I invited Moloch for supper so he can meet the boys before he moves on. I trust you approve?”

“You shouldn’t have done that without consulting me. I bear no ill will towards the Sadducees. I remain a faithful servant of Adonai, but the priests grow more unpopular by the day. I would have preferred to meet with him somewhere other than my home.” Miriam said.

“Don’t speak such nonsense. The Pharisees and their heretical ideals are a passing trend. I am shocked to hear this coming from a Daughter of Aaron. Have you no pride?” Elizabeth said, her voice rising with each sentence.

The answer was no, but Miriam was interrupted before she could answer. Yohan came running into the house and into his mother’s arms, tears rolling down his cheeks and fresh blood smeared on his upper lip. Joshua appeared in the doorway as Yohan entered his mother’s embrace.

“Who did this to you?” Elizabeth said. Her eyes grew wide.

“Joshua...” Yohan said through his tears.

Letting go of her son, Elizabeth brandished her spoon and flew at Joshua in a fury.

“You foul little ruffian.” She said. Joshua made no attempt to avoid her attack, but he had no need to. Miriam stepped between them and took the blow on her upper arm, falling to the ground.

“Get out of the way. Someone needs to discipline that boy of yours before he turns into a criminal. Assaulting innocent people for no reason? What’s next?” Elizabeth said.

“If my son needs discipline, I’ll be the one to administer it.” Miriam said as she rose from the ground. “As for innocence, I doubt your son has any to speak of. Joshua, why did you hit him?”

“He insulted you and father.” Joshua said.

“I want you to leave, aunt. You and your son came to my house during our time of mourning and insulted me, my son, and my husband’s memory. I’ll not have your poisonous presence infect my family. Get out!” Miriam said, a fire burning in her eyes.

“You see, Yohan, this is what happens when you try to help spoiled, ungrateful family members. Come.” Elizabeth led Yohan out of the house and, Miriam believed, out of their lives.

The tears were already flowing when Miriam grabbed Joshua and held him close. She cried not for her actions or for her aunt’s departure, but because she had no idea what else to do. There had always been someone to help guide her decisions in the past, first her aunt, then Joseph. Now she alone was responsible for the choices that would affect her family’s future.

“Don’t cry mother. We’ll be alright. Did she hurt you?” Joshua hugged his mother tight.

“I’m fine. We’re fine. Things will be difficult, but we will persevere. I’m sorry I haven’t been there for you these past few days. That will change from now on. We have to work together.” She said, wiping her eyes and taking her son’s face in her hands. She squeezed him. Upon release something in her changed. Miriam wiped away her tears and took hold of Joshua’s shoulders. She knew she had to be strong for her son.

“Now about this hitting business. I’ll not have it from my son. I never want to hear of it again.”

“But you didn’t hear what he said about father!” Joshua pleaded.

“I don’t care what he said. Self-control is imperative in this world. Hitting someone, especially family, is unacceptable. You hit him, he hits you, and soon I’m burying my son next to my husband. You go right to bed without supper.”

“But I’m a man now. Men don’t get sent to bed without supper.”

Miriam laughed at Joshua’s childish remark.

“Being a man does not give you the right to do anything you want. It means you will be held responsible for the things you do, so make sure you do good things.” Miriam said, bursting into fresh tears as she finished.

“I’m sorry, mother. I won’t do it again.”

“You’re a good boy. I don’t mean to be so cross with you, but you’re the man of the house now. I’ll need your help taking care of the three of us.”

“Three?” Joshua said, looking at his mother with curiosity.

“Yes.” Miriam said, placing her hands on her stomach. “Three.”

## Chapter 21

“That’s what I said, twenty gold quenarii.” A drunken man sat at the tavern counter telling anyone that would listen. “That man wants her something fierce.”

Thea sipped her wine and listened from a lonesome corner of the room.

“You’ve had too much ale. No man would offer a bounty of twenty gold quenarii.” A man next to the drunkard said.

“It’s true! See for yourself if you don’t believe me. His name’s Barba. He has a stand in the marketplace selling trinkets.”

The lands of Judea and Galilee faced hard times. Work was scarce, and more men turned to crime every day. Bounties were placed on the heads of the worst offenders, the perfect situation for Thea and other bounty hunters.

Most people believe they are good, and make excuses for their bad behavior. If their well-being is put in jeopardy or they feel they are being cheated in some way they believe that morality can be suspended.

Thea did not care about the reasons for their crimes, only that she could profit from their folly.

“Thanks for the tip.” Thea tossed the drunk a single copper as she left the tavern.

“Thanks lady, but you’re not really interested going to try to collect that bounty are you? That’s work for a man.”

Thea swept the drunk’s chair out from under him, took back her copper, and walked out of the tavern.

“What the hell?” The drunk said.

“You fool.” Thea heard the bartender say to the drunk as she left. “That’s Theophilus, the most ruthless female bounty hunter in the world.”

*At least someone gives me the respect I deserve. Time to pay this Barba a visit.*

Few professions allowed women entry. Thea refused to marry and subject herself to the will of a man, so in her mind there were only two ways for a woman to get by in the world. She could sell her body, which she considered just another way of bowing to a man’s will. Thea never entertained that idea for a moment. The other option was selling her sword. The choice was simple. Most female bounty hunters were regarded with disdain or mocked, but Thea built a reputation that even the most misogynistic men respected. She always caught or killed her mark and cut out the tongue of any man who dared utter an unkind word in her direction. Unlike many other types of work a bounty price was fixed, so there was no gender discrimination. A man once tried to cheat Thea on her bounty and lost his ability to procreate because of it.

Time spent in smaller cities was often a waste, but every now and then a worthwhile hunt arose. On her way back to Rome, a country far more accepting of female warriors than Judea or Galilee, she happened to stop in the town of Sepphoris. It wasn't small by any means, and known for its immoral populous, yet there were few bounties high enough to be worth her effort. The lead might be a waste of time, but it was better than nothing. Another hour wouldn't hurt, so she decided to call upon the man.

She located the merchant with ease. His robes were black, an uncommon color to wear in such a harsh climate. He also wore a head wrap that was pulled low, covering his right eye.

"What can I get for the lady?" The merchant began his sale speech without hesitation as she approached.

