

THE  
FATHER,  
THE SON &  
THE SLAVE

CHRISTOPHER GRANT

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*For*

Shannon Marie  
*Light of my Life*



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## P R O L O G U E

The slave Metlip woke to his name whispered through the shuttered window.

“It is I, Brother.”

The young Nubian was instantly alert. “Iesu!”

“Quiet, my foolish friend,” the voice said. “I must not be discovered. Come and open the small gate for me.”

Metlip rolled from his pallet and stood, a shadow in the sparse moonlight that suffused the tiny chamber. He brushed the wrinkles from his knee-length tunic, tugged his sleeves down. Woven from Aegyptian linen by his mistress, the garment was a better quality than those of her neighbours.

Two short steps brought him to the curtained entry, but as he ducked under the lintel—just as his height forced him to stoop as he passed through every other doorway in Nazareth—he paused, his head swivelling from his path to the chamber behind him. With an impatient sigh, he retraced his steps and pulled a wide strip of tooled leather from its peg on the wall. Though the distinction was lost on him, he knew his master would judge him naked were he to emerge clad only in his tunic. He wrapped and tied the leather around his waist as he dodged below the sandstone lintel, only to halt again. He cinched the tunic’s excess cloth in his fingers, then tucked the pleats under his belt before twisting his body to ease the fit.

His movements were quick and efficient. Jet fingers tugged at the leather collar that marked his status as he made his way down a brief passage, stepping silently as he passed his mistress’s chamber, and entered the principal room of the house. Confident in the darkness, he threaded his way between a table, a pair of chests, and the hearth that was the centre of their lives.

Beyond these, a sturdy wooden door opened onto the walled dirt yard separating the dwelling from his master’s carpentry works and the stable. Across the yard, a thin light leaked from under the shop’s closed double doors, which meant his master desired privacy. The

slave checked his steps. His master would want to know his son had returned. He switched direction, careful to avoid the fresh horse dung that littered the packed earth. He nodded a greeting as he passed the four Roman legionnaires lounging by the main gate, talking and sharing a skin of wine.

Hunching, the slave slipped through the shop's doorway and into a generous space redolent with the scents of his—and his master's—craft. Two men reclined on a pair of new-made Roman couches angled to accommodate a brazier that provided more heat than light. The long, cushioned seats were so close-set their inside corners abutted one another. An amphora of wine stood propped in the narrow corner between them and all around, in various stages of packing, was a pile of furnishings extensive enough to fill a palace. Unwilling to interrupt, Metlip waited in the shadows for a pause in the conversation.

The one man, older than his companion, wore the tunic and mantle common among Hebrew men, though he kept his beard cropped short in the Hellenic fashion of Galilee. This man listened as the other, beardless and clad in the armour of an officer in Rome's Tenth Legion, wiped wine from his lips with the back of a hand.

"I am just happy to be far from Jerusalem," the Roman said. "Pilate has been in a rage since his return from Samaria. I told you his wife was enthralled by one of your prophets. Well, it was not enough for her to reject her Roman heritage and earn exile to a distant estate—though it brought you this contract. No, my dear Josef. While Pilate was away locating her a suitable property, she smashed his palace statues, whitewashed his frescoes and shattered his mosaics."

"Master—," Metlip interjected, advancing.

The older man laughed. "Why?" he asked.

The Roman shrugged. "Because her new god is jealous of the old gods? She called them 'false' and 'heathen'."

Metlip took another step forward and tried again. "Master."

But his master's full attention was on the Roman.

“If Pilate ever lays hands on the charlatan who bewitched her—” The Roman drained his cup and chuckled. “More wine, dear friend?” He lifted the slender clay vessel and trapped it in the crook of his arm so he could pour without sitting up. “If the Salvo family had a maxim, it would be ‘once opened, always consumed’.”

The older man handed his cup across for the Roman to fill. “Ah, Marcus. I would go to Rome just to learn the secrets of this wine.”

The Roman’s features grew wistful. “You would find a fervent welcome at the Salvo estate, dear Josef. Such a welcome that you would never wish to leave.” He paused a moment. “And if you did, well, I am sure there is an empty chamber with a heavy lock in our cellars.”

Reaching for his cup, Josef’s hand brushed the Roman’s and paused. Neither spoke. Josef’s fingers slipped over his companion’s hand as they sought purchase on the cup’s rim, but he made no effort to pull it away.

Metlip stepped past the brazier. “Master.”

Startled, both men jerked their hands back. The cup fell to the packed dirt floor, wine splashing in all directions. Josef jumped up, scanning for stains on the cushions.

Marcus leaned back as if to put distance between them and forced a smile. “Metlip. Well met.” He brushed his fingers over the delicate pattern of vines and leaves cut into the front panel of his couch. “The two of you have done a magnificent job. Your skills in carving wood are extraordinary.”

“Thank you, Tribune.”

Satisfied his work was undamaged, Josef straightened and swung around to face his slave.

“How many times must I tell you to announce yourself in the dark?” he shouted. “And for one able to read and write in four tongues, how is it you do not know what ‘privacy’ means? Must I chain you to prevent your intrusions?”

Metlip winced as if every insult held the cutting sting of a lash, yet he said nothing.



If Josef was oblivious to the impact of his words, Marcus was not. "Hold, dear Josef. There must be a reason for his presence. Metlip, my friend, what roused you from your pallet that you need to share with your master?"

Relief washed through the young Nubian, yet his answer came out as a coarse whisper. Meeting Josef's gaze, he said, "He is home." The slave spun on his heel and rushed into the night.

Crossing to a sturdy door set into the compound's wall beyond the stable, the Nubian lifted the wooden brace and leaned it against the stone wall. The hinges moaned as he pulled the gate inward to reveal a smiling, slender man with eyes framed by laugh lines, shoulder length hair and a thin, close-cropped beard. He wore a colourless, rough-spun tunic and a much-patched mantle, the garments cinched by a hemp rope wound a few times around his waist. A leather satchel hung heavy at his side but did not impede his arms as they spread to embrace the slave.

"My brother," the newcomer said. "I have missed you more than I can say. Why is it you still wear your collar?"

The African, two hand-widths taller than his visitor, wrapped his arms about the other and lifted him off his feet. "I have yearned for this day, Iesu. Every day I ask God to bring you home. And even I forget my collar."

Iesu whispered his next words. "Why are there Romans here?"

Metlip said nothing until he released Iesu from the hug and wiped tears from his eyes.

"Do not be alarmed," the Nubian replied. "All is well. The soldiers are but an escort for a friend of your father's. And what of you? What brings you home in the middle of the night?"

"Good news, my brother." Iesu answered. "Good news. News I wanted to bring personally, but with the least risk of discovery—though my cautions may have been for naught. My exile holds."

"Of course," said the slave over his shoulder as he closed and barred the gate. "Tell me."

"I will, but my time is short. I would speak with my father."

"And if your father does not wish to speak with you?"

Both men turned to face the carpenter Josef, his features unreadable in the fluttering flame of the lamp in his hand.

Iesu stepped within the meagre cast of light. "After a space of three years, Father? Are you not grateful to find me whole and hale?"

"I never imagined it otherwise. Not you. But I am grateful nonetheless. Why do you travel in the darkest hours of the night?"

"It would jeopardize my plans were I to be recognized and taken. It seemed best to come when the chance of discovery was minimal, and that is now. How do you fare, Father?"

"We prosper, no thanks to you."

"How do you mean?"

"How do I mean? With your banishment went my trade."

The Roman officer emerged from the shop, fastening his helmet. The soldiers snapped to attention, but a gesture released them. He halted beside Josef.

