



PANTERA

By Sara Reinke

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FOREWORD

I was born and raised a Catholic, although I haven't been to church in more than 15 years and technically consider myself to be a really *latent* sort. I'd never heard of a Roman soldier named Pantera until a few years ago. Catholics are taught that Mary became pregnant with Jesus through divine intervention; she was still a virgin upon his birth. It's nice conjecture, but the logic-minded history buff in me always longed for, as the late Paul Harvey might have said, "the rest of the story."

While watching a documentary, I heard several historians debate possible origins for Jesus. One that stood out as plausible in my mind was that Mary had been raped by a Roman soldier and Jesus was the result.

Other historic "urban legends" suggest that Mary had a consensual affair with a Roman soldier named Pantera. Indeed, in Germany, a headstone has been discovered with the name *Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera* engraved; a soldier whose birthplace, it states, was Sidon, Phoenicia, and whose birthdate would have made him a contemporary of Jesus' Biblical mother, if not a next-door neighbor in geographical terms.

My muse started toying around with these ideas. *Pantera* is the result. I guess I expected to come away from this story having all of the more cynical, pessimistic components of my beliefs reinforced, but much to my surprise, I felt a strangely renewed sense of faith. I think that's because I ultimately realized that Jesus' origins didn't matter to me; it didn't take away from the power of his messages in life. So maybe he'll cut me some slack for having written this. I like to think so, anyway.

— Sara Reinke (*March, 2009*)

CHAPTER ONE

“Pantera, what are you doing? Come on, the tuguria are this way.”

Abdes was still unaccustomed to this unfamiliar beckon, the Roman name the army had given him six months earlier. He rarely heard it at the training camp east of Mount Carmel in the province of Galilee. Most times, the centurions who served as his task masters settled for calling him “you, there” as they clapped him with their vine canes or lashes.

“Hadad above and below, Pantera, come on,” said his barrack mate, a young man he knew only by the Roman cognomen Opilio. Opilio had another name, of course; like Abdes, he was Phoenician, and “Opilio” had been assigned to him, as “Pantera” had to Abdes upon his enlistment. No matter the indignities or abuses heaped upon them in the pretense of their training, however, Opilio had never made mention of any given name other than this. He took fierce pride in his newly found Roman citizenship; a pride Abdes did not quite understand or share.

Even now, on their first venture beyond the walls and ditches of their training camp and into the nearby city of Sepphoris, Opilio demonstrated his pride. While Abdes wore a pair of drably colored, overlapping tunics lashed about his waist with a girdle, Opilio wore a bright red, knee-length tunic that marked him as a Roman recruit. Abdes wore a simple scarf wrapped about his head to protect him from the sun; Opilio wore the dented, scraped helmet he had been provided as if it was the crested helm of a Praetorian Guard. Abdes was nearly mortified to be seen with him.

“Pantera,” Opilio said, aggravated now by Abdes’ utter lack of acknowledgment. He hooked his hand against Abdes’ sleeve and tugged to draw his gaze. “What are you doing?” he asked. “Come on—we’ll fall behind the others. The tuguria are this way.”

The other youths of their decury barrack had been nearly frenzied with excitement to be turned loose and on their own in the market district of Sepphoris. Along their hike south toward the city, they had chattered non-stop about the infamous tuguria—brothels in which a man might spend his wages in the company of well-skilled prostitutes.

“I need to buy some papyrus and ink,” Abdes said to Opilio. He had been exchanging regular letters with his older brother Hamilcar in Sidon, and had paused at a vending stall offering an array of scribing supplies. He had not realized how expensive such items would prove until that moment, as he had listened in dismay to the merchant.

Opilio rolled his eyes, laughing. “That again?” he asked. “When will you stop? No one cares that you can write, Pantera. They will never make you immune for it.”

“That’s not why I want it,” Abdes said, shrugging his shoulder to dislodge Opilio’s hand. He wrote because he missed Ham, although he had to admit he had hoped one of the decurions might have taken notice of his literacy. Being appointed an actarius, or scribe, would have been thankless work, but at least it would have earned him immune status, absolving him of latrine and ditch digging, stable cleaning, late-night watches and other such unpleasanties that currently comprised his days.

“Why do you want it at all?” Opilio asked. “You heard the man—one hundred denarii for the pair of sheets alone. There’s money best served at a tugurium, I say.”

“You go on, then,” Abdes said. “I’ll catch up to you.”