"I have no need for low quality trinkets. Are you Barba, the one offering the bounty?"

"Who's asking?" He said.

"My name is Theophilus, but most call me Thea. I'm here to solve your problem. Tell me about the mark."

"A female bounty hunter? Don't waste my time little lady." He said, turning away to help another customer.

A dagger flew straight at Barba. It didn't strike him, but it came close enough to pierce the wrap on his head. Thea recoiled at the sight of the freshly mutilated right eye the wrap had been hiding. Barba stared at the knife sticking in the stone wall behind him for a moment, and then turned back to Thea.

"You bitch. I'll have your head for that." Barba unsheathed his sword.

"I'd not do that if I were you. If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead. I never miss my target." Thea already had another dagger in hand. "The next one is aimed at your other eye, so I suggest you put that away unless you are eager to go through life as a blind man."

Barba put down his weapon, his rage faded and a smile appeared. Thea preferred the hostile scowl to his repelling grin.

"Well, you can throw a knife, I'll give you that. Your mark is a young girl, probably twelve or thirteen. She's got long brown hair, wears old leather, and carries a bow and arrow. She's handy with that bow, even killed my apprentice."

"She will never know I'm there until it's too late. Is it true that you are offering twenty gold pieces for the girl's demise?"

It was the high price that had attracted Thea. She did not relish the thought of capturing another female. It would not be as satisfying as a man, but with twenty gold *quenarii* she would be set for years. Bounties were not scarce, but purses were getting smaller and she was not getting any younger.

"No. The price is five gold *quenarii* dead, but twenty if you bring her to me alive. She stole my goods, killed my apprentice, and most importantly took my eye. I want to make her suffer before cutting her throat."

Goosebumps broke out on her skin. Repulsive clients were a staple of the business, and Barba seemed no different than most. The girl had done a great deal of damage to him, and his thirst for revenge was understandable. Vengeance fueled hunts always paid the best. Still, something inside told Thea not to take the job, but greed wins over caution every time.



“How do I know you have the gold? I find it hard to believe that someone dealing in such cheap wares has five quenarii, let alone twenty.”

Barba reached into his robe and pulled out a bulging coin purse. He opened it and tilted it towards Thea. The contents glittered as the sunlight hit them. There was far more than twenty gold quenarii inside. Thea wondered how he came to possess such a large amount of gold, but it wasn't her concern.

“She'll be yours within a fortnight.”

Barba's unwashed face erupted with laughter. Thea turned to avoid the sight of it. It was then that something caught her eye. A young girl, no older than twelve, was pocketing one of Barba's stones. Thea stared too long. Barba turned and, upon realizing he was being robbed, grabbed the girl with surprising speed.

“Thieves abound. I'll not be made a fool again. You'll pay for your crime here and now you worthless little street urchin.” He pulled his sword free and held her hand down against the wood. She struggled hard, screaming for mercy. Thea moved faster than even she thought possible, applying pressure to a spot on the back of Barba's neck and causing him to collapse on the hard ground. The girl broke free of his grasp and ran away into the crowd, dropping what she had stolen.

Thea backed away from Barba as he got to his feet. He did not attack Thea, having enough sense in his disoriented state not to try something so foolish. Instead, he ran in the direction the girl had gone, returning less than a minute later. There was no hope of finding her. Thea recovered the item the girl dropped and placed it back on his cart. Barba looked at her, hand still clutching his sword, unsure of what to do.

“You have lost nothing, let it go. And before you try to attack me I remind you what I am capable of doing. I will take on your hunt, so you better have that gold ready for me when I return.”

“You aren't the only one on the hunt missy. Hope you don't get your pretty head chopped off by the competition.” Barba howled with laughter and returned to his work as if nothing had happened.

Ignoring the comment, Thea walked back the way she had come. She was shocked to see that the little girl had not fled. Thea watched the girl duck into an alley as she approached. It was a dead end. The girl cowered in the corner as Thea came nearer.

“Fear not child. I mean you no harm. You should be getting as far from here as possible. If Barba sees you again, he'll likely take your head along with your hands.”

“This is my home. Where am I to go?”

“An orphan, are you?” The tattered rags she wore were proof enough, but the nod of her head gave certainty. “I was an orphan once upon a time. Let me offer you some advice. You may not have a choice about how your life began or how it will end, but you can choose what to do in between. Just because people tell you that you are worthless does not make it so.”

Thea retreated. As she reached the mouth of the alley she felt a tug on her robes. In an instant her knife was drawn and at the girl's throat. She did not scream or try to run as she did when Barba had her pinned.

“Please, take me with you. Teach me to be like you.” The girl pleaded.

“Don’t speak such nonsense. There is no one like me.” Thea said, releasing her grip.

Thea did not immediately disregard the idea. The girl was about the same age Thea was when she began training. She felt pity for the girl, but the thought of being responsible for another life frightened her more than a hundred armed men.

“Please. I don’t want to be alone anymore.” Tears filled the little girl’s eyes.

“Come along then, but I can’t guarantee your safety. And stop that crying. What’s your name, girl?”

The tears dried up almost instantly and a devilish grin took their place. “I don’t know my real name. I’ve had many names over the years, but the old lady around the corner who feeds me sometimes likes to call me Trickster.”

Thea smiled at her new ward.

*Looks like I found myself a little performer. Perhaps she could be of some use.*

## Chapter 22

It was late when Samuel returned bearing news of the Pharisee. Moloch paced in his quarters awaiting his guard’s arrival.

“Sir...”

“What kept you, Samuel?” Moloch’s voice rang.

“Our friend was a busy man. I tailed him across half the city listening to him spew the same waste from his mouth. He returned to his residence only now.”

“Did he see you?”

“I am not easily detected.” Samuel smiled.

“Good. Let’s pay him a visit. Get Daniel and change into these.” Moloch grabbed two sets of black robes and handed them to Samuel. “We don’t want to be seen by anyone tonight.”

The feel of the foreign clothing was unnerving. His golden robes could not be worn on this venture, not even beneath the plain robes as he had done earlier in the day. It had been years since Moloch had been without his priestly robes of satin and silk. The rough woolen material chafed his skin and left him feeling hollow, naked in a way. Samuel and Daniel were ready and waiting by the time he finished changing. They also looked strange to him out of their traditional attire, but it was a necessity.