Josef turned to his friend. "Marcus, this is my son, Iesu. Iesu, meet my excellent friend Marcus Salvo, Tribune and Quartermaster of the Tenth Legion."

"Ah, the runaway," Marcus said, with a curt nod to Iesu. Iesu pressed his upright palms together and bent at the hip. The Roman added, "Braving the dark—and curfew—to resume his place at his father's side, I hope."

"Have you come back?" Josef asked.

Iesu straightened, returned his gaze to his father. "No, Father. I have come seeking answers."

Marcus looked at the narrow sliver of moon, then clasped Josef on the shoulder.

"It is late and you must catch up with your son," the Roman said. "I will take my leave. Until tomorrow, dear friend." Marcus pulled Josef around and drew him into a brief hug that Josef accepted, but did not return.

The Tribune strode to his horse and mounted, his escort coming to order. One soldier raised the bar on the main gate and pulled it

open, then followed the others through. Metlip pushed the gate closed and replaced the bar.

After a moment, Iesu said, "I did not expect to find Romans here."

Instead of answering, Josef turned away. Holding the guttering lamp ahead of him, he took several paces to the side and indicated some wooden forms stacked against the shop wall, a pile of long, squared timbers with perpendicular arms at one end and tapered points at the other. They were uniform and plain, save for one marked by a knot with a discoloured tail, like a star racing across the firmament.

"Look, you," Josef said. "Do you know these? Wooden frames on which the Romans hang criminals and those who oppose them. These are my business now, and demand is ever growing. Our neighbours shun us since the day you called yourself Messiah in synagogue and brought about your exile."

"I was naïve, then. Much has happened since and I would not be caught so effortlessly in the Sadducee's word-trap again."

"Forgive me, Iesu," Metlip began, but got no further.

"And how would that change the attitude of our neighbours?" Josef demanded. "Would a better argument restore the loss of my business?"

Metlip caught a flicker of his brother's famous temper in his features, surprised at the speed with which it passed, though he also noticed Iesu needed a calming breath before answering his father.

"Father," Iesu replied. "My time is limited, and I have left my beloved alone among men far from their homes. May we go inside and talk? I would wash the dust from my feet, and I have a thirst."

"As you wish," said Josef, and held his lamp to light a path through the horse dung to the house.

"Your beloved?" Metlip asked. "You have a woman?"

Iesu had to raise his arm above his own head to rest it on the Nubian's shoulder. "Indeed, my brother. I hope you have the chance to meet her."

“Why would I not?” Metlip asked. “Will you never bring her home?”

As if to avoid answering, Iesu bent to loosen his sandals and then scoop water from a stone basin by the door to douse his feet.

“Metlip,” said his master, “please rouse your mistress and then find water and food.”

“Yes, Master.” The Nubian slipped off his own sandals and then vanished into the darkness.

“Are you my father?”

Iesu faced Josef across the table in the front room.

“You sneak through the night to ask me this?” Josef replied.

Iesu shrugged. “I am banished from my home. What choice did I have but to come under cover of darkness?”

“Why come now, after all this time?” Josef asked.

“To see you, of course. And Mother and Metlip. I have missed my home.”

Josef pressed on. “Not enough that you thought to return sooner.”

“Many nights I have lain awake contemplating the pressures of my ministry,” his son responded, “weighing my longing for home against the duties of my fate. More than once, I began the journey before the burden of my responsibilities checked my steps.”

Josef wasn’t to be so easily mollified. “Three years, has it been?”

“Close enough. But I have been busy with my ministry and truly could not spare the time. Now, time is against me. I have two questions, Father, one for your ears alone and one I would voice before both my parents. I have already asked the first.”

“Asked what?”

“Are you my father?”

“Of course.”

Iesu shook his head, as if he searched for a better phrase. “You have loved me as a son, but I must know. I must choose the right

path and your answer may determine my decision. Am I from your seed?"

Josef hesitated a moment. "No."

"Then what of my mother's story?"

"What of it?"

"She insists an angel visited her, and revealed she would bear the Messiah. Me. Father, do you believe her?"

"She has never lied to me."

"But—you always discouraged me from considering the truth of her tale."

"I did. For all the hope our people hold for the Messiah, we are near impossible to persuade. It is a sure path to an ugly death for any who might pursue it. I had no wish for you to die."

A rustle in the darkness announced Iesu's mother, Maryam, stuffing stray wisps of long grey hair into her braid as she entered the room. Iesu stood and faced her. Expressionless, she strode to her son and slapped him. Iesu took the blow without flinching.

"Wife—," began Josef, standing, but Iesu held out his arm and his father sat back down.

"You would leave your mother without a proper farewell?" she asked. Without waiting for Iesu to respond, she pulled him into a tight hug. "I dreamt you would come home."

Releasing her son, she shoved him backwards. "And what kind of son makes his mother wait so long for a visit?" Almost leaping at him, Maryam embraced him again, her eyes squeezed closed. Then once again, she stepped back. "And when he does finally return, he is dressed as a beggar and smells as bad. What would you ask me? For a bath and new robes, I hope."

Smiling, it was Iesu's turn to hug his mother. "It is so very good to see you, Mother. You look as young and healthy as I ever remember." Holding his arm around her waist, Iesu looked from one parent to the other.

Metlip materialized bearing a tray with water, dates and a second, brighter, lamp which he placed on the table.

“I would ask for your blessing, Mother. Father. To marry,” Iesu went on as he pulled her closer. Maryam leaned back to meet his eyes.

“Marry?” said Metlip, moving forward but catching himself at a look from Josef.

“In truth?” she asked.

“Before the Father Above, Mother.”

Beaming with delight, Maryam looked to her husband. “How could I have doubted this day would come, Josef?”

Maryam sniffed Iesu and stepped out of the embrace. “But who would marry such a skinny wretch as you, dressed little better than a beggar?”

“I am a rabbi now, Mother, living on the charity of my flock. It is enough.”

“So you come home to beg the bride price?” asked Josef.

Iesu poured water into a wood-turned cup and drank. “No, Father,” he answered, smiling. “There is no dowry.”

“Her father gives her away for nothing?”

“She has neither father nor mother. There need be no dowry to make this contract, only the love we share. And, hopefully, your blessing.”

“No,” said Josef. “What kind of woman—?” Josef paused as he realized just who his son wanted to wed. “You speak of the whore.”

Iesu flinched, but held his calm. “No longer. She is integral to my ministry.”

“And you love her?” asked his mother.

“She is the missing piece of my soul, Mother.”

His mother nodded her acceptance. “Where is she now?”

“Within the caravanserai, waiting to depart for Jerusalem with the dawn. She was feeling ill, so I left her to rest.”

“I forbid it,” said Josef.

“How do you own this choice, Father?”

Maryam stepped between them. “He does not. When and where is the wedding?”

“In Jerusalem,” her son replied. “Two days before Passover, to allow the guests time to make their way home.”

“Why, that is but a week away,” said Maryam. “We have little time. Come, Metlip, we must collect what we need for the journey.”

“Journey, Mistress?”

Josef reached out, stopping his wife from leaving. “Surely you do not plan to go with them?”

“I do, husband,” she affirmed. “Metlip will accompany me.”

“I cannot leave my business at a moment’s notice.”

“I am not asking you to. I know how you feel about Jerusalem.”

“Marcus’s job is not yet packed,” Josef protested.

His wife was unmoved. “The work itself is complete, yes? The packing of it is well within Negev’s capabilities. And with Passover just ahead, you cannot be so busy.”

“The road is arduous, the ground hard,” Josef added as an afterthought as he studied the lamp’s weak flame.

“I have made the journey before, husband. There is nothing to worry about. But I will need your wagon.”