“They told us to keep together, at least in twos,” Opilio said.

Abdes had no tremendous desire to see the inside of a tugurium cell. Having endured one floundering, clumsy

encounter with a girl in Sidon only a year earlier, he had no confidence in his ability to either perform more adequately, or please more readily in the company of a skilled woman than he had in the presence of a novice. It was mortification he could do without, and he seized on this opportunity to escape it. “I’ll find you,” he said. “Go before you lose the others. I’ll be right behind.”

The market district stretched for numerous city blocks, inside buildings and crammed among the close quarters of Sepphoris’ narrow streets, offering a dizzying array of produce, fresh and salted meats, textiles, baskets, pottery, glassware, dry goods, wine, oils and nearly everything a man could fathom to buy. It was the height of the afternoon; a marvelous, moderate spring day, and the margin of space between the rows of vending stalls and storefronts was packed with people. Opilio glanced over his shoulder dubiously at the throng, and then back toward Abdes. “Alright,” he said. “But if you get lost—if you’re not back at the main gate by dusk—it’s your hide to face the lash alone for it.”

Abdes was used to facing the lash. That had been standard fare at his home as much as in the army. “Go,” he told Opilio, smiling at him in reassurance. Opilio was genuinely enthusiastic about shelling out the remnants of his viaticum on a prostitute, and Abdes did not want him to miss out on the opportunity solely on his account. “It will be fine. Go. I’ll be right there.”

Opilio nodded and then grinned broadly as he turned, ducking among the crowd, hurrying after their fellows. Abdes turned back to the vending stall and gazed forlornly down at the papyrus scrolls, wax tablets, ink wells and styluses.

He had been given a viaticum allowance of seven hundred and fifty denarii upon his enlistment, but had known little if any opportunity to enjoy this advance on his wages. Already, five hundred and twenty-five had been debited to cover the cost of the helmet, sword, scabbard, sandals and chain mail shirt the army had given him—not that any of these was worth the cost he had been charged. Equipment in the Roman army was limited in number; most tended to be handed around and passed down as long as it was deemed to be even

remotely serviceable. Abdes' helmet was no better than Opilio's: dented, dull, with a poorly soldered cheek plate that meant a rough edge of metal constantly scraped the angle of his jaw every time he wore it. His standard, hobnailed sandals were at least a size too small, and wore open sores in his ankles and heels. None of his other issued equipment was in much better shape.

He bought the papyrus and ink, and sighed wearily as the merchant bundled them together. He tucked them into his satchel and turned to walk away, his feet aching, his shoulders hunching with the realization that such pain was going to be customary for quite some time yet to come. His barrack mates were long since gone, swallowed by the crowd, but he was not immediately alarmed. Unlike others in his auxiliary cohort from smaller, more rural homes, Abdes had been born and raised in a city twice again as big and bustling as Sepphoris. Rather than be intimidated by the throng or the tight confines of the packed streets, Abdes felt a familiar comfort among them. Walking away from the vending booth and jostling shoulder to shoulder with people felt like being embraced, an atmosphere to which he was fully accustomed.

Besides, it would be no problem finding Opilio again. Even among the crowd, he would stand out in his ridiculous helmet and red tunic. And Opilio, like the rest of their group, had headed west for the tuguria. If Abdes took his time, allowing himself the luxury of perusing passing stalls at his leisure, he would probably meet up with them again once they had all found their jollies and stumbled out of their respective brothel cells again.

Abdes followed the ebb and flow of the crowd. He caught a hint of red vestments ahead of him, and quickened his stride. For a young man as eager to straddle a prostitute as Opilio had seemed, he had made rot-poor progress in finding one. *He might as well have kept with me, if he can't move faster than this through a crowd*, Abdes thought.

Abdes saw another glimpse of Opilio—or at least, of his red tunic—ahead of him, turning off of the main market thoroughfare and onto a side street. He must have grown exasperated trying to shove his way through the throng and

meant to try a secondary approach to the brothels. Abdes followed, again and again spying fleeting, momentary peeks of his friend. Again and again, Opilio ducked and turned down side streets, leading Abdes further and further from the market. Abdes was impressed; Opilio moved as if completely familiar and comfortable with Sepphoris' winding maze of intertwining streets and alleys.

After about ten minutes of this duck-and-glimpse pursuit, Abdes found himself lost. The crowds had thinned, and he seemed to be in a residential neighborhood. There were few if any shops or stalls about and traffic consisted of people meandering to and from the market. To his dismay, he had also lost sight of Opilio, and he paused, turning about, momentarily befuddled.