“Can you lead us there?” Moloch asked Samuel. Nazareth was a large city, not nearly as large as Jerusalem but large enough for an outsider to lose his way. The moon was full, but there was a dense cloud covering preventing any light from reaching the surface and making the streets difficult to navigate.

“Once I’ve been somewhere I can always find my way back. It’s this way.” Samuel led them through the black, twisting causeways of Nazareth. He never paused or showed even the slightest doubt that they were going in the right direction. They followed without question. Any concern of being spotted melted away as they traveled. The streets were deserted except for a few homeless beggars asleep or passed out in the cities various holes and hideaways. Stopping abruptly,

Samuel pointed at a small house a hundred meters up the road. Light from a fire burned inside.

*He's still awake.*

The three men slowly approached their destination. Moloch had not told his men what they would be doing, but they were not naive. He knew their loyalty would not falter under any circumstances, but some things are best left unsaid.

"Daniel, go around back. Samuel, stay with me. We will..." Moloch stopped mid-sentence when the Pharisee appeared in the doorway.

The Pharisee hurried from his home. Moloch and his men stood no more than twenty meters from the door. The man no longer wore his crimson robes, but his illuminated face and long beard of solid black were unmistakable. He walked right past Moloch and his men without noticing their presence. Their clothing allowed them to blend in with the darkness, rendering them almost invisible when they stood still. When the Pharisee was a safe distance away, Moloch tapped his men on their shoulders and pointed to follow.

There was nothing preventing them from confronting the man in the street, but curiosity stopped Moloch. Where was he going? Who was he meeting? Why so late? More was to be gained by waiting than by acting in haste.

It wasn't easy following the Pharisee, the sound of his wooden sandals coming down heavily on the ground was the only assurance they were still on his tail. Moloch and his men had not worn anything on their feet to prevent such detection. They almost lost him in a series of quick turns, but the moon came out from behind the clouds at the right moment to show them the way.

*What more proof is there that we are doing the will of Adonai?*

Coming to a halt at a large hall, the Pharisee was greeted by two armed sentries. He was allowed to pass without pause. Moloch pulled his men into an alley and spoke in a whisper.

"I want you to get as close as possible to those men, but do not be seen. I'm going to find a way in around back. When the time comes, take care of the guards."

"How will we know when the time comes?" Daniel asked.

"They'll turn their backs."

Moloch crept to the back of the building. There was only one sentry guarding the rear entrance, and he was not diligent in his duties. His weapon was sheathed and he stared up at the moon as it peeked out from behind the cloud cover once again. Moloch wondered what thoughts occupied the man's mind as he looked up at the glowing orb, hoping they were worthy of such an important moment in his life.

Without a sound, Moloch positioned himself behind the man. He withdrew a dagger from his robe, covered the sentry's mouth, and buried the blade in the unarmored flesh below his armpit. His muffled cries quickly turned to a whimper, then nothing, as he slumped to the ground.

*What a poor excuse for a sentry. This is almost too easy.*

Moloch entered the kitchen, looking for any sign of life. He moved from room to room until he heard voices. A dozen men were gathered in a large room at the center of the building. There were two more armed guards in the hall, one at each

end. Braziers along the wall emitted a dim glow, but the room was still dark with plenty of shadows to hide in. All but one of the men sat at the table drinking wine. The Pharisee that led Moloch there paced at the table's head.

"Sit down. What has you so tense Jeremiah?" One of the men said.

"It's nothing. I had an odd feeling on the way here, as if I was being followed." Jeremiah said.

"Not to worry. We are well protected. Shall we get down to business?" Another chimed.

"Yes." Jeremiah pulled a piece of parchment from his robes and placed it on the table. "I have received word from the Holy City. Abraham is pleased with our efforts, but we must double them if we are to convert enough people in time for the next stage of the plan."

Each of the men took turns reading the parchment.

"Very well, we will begin at once." The oldest of the men proclaimed. They rose to their feet as if to leave.

Moloch had remained in the shadows long enough. As quick as a serpent in the grass, he slinked from his hiding spot and struck. He extinguished the braziers one by one, his movements so fast it seemed like a blur to all looking on. The guards' death cries filled the silent hall. The men at the table began the panic, calling out for their guards like a child for his mother. The only source of light remaining was a small candle in the middle of the table. They had nowhere to go.

"Help! Guards!" Jeremiah cried out loudest of all.

Footsteps were heard, though no figures were seen. Bone chilling yelps of agony echoed around them, their one hope for salvation destroyed in an instant by Moloch's men. Jeremiah was still standing up when Moloch approached him from behind.

"Good day gentlemen." Moloch said, restraining Jeremiah with one arm and holding the dagger to his throat with the other. "Pity it had to be this way. You really are a fine speaker. I could have put your talents to good use if not for your insolence."

"Why are you doing this?" Jeremiah asked. The others seemed frozen in place, unable or unwilling to speak or move.

"You think you can challenge Adonai and his true believers and go on living? I have to thank you, though." Moloch picked the letter up with his dagger hand and placed it in his robe. Jeremiah pulled on Moloch's arm, but could not break the priest's iron grip. "Without your help, I never would have known who has been stirring up all this trouble of late."

"It's not his real name. You'll never find the prophet, and you certainly won't harm him. Adonai speaks through him and protects him."

"Loyal to the end, I see. An admirable quality. For that, you have earned a quick death."

Moloch sliced his neck from ear to ear. Hot blood flowed down Jeremiah's robe and his body went limp.

*The first lamb brought to slaughter, but not the last.*

"Abraham will be found and brought to bear for his crimes. I wouldn't want any you to die thinking otherwise." Moloch then turned to the others at the table, their

eyes were fixed on him and their mouths open wide. “All of you shall share the same fate for your heresy. Daniel, Samuel, finish this.”

Pleas for mercy fell on deaf ears. One by one they dropped. When it was finished, the three men waded calmly through the sea of carnage they created and walked victorious into the night’s cold, dark embrace.

## Chapter 23

“That is wonderful news Miriam. We can pray that it is another son to help you.” The Shiva was over, but Marta still visited Miriam to see if she needed anything. Miriam was not yet showing, but she felt the need to tell her closest friend about her condition.