Josef looked up. “My new wagon?”

“Would you have your wife walk for four days?”

“It is not ready for such a trip.”

“Of course it is. You drove it not two days ago.”

“It is not like the cart. You cannot handle it.”

“Metlip will drive it. But we will take both horses, yes?”

“And if something breaks?”

“It will be fine.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you built it.”

“I cannot allow you to go alone, even with Metlip.”

“Then you will come, yes? You must let Marcus know.” Turning to her slave, she said, “Metlip, please go to Marcus and ask him to return. I will pack all we need. But first, if you will, lamps lit throughout.”

To her husband, she said, “Josef, rouse your apprentices and leave your instructions.”



## O N E

The waning moon cast a soft blue tinge on the crushed limestone road winding leisurely among vineyards as it descended from the ridge on which Nazareth perched. It was the only route in and out of the town suitable for men and beasts alike. Below it, like a poor mirror to the stars above, the firelight dotted the valley floor.

The ridge itself ran east to west. The southern face was steep, those parts which were not sheer cliffs, and dense with vegetation. Children from the village often braved that tangle of roots and branches to gather wild almonds or steal honeycomb from the hives hidden in the deepest bush.

The road from Nazareth met the paved Roman road from Sephora, the beautiful new capital of Galilee built by Herod Antipas. Guarding the junction was a caravanserai, one of many set along the roads within a day's travel of another to serve as both market and safe harbour for traders and all others with reason to roam the land.

The great compound covered more than a hundred paces on a side, with walls the height of three men and a double gate in the western face. It was here where merchants could lease space to store their cargoes, care for their animals, and rest. Here also, they might foster a new alliance, discover a new product, or learn information they could exploit for profit.

Up the ridge road some distance above the caravanserai, before the slope lost the advantage of high ground, was a semi-permanent Roman fort. Of a size with the trading hub, a deep ditch and earthen wall protected the legion post. Sharpened stakes lined the berm, angled outward like a row of hungry teeth. The camp sat a safe distance back, the trees and shrubs surrounding it cut low as a killing field. Two tall braziers marked the main gate.

"Married," Metlip said, shortening his steps to match Iesu's. Iesu looked up at the Nubian. "I surprise you?"

"Not really," Metlip replied. "I just never thought about it. It is not something possible for me, but I admit I never considered the

same for you.” He looped a ropy arm across Iesu’s shoulders. “I have missed you so, my brother. There is an emptiness at home without you.”

“How so?”

Metlip considered his words. “Your mother was upset you left without a farewell, but she has coped better than your father. After all, she owns the only Aegyptian looms between here and Capernaum, so her weaving is sought after even by those who shun Josef’s furniture. But your departure—and the bitter farewell it followed—almost crushed his business and his spirit both. Were it not for Marcus—“

Iesu chuckled. “The Roman? I think he does not care for me.”

Metlip took his arm from Iesu’s shoulders, turning to face him. “He is a good man and has gone to great lengths for your father. After you left, our neighbours would hurl insults and throw stones at his back. But then Marcus threatened to station a garrison here, and the abuses ceased. He also saved your father’s enterprise.”

“The torture frames?”

“Yes, those,” the Nubian answered, “but also a rich market for his traveling furniture among the Roman officers. I will show you your father’s genius with wood, and how a simple box may become a desk or how three sticks and some leather take but a moment to become a seat that is stable in any terrain.”

“Indeed,” said Iesu. “I confess I had little thought for what my exile meant for you, beyond my regret at missing my mother’s farewell. It was not a thing I planned.”

The two men walked for a while in comfortable silence, each lost in their thoughts. They made good time, their steps eased by the track’s incline. When they came level with the track leading to the watch fires marking the Roman camp, Metlip slowed to a halt.

Resting his hands on Iesu’s shoulders, he waited for his brother to meet his gaze. “I am relieved and grateful you are here, Iesu. Each day I asked God to bring you home so I could beg your forgiveness, Brother.”

“Forgive you? For what?”

“All of this was my fault. Your exile, your father’s anger and resentment. Had I not persuaded you to follow your dreams—if you had not listened to me—“

Iesu held up his palm, and the Nubian quieted. “All I have experienced is thanks to you, Brother. You spoke for the Father Above and laid my destiny before me.”

“How so?”

“In good time, my brother, I will reveal all you set in motion, but here we must part. Until dawn, then.”

Metlip jogged towards the Roman sentries. Iesu continued downhill to the caravanserai, marked in the darkness by a tight constellation of fires signalling the first labours of the day.

On the return up the ridge, Metlip kept pace with the Tribune’s mount, his loping strides matching the canter of the Arabian horse. He held a torch in his outward hand to light the way, but his attention was on the Roman.

“Do not dwell on your master’s anger, my friend,” Marcus told him. “His words were cruel, but they reflected the emotion of the moment, not his true feelings. I suspect they were aimed at himself as much as you. He loves you as a son.”

Metlip shook his head, though Marcus missed it. “He is not my father. He is my master, though I confess there are times when he leaves me confused. Tonight was one of only a handful of times in my life when he has chastised me.” He paused a moment, then laughed. “Come to think of it, most of the other times were at night too, when he failed to see me in the darkness.”

The pair reached the outer buildings of the town. Marcus slowed his mount to a walk, lowering his voice so as not to wake the sleeping villagers.

“Are you happy, my friend?” Marcus asked.

“Of course, Tribune. Why should I not be?”

“As a slave, I mean.”

“I know no other status, Tribune. What have I to compare it to? I am sheltered, I share my master’s food, I am skilled in my trade. What more should I want?”

“The choice to be something else. Join the legions, for instance.”

A moment passed before the slave answered. “A soldier? I think I could not be an effective one.”

“Why not?” Marcus asked. “Look at you. More than a mile at a steady run, and uphill, but your breathing is not even laboured. Your physical condition is already the match of any legionnaire and better than most.”

“I have no wish to kill.”

Marcus didn’t answer. Metlip glanced up at the Tribune and caught a haunted expression before the Roman looked away.

Eventually, Marcus said, “Of course not. No man should wish to kill. But a soldier follows orders, and when commanded to attack, you—you obey. My father owns vast vineyards and taught me to follow him. But I was not happy and wished to change who I was. I ran away and joined the legions, sure that a soldier’s life would hone me into the man I thought I should be. My family name ensured quick promotion, and I embraced my training. Soon, I was an officer, and imagined my rank would shield me from the worst violence.”

The Roman met Metlip’s eyes. “And it did. Until my patrol—well, I was but second in command—they tasked my patrol to scout behind the enemy to determine the strength of their reserves. They had none, but we discovered their baggage train with their injured, their women, children. They ordered me to kill them. And I obeyed. We slaughtered everyone.”

“Women?” Metlip asked. “Children?” Marcus could only nod.

They turned into the narrow lane that led to Metlip’s home.

“Yes. Women and children and the infirm. They only haunt my dreams, now. They have vacated the shadows, abandoned the edges of my vision. But they will forever inhabit my dreams.” Marcus cleared his throat. “After, when I thought about what I had done, I could not bear it. It made me sick. They placed me on medical leave and, lacking another haven, I went home to face my father.”

The Roman went silent again. When he could wait no longer, Metlip asked, “And?”

“And what I thought would be humiliation and ridicule was not. My father knew why I had left. ‘A father knows his son better than he even knows himself,’ he told me. Rather than disgracing me, he told me what was important to him was that I returned. Though he could not prevent me from fulfilling my remaining term of service, he was able to facilitate my transfer to a new, less dangerous posting. Quartermaster of the Tenth Legion.”