Splendid, he thought with a frown, as he surveyed the stark, blanched walls of one- and two-storey homes surrounding him and doorways framed by baskets and large pottery jugs. *Opilio doesn't know where he's going, and now I don't, either.* He wasn't worried...exactly. He had never stepped foot in Sepphoris before, but a city was a city and north remained north no matter which direction your feet were planted, as Ham might have said. Abdes knew which direction he had come from; he could simply turn around again and retrace his steps to the market.

He turned in an aggravated circle, and saw a figure in red darting down a side street ahead of him. Abdes hurried to follow. "Opilio!" he called out, but it was too late. Opilio was gone, having apparently decided on a direction and a course to pursue.

Following this side avenue delivered Abdes into a relatively vacant area where the back stoops of houses greeted the street on both sides. He saw no pedestrians or traffic, although he heard murmured voices from either direction, as people either approached or passed. Abdes walked down the street, glancing down shadow-draped alleys between houses.

"Opilio?" he called. A dog answered him from somewhere, barking out a couple of peals in uncertain warning. He heard a door close from someplace else, a child yowling

from a distance, and women laughing together, muffled through walls from beyond that.

“Opilio?” he called again. There was something unsettling about the quiet in the street, the close press of the mud-brick buildings that seemed to cast heavy shadows against the ground. *That’s it*, he thought, frowning again. *You’re on your own to this, Opilio. You have no idea where you’re going and I’ll be damned if I get lost and flogged for being late because of you.*

He started to turn, to go back to the market, when he heard a sharp, startled cry that cut off abruptly. “Opilio?”

They had been warned by their officers to keep together in the city, or at least in pairs, as Opilio had pointed out. The market district of Sepphoris was crowded and bustling—and ripe with potential thieves. Though Abdes and the others in his group had been issued swords and received basic instruction and daily drills in using them, they had not been allowed to bring them. They had been sent on their own, none among them armed.

Abdes looked in the direction of the sound and heard a heavy scuffling followed by another warbling cry. It cut short as quickly as it had come, but he thought he heard more rustling; the muffled sounds of a struggle.

He moved slowly, cautiously toward a nearby darkened alley, canting his head to listen. He heard men’s voices overlapping in quiet, grunting murmurs, and then a cry again, a faint and frightened mewling.

Tensions were high throughout Judea between Jews and Roman soldiers—another reason Abdes and his fellows had been warned to keep together. Like Abdes’ own homeland, Galilee had been through a succession of oppressive, conquering governments over the ages. Galilee and its surrounding territories were governed at least in part by Rome, by way of the vassal king, Herod the Great, who held the throne in Jerusalem. Unlike the Phoenicians, who did not mind the Roman presence in their area, or influence in their lives, the Jewish people resented Rome—and anything and anyone associated with it. They may have tolerated Rome for lack of any viable alternative; they might have publicly kept their

mouths closed against any protest they might feel, but for some, coming across a young, hapless, relatively naïve recruit like Opilio, flaunting his makeshift Roman uniform with pride, might have seen an opportunity well worth the taking.

Abdes paused just beyond the mouth of the narrow alley. He could still hear the sounds of feeble struggling and muffled cries. His heart was racing, his breath drawn still with anxious fright. If Opilio was in trouble, Abdes couldn't just leave him, no matter his desperate instinct to bolt.

Hamilcar wouldn't run, he told himself, his brows furrowing. Even from Father—whenever he would take out his lash and come after me, Ham would be right there in his path. He's not afraid of anything. He wouldn't run from this.

"And neither will I," Abdes whispered, closing his hands into fists and stepping forward into the alley. It took a shocked moment for what he was seeing to slap him fully, and then, when realization struck him, he gasped sharply, stunned.

It was not Opilio in the alleyway; not Abdes' barrack mate's voice he had heard crying out in muffled pain. In fact, he realized to his dismay, it had likely not been Opilio at all whom he had been following so far from the main market square.

He caught a glimpse of red tunics and leather breastplates with overlying armor; two men with their backs to him. He recognized the helmets, each with a distinctive rear neck-guard that protruded outward from the apex of their shoulders.

Roman soldiers, he thought, shying back in bewildered shock. They are Romans...!