“Joseph and Joshua together could hardly support us with their woodwork. Now that he is gone I don’t know how we will manage.”

“Your cousin has plenty of silver and gold. Her husband is a successful merchant. She will not let you live in poverty.”

“You don’t know Elizabeth. Besides, she has gone home already. I have no intention of asking her for assistance after her harsh words, but even if I wanted to it’s too late.” Marta bit her lip, telling Miriam something was amiss. “What is it?”

“Elizabeth has not left town. Ezra saw her entering an inn with her son this morning. He spoke with her. She expressed deep remorse for the way she treated you, and wishes to speak to you. After your parting words she doesn’t want to come to your home and asked that we deliver this message to you.” Marta reached into her robe, pulled out a letter, and handed it to Miriam.

“I don’t care much for what Elizabeth has to say. It probably has to do with that priest. I’ve never known her to show remorse before.”

“No harm in reading. I can’t see why you wouldn’t want a priest in your home. It’s such an honor.”

Marta had made her feelings about having a priest visit well known to Miriam. She even offered to prepare the meal if she would be allowed to stay and meet him. Miriam mentioned Moloch to her in passing while complaining about Elizabeth, but she hadn’t given the holy man’s potential visit another thought since.

“I don’t know. It wasn’t my idea to invite him, but I can’t turn the man away if he comes knocking. Joseph tried to keep us as far removed from the conflict between the Pharisees and Sadducees as possible. The last thing I want is for my family to get dragged into such a dangerous mess. My sister must be fuming at the thought of missing a meeting with him.” Miriam could not resist the temptation. She unsealed the letter and read its contents.

*Dearest Miriam,*

*I am filled with sadness when I think of what I put you through the other day. It was not my place to tell you how to live your life or discipline your child, especially during your time of mourning. I only hope you can find it in your*

*heart to forgive a dreadful old woman. What else do we have in this life besides family? I will not contact you again if that is your wish, but if you prefer to put this awful mess behind us please come see me. Ezra will be able to tell you where I am.*

*All my love,  
Elizabeth*

It was a good thing she was sitting down, or she would have fallen flat on her back while reading.

“What does it say?” Marta asked when Miriam looked up from the letter.

“Where is my aunt staying?”

“Ezra said they are at the White Horse Inn in the central bazaar.”

“I must go. Please stay here, Marta. Don’t tell Joshua where I’ve gone. Poor thing has been in his room all day reading. If he comes out make sure he eats something.”

“Of course I will. Do be careful.” Marta said as Miriam rushed out of the house.

Miriam dashed through the streets. The pitches of vendors and beggars alike went unnoticed as she sped toward her aunt. The letter was still clutched in her fist when she arrived at the inn.

“What do you need? A room for an hour, or the whole night?” The innkeeper said as she entered.

Miriam ignored the comment, as vile as the insinuation was. Women did not dare speak their minds to men, even the lowest of the low. “I’m looking for my aunt. She’s an older woman staying with a young boy. What room are they in?”

“Might be someone here who fits that description and might not be. Depends what I get out of the deal.”

“I have no money, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

The innkeeper got to his feet and looked Miriam up and down as if she was a horse up for auction.

“Money wasn’t what I had in mind.” He ran his hand down the sleeve of her robe, causing her to jump back.

Miriam felt helpless. Elizabeth would have torn the man apart with her bare hands, or at least her words, had he tried anything like that with her. Miriam was about to turn and run, but as she stepped back she bumped into someone.

“Fear not, dear lady. This vermin will do you no harm.”

She looked up to find a tall man with bright orange hair and golden robes staring back at her. It was the priest from the funeral, the man who she had no desire to meet again until that moment. His grin was welcoming, and she moved behind him to shield herself from the innkeeper.

“Who you calling vermin old man? You think I care about them robes? I’ll stain ‘em red without a second thought.”

“I’m not about to fight in front of a woman. Daniel.” He turned and called outside. A man in armor entered brandishing his sword. “Now I believe the lady needed something. What was that?”

“I’m looking for my aunt. She’s staying here.”

Moloch stared down the innkeeper, whose color drained at the sight of the warrior. He could do nothing but stare at the sword in Daniel’s hand.

“S-second room one on the right.” He stammered.

“Your help is most appreciated. Daniel, would you be so kind as to take this man outside and show him what happens to those who mistreat women in my presence.”

“But I told you what you wanted!” The innkeeper pleaded as Daniel approached him.

“For that, you get to keep your life. Whatever else happens, consider it your penance.”

Daniel grabbed the innkeeper by the back of his neck and dragged him outside as he kicked and pleaded.

“Thank you, sir. I owe you my life, or at the very least my dignity.” Miriam bowed before the priest.

“No need for thanks. These are dangerous times we live in. A woman should not be out alone in the streets. Did you say you are here to meet your aunt?”

“Yes, my aunt, Elizabeth. She has been staying here for a few days.” Miriam clenched her fist to make sure the letter was still in her hand.

“Elizabeth? Of course, I apologize for not recognizing you my lady. I thought Elizabeth was staying with you. We were supposed to dine together once your grieving period ended as I recall. How is your son?”

“He is coping as well as can be expected.” The lie rolled off her tongue without hesitation. Joshua was despondent, distant, and moody since Joseph’s passing, but she wasn’t about to tell that to a stranger. “Would you mind joining me when I speak to her? Our last words were not amiable, and I think the presence of a holy man will keep things more civil.”

“It would be my pleasure. I was planning to call upon both of you today, and now seems as good a time as any.” The priest replied, and they walked to Elizabeth’s chamber together.

Miriam knocked on the door.

“Who is it? What do you want?” A voice called out. Miriam would know the disdain of Elizabeth’s voice anywhere.

“It’s Miriam. I got your letter.”

The door swung open. The hardened expression Miriam had come to know so well was not present on her aunt’s face. It was replaced by a smile. Her elation knew no bounds when she noticed Moloch was there as well.

“What a surprise. Come in. Come in.” Elizabeth ushered them in, pulled up chairs, and poured them each a glass of wine. “I wasn’t expecting this, but I’m so happy you are both here.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Moloch said, raising his glass and then downing the contents in one swallow.