As they reached the slave’s home, the quiet sibilance of the night surrendered to the noise of human activity in the yard beyond the wall. Metlip rapped on the gate and a moment later, they heard a grunt of effort, followed by a thud, and the portal opened to reveal a straining prepubescent boy. Ezekiel was an orphan and now Josef’s youngest apprentice. Marcus dismounted, waiting for Metlip to take his horse.

“Thank you, Zeke,” the slave said, and handed the boy the torch. “You will be stronger than Samson when you are full grown. I was much older than you before I could lift that beam. Will you please care for the Tribune’s horse? I will secure the gate.”

The boy’s smile vanished as he turned to accept the reins from Marcus. The Roman was a regular guest, but he was still a Roman—and a soldier—and he terrified Zeke. That fear multiplied when the boy realised he could not both lead the horse and carry the torch, in case the animal shied. He halted in his tracks, unsure of what to do.

But no sooner had he heard the beam replaced in the iron brackets when Metlip lifted the torch from his grasp. Relieved, the boy led the horse towards the stable, rubbing the animal’s neck with his spare hand. Metlip took a few paces along the wall, returning with a tall iron tripod.

“You never fail to impress me, my friend,” Marcus said. “If you ever were to sign up, you would be promoted quickly, your race of no consequence among legionnaires. The legion looks for men able to consider the needs of their troops and maintain respect for those they command.”

“But I lied,” the slave replied. “I was not older than him when I first lifted that beam.”

“Perhaps, but a commander is forgiven a lie if his words motivate his men and raise their morale.”

Another of Josef’s apprentices, Abram, older than Zeke and an orphan like the others, was harnessing two horses to a wagon in the middle of the yard. The wagon was new and singular in its construction. While the bed of the vehicle kept familiar proportions, the wheels were much larger than normal, though more slender in profile. As a result, the wagon was taller, but appeared shorter.

The slave set the tripod near the rear of the strange vehicle, out of sight of the horses, and dropped the torch into a ring at its peak.

Marcus walked around the wagon, shaking his head. “This is the most unique wagon I have ever seen. And one of the most beautiful, considering it is a utility wagon and not a patrician’s carriage. It is both practical and elegant. And, of course, meticulously crafted.”

“It is all that, Tribune. We have worked on this for more than a year. We spent more time determining its proportions and attributes as we did building it.”

“But it is obviously a wagon meant for goods,” Marcus said. “Why then is it so different from every other of its kind?”

“We wanted it to be adaptable,” Metlip replied. “Think of it as a natural progression of my master’s traveling furniture.” He held his palm up to avoid any more questions from the Tribune. “I know my master wishes to explain all that went into it himself.”

Side by side, slave and soldier crossed to the open doors of the shop, where Josef was reciting his instructions to the eldest two of his four apprentices. Both youths listened intently. After Josef finished, Negev, almost full grown, repeated all he had heard. When he paused near the end, Daniel, as tall despite a few years difference in age, picked up where Negev faltered. Josef nodded and the two youths relaxed.

Several paces before reaching the shop door, Metlip called, “Master!”

Josef looked up, alarmed. Marcus hid a chuckle behind a hand to his mouth and then cleared his throat. When his master saw nothing to worry about in the two men, he furrowed his brows at Metlip, who added, "Apologies, Master. I did not want to surprise you again."

Marcus diverted Josef's attention. "My dear Josef, you must explain your intent and rationale behind your new wagon. It resembles what I imagine a patrician might employ to ferry his family's picnic supplies."

As Josef's gaze swung to Marcus, so his expression changed. As if upended, his scowl became a smile. "You will not have it. It is mine. Besides, it is not rugged enough to stand up to the abuse of metal-clad soldiers throwing their equipment into it, or worse, clambering in and out of it themselves. It is the first of what we hope will be many, but we only completed last week and I haven't even driven it more than a mile or so, because the varnish refused to dry."

"So that is why you wanted varnish. I thought it was for furniture. I agree about how long it would last in service with a legion," Marcus replied, looking over his shoulder at his friend's brilliance and craftsmanship made real. "It is of the same quality as anything else you have assembled in wood. All it lacks is some of Metlip's exquisite carved ornamentation."

Josef moved past his friend, beckoning him to follow. "It is a meeting of two empires in a dual-purpose conveyance."

Marcus laughed. "You said I would never have it, yet now you sound as if you are trying to persuade me to buy it. Two empires, two functions. Fine. What does that mean?"

Halting a few paces short of the wagon, Josef considered his next words. "We took the basics of a Roman utility wagon, those your quartermaster corps use daily, because it is the best wagon in the world. But we have no need of a wagon rugged enough to carry a dozen barrels of wine or six injured legionnaires. Nor do we need it to be as large as the original. So we thought about how much to reduce it without losing too much capacity and how to lighten it with the least loss of strength."

Closing the distance to the vehicle, he ran his hand along the upper edge of the sideboard. “We also considered which wood, if any, might be better suited to build such a conveyance rather than the heavy oak you Romans use. In truth, the answer is two woods, not one.” Josef bent to rap his knuckles on the undercarriage. “Poplar for the running-gear, because it is strong, light and flexible—as long as we do not expose it to water. Hence, the varnish. Everything else is cedar for its resistance to insects and weather. This wagon will carry three quarters of what your wagons can, and it weighs less than half as much.”

“I can see why it took you half a year to complete your plans for it.” Marcus caught Josef’s brief glance at his slave. “Save your anger, Josef. Metlip refused to tell me anything other than it took longer to design than to build. So, Rome is one empire. Which other did you marry us to?”

“Look closely, my friend,” Josef teased. “Consider the size of the wheels, a third larger than the wheel of a legion wagon, with twice as many longer, yet more slender, spokes. Where have you seen wheels such as these?” He wrapped his fingers around a spoke.

“Chariots?”

“Exactly,” the carpenter confirmed. “Larger wheels grant a smoother ride—something you want if you are using a bow at speed in a chariot. We also kept Aegyptian construction techniques in mind. Rather than cut the rim’s curved sections from blocks, we soaked them for a week and then clamped them into shape using special-built iron clamps. The result is a stronger, more resilient wheel, but they took longer to assemble, which was why—”

“Josef!” Maryam stood in the dwelling’s doorway, a pair of leather bags at her feet. “Save it for Jerusalem.” She bent to pick the bags up, but Metlip was already beside her, easing them from her grip.

“Until Jerusalem, then,” Josef said. Turning, he walked into the shop. Negev waited just inside, bowing as Marcus entered behind him. “As you know, almost half of the pieces are packed,” the carpenter added, gesturing. “Negev and the others will finish the rest tomorrow.”



Marcus nodded his agreement of Josef's assessment. "I will send some men to help in the morning. I would like to climb the valley's southern slope into Samaria and reach Nain tomorrow night, which will make an easy two-day journey. I will reach Jerusalem before you, since your route will detour through the Jordan Valley. Send word of where you lodge to the garrison." The Roman clasped Josef's shoulder. "Finally, I will have you in Jerusalem. We will further your education of fine wines and build the market for your craftsmanship among my cohorts."

To Negev, Marcus said, "Expect some of my men and wagons in the morning to assist you. They are very experienced at transporting supplies, but I will tell them to defer to you in the packing of the pieces."

Negev's eyes lit up. "But," Marcus added, "you must pledge to hear them out if they disagree with your decisions. They will explain their reasoning, hoping to change your mind, but you will have the final say."

"Yes, Tribune," Negev replied. "Thank you, Tribune."

When Negev didn't move, Josef cleared his throat and said, "Negev." A second mention of his name brought the youth back from his reverie. His master added, "Help with loading the wagon, please."

"You are a good man, Josef, but you fail to see yourself as the rest of us do." Marcus could see his words made his friend uncomfortable. He changed the subject. "So, two empires, Rome and Egypt. What about dual purpose?"

"That must wait, my friend. That and all else I wish to share with you. Dawn will arrive soon, and we must be at the caravanserai before then. I think my tale will be worth the wait."

Marcus stepped close to Josef. "So be it. Until Jerusalem," he told the older man. The two men embraced once again, for longer this time, their release of each other slower, reluctant. Marcus turned and left. Josef perused his products, deciding which of them to take.

## T W O

The sight of the caravan in the dim glow of the pre-dawn reminded Metlip of his early apprenticeship to Josef, when the boy thought to braid strands of waste thread, tying knots in a short, regular count so he had a consistent and accurate means to measure the lengths of lumber Josef needed. Metlip's knots had been meticulously spaced and equal in size—the caravan looked like a mad string of random knots carelessly placed. Both ends of the caravan dissolved into the darkness, and Metlip had never heard such noise.

The odd collection of wagons and carts were the only things stationary. Surrounding them were chaotic clusters of pack animals and flocks and people burdened with goods and babies. Older children clutched skirts and looked terrified. Donkeys brayed in protest at the weight of their loads. Young boys and girls called to their sheep and goats, herding them towards the rear while guards paced up and down the line, shouting orders and pointing to where new arrivals should join the raucous procession.

“Over there,” Josef said, and pointed towards a waving figure silhouetted against the caravanserai's pale wall. Metlip's gaze followed Josef's finger, and made out his brother and the woman standing beside him. Seeing the wagon veer towards them, Iesu's attention went to his betrothed. The slave watched Iesu lift the flap on his satchel and pull something from it, which he handed over to her.

As the Nubian reined the horses to a halt, the pair approached the wagon and Metlip could see his brother's wife-to-be. She was as tall as Iesu, and slender as a blade of grass. Dressed in a worn but clean and well-mended dress, her hair wrapped in a tichel, the headscarf ubiquitous among Hebrew women. He watched her head tilt back, swallow whatever it was Iesu had given her, and then slide a water skin from her shoulder and drink from it. Slinging the skin over her shoulder once again, the young woman plucked at her dress and faced them.

One of the caravan guards had noticed the new arrivals and marched over. He wore plain and functional armour of no particular style. His hide cuirass bore scrapes and scratches, but looked well-maintained.

He glanced at Metlip, eyes widening at the African's height and build, then just as quickly dismissing him as a threat by his collar. His gaze slid to Iesu, but he spoke to Maryam. "You turned us down for him?"

"I know your kind," Maryam replied. "Long on talk, but too often short on skill. This is my future husband and I would not lose him for a brief entertainment."

"I would not speak about 'brief'," the guard chuckled. Turning to Josef, he spoke with memorised formality. "The Sadducee Methelas of Philippa leads this caravan. If you travel with us, you must pay for his protection. There is an additional fee if you wish for us to care for your animals at rest stops and nighttime, but you are responsible for removing and fastening all harnesses." He paused and glanced around. "Do you have a flock? If so, there is a fee for their protection. You must be ready to move on when the caravan does. If you are not in your assigned place when the caravan leaves, we will leave you behind. If this happens, you will forfeit your fee. Do you understand what I said?"

"We do," Josef replied.

"Do you agree to these conditions?"

The carpenter nodded. "We do."

The guard pointed to a man armed with a waxed wooden tablet, talking to each group of travellers as he etched their particulars in the soft surface. Two guards stood nearby, one hefting a small iron-strapped chest into which they deposited coins. A second guard held his short sword unsheathed.

"That is the caravan's scribe," the man said. "Speak to him, then join where he tells you." Satisfied the newcomers understood, he moved off to intercept a couple leading a donkey loaded with sacks and children.

Josef climbed down from his seat next to Metlip and reached under the bench seat to release a hidden latch. The front panel swung down and he withdrew a seasoned leather bag. As he moved away, Iesu forestalled him.

“Father, this is Maryam of Magdala, my beloved and betrothed. My Heart, this is my father, Josef, master carpenter.”

“It is an honour, Master Josef.”

“I know who—what—you are.”

“Josef,” his wife scolded. “You promised—“

The young woman seemed unaffected by the insult. “What am I?” she asked, her tone curious and without rancour.

“A whore.”

Maryam nodded her agreement. “I was.”

“You have defiled yourself beyond measure,” Josef insisted. “My son thinks his forgiveness is enough to redeem you, but I know the depth of your dishonour and you will never be rid of it.”

“Father—” Iesu began, but fell silent when his betrothed laid her hand on his arm. Maryam made eye contact with Metlip and his mistress before returning her attention to Josef. “I have been a whore,” she said. “I have let men use my body for their pleasure. I had no other choice than to starve.”

“There are always choices,” snapped Josef.

“Are there?” Maryam replied. “List my choices then, and we will see which would have been a better one.”

“Marriage.”

The young woman scanned the surrounding faces again. “I was, once. To the son of a salt merchant. But he put me aside when I failed to bear him children.”

Josef shook his head. “Then you should have returned to your family, as custom demands.”

“I have none. My mother died by my father’s hand and I would have shared her fate had I not escaped.”

Josef was angry—at his son, the spontaneous journey to Jerusalem, having his time with Marcus cut short—and so was im-

placable. "You could have offered yourself as slave to a merchant or noble."

Maryam laughed. "Sold myself to a merchant? So he may use me however he wishes whenever he desires it? The only difference between that choice and mine is that I say who may have me and when, and earn a coin with each encounter. No, Master Josef, what offends you is not my trade, but that I submit to no man."

Josef glanced at his wife, but found no sympathy in her frown. He managed a curt nod before striding away. Iesu led Maryam to his mother.

"Why is this wagon so tall?" The older woman asked. "I am likely to break something climbing down, yes? Even with the step," Iesu's Mother gauged that likelihood as she studied the drop, but Metlip held out his arm for her to grasp. "I will meet your wife-to-be on equal footing."

Once on the ground, she embraced the younger woman. "Welcome into our family. Heed not my husband's rudeness. He is angry about having to make this journey. He has no fond memories of Jerusalem."

"Of course," said the younger Maryam, but her attention had moved to take in Metlip.

"One thing, though," the older woman said, holding the younger woman's arm. "We cannot both be 'Maryam'. I will be 'Mother'. That includes you, also, Metlip."

"Yes, Mistress."

"Metlip," Maryam said, craning her neck back. "You are even more impressive in real life than you are in Iesu's stories. And so much taller than I imagined."

"My brother, in all ways save blood," said Iesu.

"Then why does he wear a slave's collar?"

"Hebrew vanity," Iesu replied. "It reminds them of their precedence before all others in the eyes of the Father Above."

"It is nothing," Metlip said, his fingers plucking at the iron ring set into the front of his leather collar. "I often forget I wear it."

“It marks a compromise made to reassure our neighbours while permitting Metlip unaccompanied movement in the village,” Iesu explained. “Nazareth is a very traditional town. Remember my tale of walking out of synagogue in protest as a youth? It was because they refused to welcome Metlip for the colour of his skin. He wears a collar, but he lives as one of us.”

Metlip bowed to Maryam. “It is a pleasure to meet the woman able to capture my brother’s rebel heart.”

The smile she gave him in return assured Metlip that she saw him no differently than Iesu. “I have seen dark skin, but none so black as yours. Where are you from?”

“Somewhere far away. I do not know exactly, but I think from beyond Aegypt. My master acquired me as a child, so all of my memories are of Nazareth.”