“I haven’t come to celebrate, only to hear you out. Speak before I go.” Miriam was still rattled from her encounter with the innkeeper and wanted this meeting over as quickly as possible. She wanted nothing more than to go to the public bath and wash, but she was already there and needed to hear Elizabeth’s apology first hand.

“Miriam. Let us put this nonsense behind us. A great opportunity has been offered to our children, and it is our duty to do the best we can by them. Hear Moloch out. You will not be displeased by what you hear.”

*Is this some sort of conspiracy? Have they planned this together?*

Miriam did not like being the only one left out of the secret. Joseph kept many things about his past from her, but he was her husband. A woman is not meant to question her husband. But this involved her son, and where her son was involved Miriam wanted to know everything.

“We did not mean to be so cryptic, Miriam. I was unaware that you weren’t informed of the situation by your aunt. We met yesterday in the market and discussed possibilities for the boys’ futures. I regret bringing this up so soon after Joseph’s passing, but time is short. I wish for Joshua to accompany me to Jerusalem, where he will be trained as a priest. Yohan will also be joining him, so he will not be alone. Elizabeth was quite enthusiastic about the idea when we spoke about it early this morning. I hope you will share her excitement.”

It sounded like a wonderful proposition, but something didn’t sit right with Miriam.

“What do you want with my son? You came here with the clear intention of getting him, and it seems only my husband’s death slowed you down. Why do you want Joshua?” Miriam asked.

“Your son is a fine speaker. It is a rare gift, and since only descendants of Aaron can become priests, it is even rarer among our brethren. He is well learned and charismatic. Our ranks diminish each year. The list goes on, but it all amounts to the same thing. We want him.” Moloch said.

There it was laid out before her. It was her husband’s wish that Joshua follow in his footsteps as a carpenter, but Joseph was gone and Joshua wasn’t ready to take up the trade alone. The idea seemed logical. He would never have to worry about money again, and his talent for speaking, reading, and writing would be put to good use. Still, Miriam refused to make the decision for him. It must be his choice to make.

“I’m sorry to say I can’t make that sort of decision for my son. I will speak to him about it, and let him decide which path his life will take.”

“Boys never know what’s good for them. It’s our job as mothers to steer them down the correct path. Don’t be foolish Miriam.” Elizabeth said.

*Something tells me that if Joshua does not go along with their plan, Yohan won’t be welcome.*

“I’ll inform Joshua of his options, and get back to you as soon as possible.” Miriam directed her comment to Moloch and ignored Elizabeth’s remarks.

“If you accept our offer, we will require proof of your lineage. You do have the proper papers I assume?” Moloch said.

“That will not be a problem, though it may take some time. The proof is at my home in Hebron.” Elizabeth said.

“Very well, I suppose the rest is up to Joshua. Let him know our time is short. We leave in tomorrow, with or without the boys.”

## Chapter 24



*I don't fit in with the other men. Saul favors me and many have grown jealous of our relationship. Already I am being harassed for my size and proclivity for reading, writing, and playing music. My father taught me these things at a young age. He said that being well educated would keep the traders in the marketplace from cheating me, but all they seem to do is make me an outcast.*

• • • • •

*I was invited to train with Saul's personal guards. They did it as a jest, a way to humiliate me and put me in my place, but the joke was on them. I bested them one by one, and then all at once. Archery, sword-fighting, sling shooting, and even hand to hand combat; no matter the scenario, I could not lose. I felt that mysterious power once again and did not fight it. My senses were heightened, my strength and speed unparalleled. It was as if I could see their punches before they were thrown, the targets grew so large it was like aiming at a horse. How could I miss? I fear that my actions were a mistake. The looks of resentment I once received have been replaced by looks of hatred. Why didn't I just let them win? I should have known better. Just because I can beat someone, does not mean that I should.*

• • • • •

*The battles take a terrible toll. Men who were alive one day are gone the next. Women are widowed and children orphaned by the hundreds. True to his word, Saul has not let me join in the fighting. Even after witnessing my combat prowess and hearing my pleas, he refuses to allow it. There must be more I can do for my king and country than play music.*

• • • • •

*A beast of a man known as Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, deals swift deathblows to our troops. It is as if they are bugs being squashed under his monstrous feet. His armor is so thick it prevents any arrows from piercing his skin, and his reach is so long that none can get within striking distance. I pray that someone strikes him down before more of my comrades are counted among his victims.*

• • • • •

*The Philistine army raided our encampment in the night. They aimed to kill our king while he slept. Goliath was among them. The monster hacked and slashed his way through our weary soldiers with ease. The desire to run and save myself was outweighed by concern for my king. I ran to his side, not even stopping to grab a sword. I had my sling, which I kept at my hip since the attack of the lioness, but there was only a single rock left in my pouch. "What good could one rock be?" I thought.*

*Goliath set his sights on Saul as he made his way across the camp. As he approached, time slowed to a crawl. I could see his every feature in full detail. Long black hair stuck out beneath his helmet, and rotting yellow teeth shown through a small slit in his grizzly black beard. Thick bronze armor, which no normal man could have supported, covered his entire body. Brave and foolish men raced at him, attempting to take his life for honor and glory, but all were cut down. The blood of*

*my countrymen cascaded down his armor like rain down a mountainside. A rider galloped by on horseback, attempting to run Goliath through with a spear. Both horse and rider were dispatched with one stroke of his massive sword. The horse collapsed to the ground creating a cloud of dust. It was then that I discovered the giant's one weakness.*

*Goliath writhed in pain as the dust flew into his eyes. His helmet only covered the top and sides of his head, not his face. No more than ten meters separated me from the giant, but the sudden realization that he was only a man calmed me and I stepped forward, placing myself between Saul and Goliath. I twirled the sling above my head, waiting for the right time to strike. Goliath laughed at me. What could such a small boy with only a sling do to hurt him?*

*"Is this your last line of defense? Such a pity, I hoped for a more thrilling fight." The giant spoke his last words.*

*I hurled the stone towards him with all my might. It was a perfect strike. The rock entered his left eye with a great pop. His last laugh was still etched on his face as he fell to the ground, never to rise again. The entire battle stopped as all eyes moved to the invaders' fallen champion. Enemies fled while allies gave chase and put them to the sword. When the dust settled, everyone gathered around me shouting their praises.*

## **Chapter 25**

*David sure was a lot different than I was led to believe.*

The stories Joshua was told always depicted David as a wise and fearless leader. When telling the tales of heroes, many forget that they were still men. Their brave and selfless actions are emphasized, and any misdeeds or failures in their lives are forgotten. The truth is that heroes bleed and fear the same as anyone else.