Mother raised her chin and sniffed the air. Closing her eyes, she pivoted and sniffed again, and then once more. When she opened her eyes, she was facing the caravanserai wall. “Of course.” Without another word, she reached behind the bench and untied one of her leather bags.

“What is it, Mistress?”

“I smell fresh bread. I have dates, olives, figs. But no bread.” She held out a small leather purse to Metlip.

The Nubian accepted it. “Do we need cheese, Mistress?”

Mother appeared not to have heard. “Someone in there is baking bread. Please purchase some. Seven or eight should be enough for the day, and we can get more in Beth-Shan.”

“Beth-Shan, Mistress?”

Iesu answered for his mother. “A town at the eastern end of the Jezreel, my brother. Where we will rest tonight. I forget this journey is new for you. We must travel four days to gain Jerusalem. In truth, it should take less than three days, but the only Hebrews who will set foot in Samaria are merchants. Today we will walk a Roman highway to the Jordan Valley. Tomorrow we will cross the River Jordan, then turn south and follow the river’s escarpment until we

meet another Roman road which we will take to climb up to the city. I cannot wait to see your face when the Jordan reveals itself.”

Looking over Iesu’s shoulder, Mother saw her husband returning. She understood what his rapid strides implied. Lifting the purse from Metlip’s hand, she faced her son. “I think it will be better if you two get the bread. And whatever else that will travel well. Metlip will help your father position the wagon in line. Look for us there.”

“And cheese,” Metlip called after them.

As Iesu and Maryam walked towards the caravanserai gate, Metlip, too, noticed his master’s approach.

“Mistress,” he said, “we should regain our seats.” He climbed to the bench and then helped Mother up. They were both seated when Josef replaced his satchel under the bench.

“Robbery!” he growled. “I must pay a bandit for protection from bandits. We should wait and travel with Marcus.”

“Marcus will go through Samaria,” his wife replied. “We may not.” Mother’s calm tone and reasonable words fed Josef’s temper.

“Who would know?” he barked. “And if they did, what could they do against Roman soldiers?”

“You are right, of course, husband. You should travel with Marcus. Metlip and I can escort Iesu and Maryam, yes? You will arrive ahead of us.” As if struck with an unexpected thought, she added, “you may find us lodging.”

Josef changed the subject. “Where are they?” he asked as he climbed up beside his slave.

“In the caravanserai, Master, purchasing bread and other provisions. Hopefully, cheese. They know to look for us among the column.” He flicked the reins, and the horses moved off. “Where do we join, Master?”

Like the Great Sea, the caravanserai was subject to tides—the daily outflow of those who spent the night and later, the influx of new guests. The dawn activities seemed the more intense, and witnessed a level of chaos that stemmed from the collective urgency to be on the road, but the greater share of the caravanserai’s labours oc-

curred in the afternoon. While they left in a large group every dawn, travelers arrived in a steady stream as the day came to a close, but every group had to be registered, their needs noted and space assigned among the two-level wooden structures lining the interior walls. The lower sections were stables or storerooms, the upper levels divided into chambers for people.

Two rules governed these market havens. The first was ‘Any Bargain Must be Honoured’. The second involved keeping the peace, and was less of a rule than common sense, because to be banned from a caravanserai could ruin a merchant’s trade. If he could not find an alternate—and potentially longer—route for his goods, he would have to camp outside the walls, risking bandits.

Some fed and watered their own animals, while others paid for the caravanserai grooms to do it. Visitors could buy food and drink, then sit with their fellows and share tales of the road, or eat what supplies they carried. Local farmers sold their produce in the yard’s centre, but they performed all slaughtering and cooking of meat outside the walls.

Iesu ignored a man waving skewers of roasted lamb as he threaded his way through the departing travelers. He passed beneath the grand arch in the western face, Maryam at his side, and found the expanse of packed dirt almost deserted.

“Iesu.” Maryam plucked at his sleeve, and he followed her towards a short line of hearths built against the wall just inside the gate. They came to a pair of wooden planks set on trestles. At one end of this makeshift table, a woman rolled handfuls of dough into balls, while the man beside her used a cylindrical stone to roll them into flat rounds before slapping them against the oven’s wall. He scraped other, finished loaves free, catching them with a long-handled tool with a wide, thin head, then piling them at the other end of the table.

A young boy crouched between them, a mound of fresh reeds at his side. After placing a row of reeds side by side, the boy planted a stick across one edge. He placed his foot to secure the stick and then, taking single reeds from the pile, the child rapidly plaited them into a rectangular mat which he handed to his father. The father piled



the flatbreads onto the mat and rolled them into a tube, which he secured with yet another reed before exchanging it for the coins Iesu offered.

The pair walked among a shrinking cluster of farmers and bought dried grapes and almonds. A rise in the volume of shouts outside the walls encouraged them to pick up their pace. Iesu could tell in the growing daylight that the lead wagons were already moving, but he knew his father's wagon was at the rear, so he guided Maryam in that direction.

## T H R E E

“You are the Nazarene.” Josef’s tone made it an accusation.

Iesu answered his father calmly, refusing the bait, his attention on the shallow clay bowl of dates and almonds in his hand. “Yes, Father.”

The Roman road from Sepphora that skirted the base of Nazareth’s ridge was paved and well-maintained, wide enough that the two men walked alongside the wagon, moving into file only for the occasional farmer’s cart or merchant’s wagon traveling in the opposite direction. Among the last to join the caravan, the family found themselves placed at the rear of the long line of vehicles, just ahead of those travellers pulling handcarts, the pilgrims on foot and the flocks that followed them.

“I knew it,” Metlip laughed. “I said it had to be him, Master.”

Their end of the column had yet to round the base of the ridge, but Metlip saw they were getting closer. The sun had cleared the horizon, but remnants of the night clung to the rocky slope towering above them.

The slave sat between the women, the reins slack in his hands. Maryam sat on his left, closest to Iesu, while on his right, Mother leaned forward, straining to hear.

“Where are your followers?” Josef asked.

“Gathering my flock. I hope.” Iesu offered the dish to Maryam, but she waved it away.

“Your flock are not your followers?”

“My followers,” Iesu explained, “my disciples—are those who share my ministry, like pupils or apprentices. My flock are those who have embraced my new vision of our relationship with the Father Above.”

Josef plucked a date from the bowl and looked at his son. “You dare to call yourself Messiah?”

Meeting his father’s gaze, contrition in his voice, Iesu responded, “No, Father. Not since that day. But others name me so, to sow

doubt among those I teach, in particular the priests who come whenever I speak to hurl insults and ask sly questions.” He jabbed his father lightly with his elbow. “But thanks to you, I know the law as well as they, and often better. And they lack imagination. While the priests themselves differ from place to place, their questions rarely change. Indeed, sometimes I answer before they finish asking, but then they name me wizard.”

“Why do they hate you so?” his father asked. “The caravanserais echo with tales of your miracles, yet the synagogue priest names you an enemy more dangerous than the Romans.”

Iesu shrugged. “The people see hope in my message, while priests fear for their power.” Iesu nodded to himself, organizing his argument in his head, then continued. “Yet they are blind to the simple fact that it is their corruption which necessitates change.” He gave another shrug. “They fear my teaching will rouse the poor and starving against them, and risk their wealth and status.”

Just then the wagon crossed the meridian from shadow into sunlight, and with it came a panoramic view of the Valley of Jezreel spread before them. Separating Galilee from Samaria, this broad, sloping vale ran east to west from the Great Sea to the Jordan Valley. Metlip had seen the valley many times during his walks in the hills above Nazareth with Iesu, but he had never been in it. Its true depth surprised him. Viewed from the hills, the valley seemed less dramatic. The discovery excited him, adding yet another novelty to this unexpected journey. And at the end, he would experience the wonder that was Jerusalem.

So clear was the air that the Via Maris, the primary highway linking Aegypt to Rome, looked like a sleek black snake emerging from a mountain pass to slither down the Jezreel’s southern slope, where it forked on the valley’s floor. One branch continued north following the coastline of the Great Sea.

The eastern arm ran the length of the Jezreel to the Jordan River, where it, too, turned north, skirting the western shore of the Sea of Galilee on its northern journey to the great markets of Damascus, crossroads of the world, for there the trade goods of Rome and Ae-

gypt were bargained for items and produce of Parthia and the Silk Road.

Sloping gently from west to east, Metlip could see the true length of the caravan. While the lead wagons had reached the great highway and were turning east, a glance behind him revealed only a portion of the ragged train of those walking—it would be some time still before all of them would see the sun. He began to count the wagons as they turned, but was distracted by Josef’s rising voice.

“Should they not fear losing all they have earned?” Josef demanded.

“Of course they should, Father,” Iesu answered. “That is not my goal. I have no wish to take what is theirs, but persuade them to better share their surplus with those near starving. When one has enough wealth to ensure a sound roof, a full belly and a fine cloak, what good is more, except to pretend superiority and stretch the lengths of pride? The priests press the peasants like grapes, draining the juice and leaving only pulp. The greater one’s wealth, the further removed are they from the Father’s Grace.”

“You say acquiring wealth goes against God?” Metlip glanced around to see who else might have heard. He was sure the merchant ahead was now listening, so he looked behind him—and his breath caught to see that the numbers of people on foot were far greater than he had imagined, the herd of animals behind them even larger. Then he realized not only were they walking but forced to carry their possessions and supplies while monitoring their children.

Iesu appeared unaware of his father’s growing anger. “Acquiring wealth is no sin, but hoarding it when others around you starve, is.”

“Why should those who toil from dawn to dusk to prosper give away what they have earned?”

“Show me a wealthy man who toils from dawn to dusk. Such men sit and watch their labourers harvest grapes or dress stones and then take the profit, taking joy from paying their labourers as little as possible. Do you imagine the Father Above approves of such inequality?”

Metlip felt a gentle elbow in his side. “Do something,” Mother said. “I will not have these strangers witness one of their arguments.”

He turned his face towards her. “What should I do?”

“Speak of a new subject. Ask Iesu something about his travels.”

Josef pressed his case, thinking his victory assured before his son’s naive goals. “Inequality is life. There have always been those who have more than others, because they work harder and longer.”

It occurred to the slave that this argument was very one-sided. The old Iesu would have been just as roused as his father by now, but the new version of his brother kept his calm, refusing Josef’s challenge to make the argument personal.

“And so they choose to labour such long hours,” Iesu replied. “Where is it written that life is eternal labour? They could also choose to put aside their labour when they achieved their needs to sustain themselves and their families.”

Metlip felt another jab in his side, harder this time. What topic would avoid becoming fuel for a different side of their conflict? Did one even exist?

“Did you learn nothing of business while you apprenticed?” Josef countered. “An enterprise takes years to develop. It must become known, build a reputation. Only then does business become steady, and even greater effort is necessary to maintain it. If the shop only opened a few days each week, buyers would go elsewhere.”

“The business need not close. Others would take their turn to labour within, earning their way and advancing commerce.”

Metlip sighed with relief when it came to him. “The stories of your miracles,” he blurted. “Are they true?”

Iesu glanced up at him and smiled in gratitude. “I have done miracles. Just not all they have credited me with.” He leaned forward so he could see his mother’s face. “Mother, do you recall that wedding we attended, where the wine ran out?”

“Yes,” she replied. “You added water to the empty casks and made sport with the children rolling them around.”

“Indeed,” Iesu said. “The water took on the flavour that had soaked into the wood, enough that they accepted it as watered wine. Someone remembered that wedding and turned it into the miracle of how I changed water into wine.” Iesu raised his arms in triumph. “A miracle.”

All laughed, save Josef. “Did you tell the truth of the tale?” he asked his son.

Iesu studied his father for some moments before answering. “Many times, Father. I explained how a cask absorbs some of the wine’s flavour and that by adding water and rolling the barrels, it may draw some of that flavour from the wood.” He shrugged. “No one would believe me.”

The slave laughed, showing his even, white teeth, but he noticed his master’s frown and quieted.

“Did you truly walk on water?” he asked.

Iesu glanced at the Nubian. “Do you think I did? If so, I must disappoint you, Brother, though there are those who would swear otherwise. Successive storms had battered the Sea of Galilee in the days before I spoke, and the water level in the lake had risen to cover the pier. Though it was plain to me as I climbed from our boat, to those waiting onshore it seemed as if I walked across the lake’s surface. By the time I made land, my disciples were already proclaiming it as a miracle to the crowd.”

Metlip threw his head back and laughed even harder than before, and Iesu joined him.

Josef only frowned. “And the stories of your healings?”

“I have healed many, Father, it is true. It is my gift from the Father Above, but I learned much of healing from an isolated community and more yet from a Parthian physician.”

Still chuckling, Metlip asked, “How did you feed thousands?”

Shaking his head, Iesu smiled at his brother. “A few hundred.”

“Still. From nothing you created bread and fish.”

“I did.”

Iesu’s answer puzzled Metlip. “Was that not a miracle?”

“No. It was luck. A noble woman, a Roman, gifted me a golden buckle when I baptised her. I kept it, to use when the time was right. The crowd that day were contentious, goaded by priests to demand a miracle, so I used the buckle to buy bread and fish enough for all.”

Metlip laughed. “A neat trick.”

“Which ever returns to bite me,” Iesu replied. “It is the tale that precedes me, the plenty-from-nothing miracle everyone clamours to see.”

Josef noticed a new vibration in the stone surface of the road, and then a rhythmic whisper that grew in volume to become the measured slap of hob-nailed sandals from a column of Romans approaching from the East.

Taking his son’s arm, Josef pulled Iesu into the space between their horses and the wagon ahead. When Mother saw this, she nudged Metlip once again and pointed. Metlip held the reins for Maryam to take, then leapt over Mother’s feet to the road.

Josef asked, “And when they do not see it?”

“I answer that if they need a miracle to convince them, then they are not ready to see it. When we are ready, I tell them, we will see miracles all around us, because everyone will produce them.”

Josef growled, “That answer cannot work forever.”

“No? That answer leads to the core of my message, that each of us must make their own covenant with the Father Above, a pledge to love all men as he loves himself, and act to honour God in exchange for His Grace.” Iesu smiled at the slave as he joined them, held out the bowl. Metlip took some almonds, which he ate one at a time.

Led by a pair of mounted officers, the legionnaires marching three abreast sounded like a pulsing waterfall and drowned out any conversation. Metlip watched the soldiers as they passed, though not a single pair of eyes met his. As quickly as they arrived, the Romans moved on.

“That is foolish and naïve,” Josef stated once the troops were well past. “Do you think generations of enmity may be erased so easily?”

“Yes,” came the reply. “Enmity thrives when shared among many. Reduce those who cling to it and it withers. Hold to your covenant with the Father Above, regardless of the actions of others. As more people accept my word, there will be fewer to ignore it.”

“And how will you guarantee that?”

“I am not ready to share my plan. In the meantime, I live my message. I heal the afflicted as I find them and I honour my covenant with the Father Above.”

“You tell them what they want to hear.”

“I tell them what they need to hear—that there is a better way, where cooperation succeeds competition—that the bounty of the Earth is not for the few to hold over the many.”

“You speak of the Sadducees,” Josef said. “They have always been the priests, and so have ruled us.”