*I need a break. This is getting too intense.*

Joshua folded the corner of the page and closed the ancient book. He then picked up his father's journal and flipped through the pages. He stopped when he noticed his mother's name and learned an entirely different, yet just as fantastic, story about a king.

## **Chapter 26**

*Miriam has given birth to a beautiful baby boy. We named him Joshua. Never have I looked upon any living thing and felt such emotion, but I have been selfish to bring this boy into existence. He has no idea the burden he will bear; the legacy he must continue in secret. It's an unfair thing to ask of anyone, but at least he can have thirteen carefree years before he learns of his responsibility. I confess that I*

often wonder whether there ever will be a Messiah. The world has become so detestable perhaps Adonai doesn't believe it's worth saving.

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It is good to finally find time to sit down and write. The strangest thing happened a few weeks ago, something that has since uprooted my entire life, and I need to record it all while the conversations are fresh in my mind.

Three men, scholars from various parts of the world, arrived at our door late one night. They were named Balthazar, Melchior, and Casper. Their wagon broke down nearby, and asked if I could take a look. I would never turn down someone in need, so I mended their broken wheel, invited them to supper, and offered them a roof for the night. They told me the most amazing tale.

For the last three years they resided with King Herod. The wise and noble King valued sound advice from learned men. Now that Herod is dead, his sons are fighting over their inheritances. Archelaus, the eldest of the three successors, wants to be the sole ruler, and none of them are interested in the wisdom of scholars. Balthazar suspects Herod was murdered by Archelaus, but he has no proof. My guests fled the palace in the night, afraid Archelaus would have them killed for not choosing his side.

"While Antipas and Philip seem content with the land they have been given, Archelaus desires to be king. Rome has ratified Herod's will as he last wrote it and the division is not to be altered." Balthazar said.

"Archelaus will not be satisfied until he is king or dead." Melchior added.

Casper, the scholar from the Far East, was much quieter than the other men, but it is he that I will never forget. During our supper, Joshua began to cry. Miriam got up to tend to him but Casper gestured for her to sit. The scholar needed only to go near the baby to turn his cries into laughter. He lifted Joshua up and held him close. It was then that he spoke to all of us, or perhaps none of us.

"It is no coincidence that we stopped here. This child will change the world forever. His life will not be easy, and it will not be pleasant, but it will be spectacular. There has never been a single man that has touched as many hearts as this one will. He will be a king among kings for the entire world to cherish."

I was frightened and amazed. Could he know who I am?

"Do not be alarmed. Casper sees things that go unnoticed by normal men. I assure you we mean you no harm." Balthazar said.

Casper laid Joshua back down and spoke to his fellow travelers in a hushed voice.

"Would you excuse us for a moment?" Melchior said.

The three men left for a few minutes. They each retrieved an item from their wagon and laid them down beside Joshua.

"These gifts were given to us by Herod for our years of service some time before his death. No gift is as fit for a king as one that comes from a king. Do not waste them. They will be a very important part of your journey little one." Casper said to Joshua, and then he turned to me. The smile on his face faded. "You must leave this land. Dangerous times are upon us, and your son must be protected at all costs."

"You want me to leave my home and homeland?" I asked.

*“You must. Travel to Egypt, away from this conflict. Keep your ears open for word that the struggle has ended, and then you can return. It will not last long, but it will be bloody.” He would not relent until I agreed, so I told him I would take my family out of Judea.*

*It wasn’t until they left that I examined the gifts for myself while Miriam tended to Joshua. Gold, olibanum, and myrrh were laid out before me, each of substantial weight. There I sat, a poor carpenter, with three of the most valuable substances in the world in front of me. My son will never want for anything if he is careful, though Casper’s words lead me to believe there is a far greater purpose behind these gifts than making him comfortable. I lied to Miriam about the gifts, pretending they were nothing of value and hiding them away. It is the first time I’ve ever lied to my wife, but just like my lineage this is not for her to know.*

*The encounter with the men left me shaken. Could my son be the one? Is he the Messiah, or just another to carry on the torch until the true savior emerges? I trusted Casper’s words. Within two days we were on our way to Egypt.*

## **Chapter 27**

Casper was right. Judea faced a time of great suffering following Herod’s death. Many innocent people lost their lives due to the tyranny of Herod Archelaus. During his first Passover in power he had no less than three thousand Hebrews killed while they offered sacrifice at the Temple. Joseph and his family could have easily been among them if not for the scholar’s warning. While Archelaus was removed from power and exiled by Rome after a short time, Antipas still ruled over Galilee from his seat in Sepphoris.

Joshua sat in his room, his father’s journal still opened to the last page he read. After reading it numerous times, it still made no more sense to him than the first time. Not making sense seemed to be the new theme in Joshua’s life. He couldn’t believe how much his life had changed in a few short weeks.

*First a priest tries to recruit me to be his messenger, herald, or whatever he wants to call it. It seemed strange, but it was still a welcome possibility. Then I find out I’m descended from David, the last in a long line of men who have done nothing but wait for the Messiah to be born. That’s enough to make my head spin, if only it had stopped there. If what this book says is true, I’m supposed to change the world or possibly save the world. Change it to what? Save it from what? This is too much. Can I go back to being a carpenter? Can I go back to being a boy?*

A night of reading followed by several days of constant inner turmoil had drained Joshua’s energy. Being so engrossed in his reading and contemplation, he hadn’t stopped once to eat. The groaning from his stomach overpowered the cacophony in his head and he finally left his room in search of food. Joshua was surprised to find that their neighbor Marta, not Miriam, sat in their kitchen helping herself to lunch.

“Where’s mother?” Joshua asked.

Marta was startled, dropping a spoonful of broth into her lap. “Joshua, you scared me.” She began frantically wiping the steaming liquid off of her robe. “Miriam went to speak to Elizabeth.”

“They’re still in town?” Joshua asked.