“The Sadducees are not fit to be goat-herders, let alone priests,” Iesu replied. “Their corruption blackens the name of the Father Above when they should be an example for the people. Instead, they covet entitlements and exceptions, preference and power. They degrade the role rather than rise to it. The Pharisees are complicit, happy to grow fat and soft while they meet the minimum charities defined by law.”

“The law is all,” said Josef. “The law defines us, specifies our responsibilities to God.”

Iesu leaned forward to look at Josef on the other side of Metlip. “Does the law enable you or restrain you, Father?”

Josef opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind.

Into the silence, Iesu said, “The law lacks morality. What does the law know of compassion? Of empathy? Nothing. The law lacks the one thing necessary for any measure of morality—a soul.”

“Moses’ law has served us for a hundred generations.”

“It has,” Iesu agreed. “His laws are the glue that preserved us when it seemed God had turned away, and our unrelenting obedience to those laws proof of our fidelity. Yet Moses failed, because you may not define morality with laws.”



“Have you lost all respect for your people?” growled his father. “Will you reject your heritage? You deny the very covenant that defines us.”

“Perhaps it is that covenant which is flawed, Father,” Iesu replied. “Your pardon, but I must check on my betrothed.” He veered away before his father could answer.

“Always he manages the last barb. He never changes,” Josef stated.

“Of course he has changed, Master,” the Nubian said. “Where is his famous temper? His self-doubt? He is not the angry rebel who walked south so long ago. Though his laughter lacks the passion I remember and his eyes hold a secret that haunts him, I say he has weathered his time away.”

“Where is his common sense, Metlip? This woman he weds, the dereliction of his trade to walk the land begging for alms? How can I accept those choices and be silent?”

“Silent? No, Master, that would be a dereliction of your duty as his father. You must present your wisdom and explore his reasoning, but then, Master, you must accept those choices as his own.”

“See? It requires no special skill beyond attention to the task,” Maryam said as her future mother-in-law gripped the leather reins. “The horses know to follow the wagon ahead. Holding the reins too tight confuses them.”

“Josef always made it seem difficult,” Mother replied. “Beyond a woman’s ability.”

“Perhaps he considers it beneath you, Mother,” Iesu said, handing Maryam the near empty dish. She accepted it, frowning, but didn’t eat. Iesu missed her reaction as he stared ahead to Josef walking with Metlip.

“How alike they are, master and slave,” he said. “Aside from a dramatic difference in height, they share a host of manners. The careful, measured steps as if they were forever being observed and tested, the way they keep their arms close in to avoid accidental contact, their tunics precisely pleated under their belts. And their ner-

vous habits, Metlip always tugging at his collar, father twisting his ring whenever he is thinking. They are as alike as father and son. There is none of the child left in Metlip, Mother. Why has he not had his freedom?”

“And what would he do with it?”

“Decide his own path?”

“Would his freedom truly bless him with that choice? It would only force him from us, yes? He may not live as a free man here.”

“In truth?” asked Maryam.

“Indeed,” Iesu replied. “Nazareth is far from Capernaum, my Heart. What may be common there is forbidden here.” He looked back at his mother. “Are you certain it is not that father holds propriety as the highest virtue?”

“You question the depth of your father’s affection for Metlip, yes? Do not. It is not my husband’s nature to display his affections so openly, but his love pervades all his endeavours with Metlip, even more so since you left. And Josef is not getting any younger.”

The lower slopes and floor of the Valley of Jezreel were the most fertile lands in Roman Palestine, and so great estates lined the Via Maris, their boundaries marked by rows of piled rocks. Beginning mere paces from the road’s edge were fields of wheat and barley stretching into the distance. Smaller piles of stones identified the fields of tenant farmers, those without land of their own, who laboured in exchange for whatever yield remained after their landlord took his due.

Where the valley’s slopes grew too steep for grain, orchards and olive groves replaced them, and among these sat palatial homes. As often as one of these expansive homes sat among gardens, another huddled behind stout walls. Metlip noted a common rhythm among the labourers as they harvested the grain. The workers took a short pace and then twisted their upper body to maximize their reach as they swung heavy scything blades through the ripened crop. Behind them, women and children gathered the stalks into bundles, tying them and standing them upright.

As the morning wore on, the valley narrowed and the hills lining the slopes grew taller. Two mountains soon towered above the rest. The southern peak sat among lesser hills whose slopes hosted orchards. The northern mountain stood alone and was higher, its steep slopes becoming the northern boundary of the Jezreel.

Pointing towards the North, Metlip said, "I know that is Mount Tabor. We could often see it from the hills, if the clouds permitted." Shifting to point at the southern peak, he went on, "But what is that one called?"

"Mount Gilboa," his master answered. "The northern limit of Samaria. Beyond these two lies the Jordan Valley."

Though maintained by the Roman civil authorities, the paving stones tight and level and the border vegetation neatly trimmed, the Via Maris road was well-travelled and subject to a considerable litter of animal droppings. And since the harvest rains were over, the constant procession of wheels, hooves and feet flattened and spread the excrement to dry under the sun and rise as dust.

The further back in the column, the greater and more dense became the foul cloud. Mother's eyes began to itch, and then to burn when she rubbed them. Her breath shortened in response to the choking dust, and soon she coughed.

Iesu heard a wet gurgle in her throat after a bout of coughing. "Are you distressed, Mother?"

"It will pass," she replied, looking at him. "But my eyes are burning."

Mother went into another coughing fit, which brought Josef rushing to her side. He climbed the wagon's step, but she pushed him back.

Iesu said nothing, instead delving into his satchel. He withdrew and unrolled a cloth and doused it with water. "Place this over your eyes," he instructed her. "Do not rub. Just hold it in place. I will tell you to reverse it and when you do that, then you may—gently—rub from the inside outwards."

She took the wet cloth from him and obeyed. As she held the cloth to her face, Iesu took a second cloth from his bag, and then a

slim clay jar, like an amphora without handles. This cloth he folded before pouring some liquid over it. He looked at his mother and said, "Now reverse the cloth, Mother, but remember to wipe away from your nose."

Mother did as he told her. "Better?" Iesu asked.

She blinked several times, then smiled. "Yes."

"Now," her son continued, holding out the folded cloth. "Place this over your mouth and breathe through it. It will remind you of a grove after a heavy rain, yet slightly bitter. Still, it will clear your breaths and help expel the dust in your coughs."

"What is that?" Josef demanded.

"Something to help clear her lungs."

"How do you know this will work?"

Iesu spared a quick glance at his mother. "See for yourself, Father."

His mother, holding the cloth over her nose and mouth, nodded at her husband.

Just then Maryam tugged on the left rein and the horses veered in that direction, following the wagons in front. A guard marched along the column's right flank, motioning the procession to move off the road to the North. When the caravan finally halted, the Via Maris was a thin ribbon in the distance, and the sheer slope of Mount Tabor was so close the mountain seemed poised to crush them.

## About the Author

Christopher Grant has been many things in his life, good and bad. Some of it wasn't his fault. In fact, a lot of it was nothing more than circumstance, the chance of adventure and an attraction to risk. For the record, no one was hurt (beyond recovery), no one did jail time and no one was cheated out of anything. Most of his life has been spent as an artist and a writer who enjoys the wide open spaces of the Canadian prairies for half the year and curses the cold for the rest. He is a husband and a father and a fan of Ducati motorcycles. *The Father, the Son & the Slave* is his first novel. He is trying very hard not to write a sequel.

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MAY BE ADDRESSED TO

[thatchristophergrant@shaw.ca](mailto:thatchristophergrant@shaw.ca)

[www.christophergrant.ca](http://www.christophergrant.ca)

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