“It would seem so. Miriam asked that I wait with you and feed you if you decided to come out. She should be home soon. Why not eat while we wait for her? I made soup.” Marta gestured to the mess on her robe and gave a half smile.

They ate together in silence. Joshua hardly knew Marta. He spent all of his time with his father and knew little about how his mother spent her days when she wasn’t cooking, cleaning, and sewing. When they were finished eating, Marta decided to speak up.

“How was it?”

“It was delicious. Thank you.”

“Now that you’re reenergized it’s probably best if you get back to the woodshop and do some work. There will be three mouths to feed soon and it’s not as if your father had a secret stockpile of gold lying around. Someone needs to support the family.”

Marta wasn’t wrong about their situation. Every day Joshua didn’t work meant another bite out of their dwindling reserves. She was, however, wrong about the secret stockpile of gold. Her words did more than remind Joshua of his duty, they reminded him of something else in his father’s journal.

*The Gold. That’s what’s inside that box! What else could it be?*

“You’re absolutely right, Marta.” Joshua stood, suddenly excited. “I’m going to change into my work clothes and get right on that.”

“You’ve still got it, Marta.” She said to herself as Joshua hurried to his room.

Not wanting to leave it in the workshop, Joshua had snuck the chest containing his inheritance into his room. He went straight for the small wooden box that wouldn’t open on his first attempt.

At first glance it looked like an ordinary trinket box. Joshua helped make dozens of them over the years, though none as intricate as the one he held. They were popular among women for storing jewelry and men for storing precious coins. There wasn’t a visible locking mechanism, but something prevented the lid from opening.

Joshua studied the entire box. There were etchings of the sun and the moon on the right and left sides respectively, and Joseph’s name was carved on the bottom. The signature was small and unintelligible to most, but Joshua knew it without a second glance. Though he did not mark everything he made, Joseph carved his name into every piece that was meant for his family’s personal use. He would never put his name on something he didn’t make. That meant Joseph made this container himself for some special purpose. Joshua couldn’t believe his father carved the sun and moon into anything he made, as it was considered blasphemous, but he couldn’t deny what was right in front of him.

Joshua felt the wood, hoping to find a hidden compartment or lever to release the lid. Along the sides there were a series of small rectangles. At first, Joshua thought them decorative, but upon touching them he found that when he applied pressure they pushed inward ever so slightly. He counted the rectangles, hoping

the number might give some clue to their significance. There were twenty-two in all: None in the front, twelve along the back, and five on each side.

*Father must have designed it so that only he would know how to open it. I guess I could always go grab my chisel and hammer, but I'll use that as my last resort. Pity he didn't share that information with me or at least write it down. Or did he?*

Hoping there might be a clue hidden within its pages, Joshua began skimming through his father's journal looking for any reference to the gifts or a box. Everything involved their move to Egypt, getting acclimated to their new surroundings and attempting to find work. There was nothing of importance for a few pages, and then Joshua came upon a passage that looked promising.

*Though I refuse to touch the gold given to my son, I was forced to trade away the container it came in. I hated to do it, but it was unavoidable. Our sudden move left us with no time to sell our home. The proceeds provided us enough coin to acquire a residence and sustain us while my carpentry skills built up a positive reputation. A gold inlaid box isn't exactly the best place to hide a cache of gold anyway.*

A few passages went by without mentioning the gold again.

*A man I befriended in the market by the name of Shem has been able to help me with something I'd been worrying about for quite some time. I needed a new container for the gold our three friends left to my son; one that would not be noticeable or easily opened. Shem was a blacksmith originally, but came to specialize in something a little more obscure. The former Pharaohs had many treasures, and Shem created special traps and locks to safeguard them. He even claims to have worked on the vaults of the last Pharaoh, Cleopatra! Since the Pharaohs lost power some thirty odd years ago he has had little use for his unique skill set, and he jumped at the opportunity to assist me. With his help, I have created a container that will be impossible for anyone other than me and my son to open.*

The entries didn't contain any clues about how to open it, but they did explain where it came from. The margins of the pages held a few more potential clues, though Joshua didn't understand them at first. *Follow the sun* and *Patriarch* were scribbled along the edges of the page. Joshua had no time to figure out what the clues meant; a knock at the door interrupted his contemplation. He hurried to put everything away as his mother's voice called out to him.

"Joshua, we need to talk."

"Be out in a minute." When everything was hidden he opened the door. Marta had left. Joshua and his mother were alone. Miriam sat down at the table and ushered him to follow with a wave of her hand. "Is something wrong? Is the baby alright?"

"Everything is fine. I've just spoken with Elizabeth and Moloch, and you have a decision to make."

Miriam explained Moloch's desire to take Joshua back to Jerusalem and train him as a priest. He had heard it all before, except for the priest part, but being presented the option by his mother made it all the more real. It might be the only way to uncover his true destiny and provide for his mother and unborn sibling. Joshua had no faith in his abilities as a carpenter or businessman, and even if the lockbox held a fortune it wasn't meant to be used for mere sustenance.

“I think this might be my destiny, or at least a stepping stone towards it. I’m going to do it, but only if you come with me. I have to take care of you, both of you, and keep you safe.” Joshua said.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Miriam said, wrapping her arms around Joshua and cradling his head against her shoulder. “You’re going to do wonders.”

## Chapter 28

“Move along if you ain’t got no money, girl.”

The baker watched Amara closely as she eyed some of his freshest breads. The stones she stole from Barba proved to have little value. Most of the local farmers were monotheistic followers of the deity Adonai, which prevented them from owning or even looking upon idols made in the image of other gods. She found someone willing to trade, but they offered her next to nothing. It was enough for a few good meals and some supplies to make new arrows, but not enough to sustain her for long.

Amara could have traded the stolen goods for far more in a larger nearby city like Sepphoris or Nazareth, but she didn’t want to risk being seen. Barba promised to hunt her down, so Amara wanted to avoid anywhere frequented by bounty hunters and opportunists.

The food satisfied her hunger, but there was emptiness inside that could not be filled. It was the first time Amara took a life, and it was the life of an innocent bystander who did nothing other than try to help her. The boy may not have been her intended target, but he died all the same.

*Did you ever feel this sadness after taking a life, grandfather?*

Amara watched her grandfather kill dozens of men to protect them from harm. He became quiet afterwards, keeping to himself and sleeping more than usual. Though there was never even a hint of sadness or remorse in his expressions or words, Amara believed he did not enjoy causing pain and death. Questions about what it was like to take a life were always on the tip of her tongue, but never made it past her lips.

Amara left town after several nights of eating well and sleeping with livestock for warmth. Her purse and stomach were no longer filled, and her heart grew heavier each day. It wouldn’t be long before she required food, and the thought of stealing again terrified her. She decided to try hunting and fishing despite the scarcity of game.

South was Amara’s direction of choice. Towards the homeland she would never reach. No matter how close she came, there was something inside that kept her from returning to the home she never knew. There was nothing for her to fear in Egypt. The men who sought her grandfather would never recognize her all grown up, but she feared the land all the same. It held all the truths about her past that she wasn’t ready to face.

Traveling alone as a woman, even in the daytime, was treacherous on the open road. Meeting the wrong kind of men could leave Amara without her weapons, her

dignity, or even her life. She stuck to the treacherous and rocky paths that ran alongside the main road, using anything and everything to conceal her from the view of other travelers. These hiding places were more a home to her than any dwelling of earth and stone. The trek went much slower off the main road, but it was also safer.

When Amara came upon a small stream, she seized the opportunity and caught some supper. She carved a lance out of a dry olive tree branch and stood still in the stream until the fish thought of her as just another rock or stump. Careful aim and a straight shot landed her a plump fish on her first try, with three more to follow. Fish were difficult to come by in large lakes and rivers, but the small streams sometimes held a few hidden treasures. If fishermen couldn't fit their boats into the narrow waterways or make use of their nets it wasn't worth their time. Charred fish and stale bread made a banquet of a meal. She saved two of the fish for later, and continued on her journey.

After traveling for several hours, Amara stopped to take a rest. There wasn't anything to see for kilometers in any direction. The last town she passed was small and the next would likely be smaller.

*What am I doing? Where am I going? What if he finds me while I'm sleeping?*

Amara had never questioned her movements before. In the past, her grandfather always decided where to go next. The movements were random and they never stayed anywhere too long. After he died, Amara continued on in the same fashion and never considered there might be another way of living. The fear changed that.

Hunger, that constant companion, made its presence known with a low rumble. Amara removed the remaining fish from her bag. She took off her boots and lay out on the grass looking up at the clouds passing overhead. One in particular caught her eye. It looked like an arrow. It was pointed in the direction of a much larger cloud formation, an animal perhaps. Tall and wide, almost a man if it weren't for the short legs and arms. Amara couldn't decide what it looked like.

*This is stupid. It's just a cloud. Why do I care so much?*

Amara heard a low growl followed by a massive roar from behind her. She shot up, instinct taking over as she grabbed her bow and immediately strung an arrow. Less than three meters separated her from a great bear. It stood on its hind legs, towering over her as her grandfather once did. One arrow would not stop it unless the shot was perfect. Heart or head were her only options. Both stood motionless for a few seconds, and then it moved. She released her arrow, but the shaking of her arm caused it to miss the bear's massive skull. Amara braced herself for death, but the creature did not go for her. The fish, still lying in the grass where Amara had been resting, was what it wanted. Not noticing its close call with death, the bear began to eat. Amara hesitated for a moment, considering whether or not it was right to take the creature's life. She took a step back and its head shot up. It growled every time she made any movement. Her decision was made. Amara calmed herself, pulled a second arrow from her quiver, and took aim. This time her aim was true. A fountain of blood erupted from the back of the bear's skull as the arrow pierced its eye.

"Thanks for the warning! Maybe next time make it a little less vague and more in advance." Amara called out to the sky. Her heart pounded, as if a stampede was racing through her chest, while she examined her kill. It was enormous. Most



animals she hunted were small: rabbits, fish, and roe fawns. She was not prepared for something so massive. Bear fur and meat was far more valuable than fish, though transporting it before it went bad might prove difficult. The carcass would soon become prey to all manner of creatures. She needed a way to get it to a city where she might trade it for a few silver denarii, which was enough to last her for months. If she didn't figure something out soon, her greatest triumph would turn into her greatest failure. With no alternative available, she decided to ask for help.

The road was never out of sight as she walked, but for the first time she approached it willingly. She took note of a large boulder near her prize and began looking for someone to assist her. Amara paced back and forth along the same kilometer stretch for an hour, not wanting to stray too far. Several wagons passed by during that time, some pulled by horses others by donkeys, all of them driven by men.

*They all look like Barba from a distance, but I can't be afraid. I have to find someone soon, or it will be too late.*

Daylight was fading fast. Night would be upon her in no time, and then no one could help her. Amara wasn't sure who she expected to help her, but something kept telling her to wait. Then a single camel came galloping down the road. A young girl, around the same age as Amara, appeared to be riding between the neck and first hump. Behind the girl sat a woman. Her face was covered, but the clothing was definitely that of a female. Amara decided to take her chances and ask for assistance. There was no cart attached, which worried Amara, but camels can carry far more weight than horses. Upon catching sight of Amara, the woman slowed the camel to a meandering pace.

"What is the matter child? Are you injured?" The woman asked.

"I'm not a child." Amara said, trying to restrain her annoyance. She hated being called a child. After surviving on her own for almost three years, she felt like anything but a child. "I'm fine, but a bear attacked me."

"Thank the gods you are safe. How did you get away?"

"He bit off a little more than he could chew." Amara plucked the string of her bow. "But I have no way to get the carcass to town."

"Say no more. A bear is a fine prize, and you should not be denied that which you have earned. We may have to dismember it to carry it back, but it shouldn't be a problem. Take me to it." She dismounted the camel along with the child. "Stay with Jack, Trix."

"Yes Thea." The little girl replied, leading the camel off the road.

"What's your name, child?" Thea asked.

"Amara."

It had been a long time since anything good happened in Amara's life. She was all too willing to accept the generosity of this stranger as genuine. She led Thea towards the bear. After a few steps she felt a sharp pain in her neck. Amara heard her grandfather's soothing voice echo in her mind as she drifted into the darkness.

*Never trust anyone, Amara. It only gets you into trouble.*