One of them was standing while the other was on his knees, his tunic drawn up, crumpled beneath the bottom edge of his chest armor. He was leaning forward, and Abdes saw a girl's legs spread wide to envelop his hips. The man was in the process of thrusting himself mightily, deeply into her with a shuddering, pounding rhythm. Abdes could hear the girl crying, her frightened peals smothered beneath the man's firmly clapped hand.

He was not witnessing the impromptu services of a prostitute, or even the clumsy endeavors of hasty lovers. The soldiers were raping the girl, and Abdes staggered, his eyes flown wide. Either the one standing had already taken his turn, or readied himself for it, but the one on his knees was well underway.

“Get away from her,” Abdes said, because that is what Ham would have said; there was no way on earth that his brother would have stood there, stricken and bearing helpless witness. At Abdes’ voice, the soldiers whirled in start; they blinked at him in mutual disbelief, and then Abdes marched forward, closing his hands into fists.

“Get away from her,” he said again, and before the man standing closest to him could recover from his surprise, Abdes shoved against his shoulder and sent him stumbling backward. “Get away from her!”

Abdes turned and heaved the man straddling the girl mightily, knocking him off balance, and sending him sprawling to the ground. The girl recoiled the moment his weight was off of her; she scrambled back, kicking her feet, sucking in loud, tear-sodden gasps for breath as she tucked herself against the wall.

Abdes blinked at her; she had drawn her hands to her face, cowering, but he could see the hem of her tunic shoved up toward her hips. He caught a glimpse of her thighs; a fleeting hint that might have ordinarily sent at least a shiver of pleasant reaction through him. There was nothing tempting or titillating at the sight now, however; there was blood on her, smeared against her inner thighs in stark and gruesome contrast to her pale flesh, just beneath the apex of her groin. She was trying to hitch in breath to scream. She hiccupped and mewled, shaking her head, pedaling her feet helplessly in the dirt.

The man behind him lunged, clapping his strong arm about Abdes’ throat and jerking him backward, making him dance on his tiptoes. The man’s forearm crushed against his windpipe, throttling him, and Abdes gasped.

The soldier on the ground sprang forward, attacking Abdes. Abdes swung his feet up wildly, punting him in the face and chest, sending him stumbling, crumpling to his hands and knees. Abdes let his feet drop to the ground again and rammed his elbow back into the gut of his attacker. He felt the hot rush of the man's breath as it whoofed against his ear; he buckled, folding at the waist and twisting sharply, sending the man crashing over his shoulder and against the ground.

Abdes backpedaled in alarm. Both men had reclaimed their wits, and scrambled to their feet. The first was upon him almost at once, springing like a cat, tackling Abdes and knocking him back into the wall. Abdes yelped, his cry cut short as his head smacked against the bricks, his breath momentarily lost at the harsh impact. He fell clumsily, taking the man with him in a tangle of thrashing limbs and swinging fists. Abdes shifted his weight, rolling over, pinning the man beneath him. He reared up, drawing his fist back and letting it fly, plowing his knuckles into the man's face. He felt the man's nose shatter at the blow. The man shrieked; as he threw up his hands in a vain effort to defend himself, Abdes swung his other fist, punching him mightily in the mouth.

He swung his left fist back to whip around again, and then the second soldier rushed him from behind. Again, his arm clamped about Abdes' throat, and Abdes' eyes flew wide, his breath forced from him in a strangled wheeze as he felt a sharp, screaming pain lance through his spine. Something had pierced him; the man had stabbed him, shoving something long and sharp deep into the meat of his shoulder, punching inward.

Abdes caught a wink of pale light against metal in front of him, and then the man he straddled sat bolt upright, ramming the length of a dagger into Abdes' gut, just to the left of his navel. He leaned so near to Abdes, sinking the dagger so deep that the cuff of his fist smacked against Abdes' belly; so that when Abdes uttered a breathless, strangled cry, the man caught it nearly against his ear, as if Abdes had offered it for his intimate and exclusive review.

Abdes felt the arm loosen and slip free of his throat as the man behind him stumbled backward. The man in front of

him shoved Abdes away, using the momentum as Abdes crumpled onto his side to wrench his blade loose. Abdes felt his cheek hit the graveled dirt. The pain that swelled through him was bright, excruciating.

He felt the ground beneath him tremble and heard the frantic pounding of footsteps as the men ran away. He tried to move his hand. He could see it draped against the ground in front of him, his fingers streaked with blood from the man's broken nose. Abdes closed his eyes, gasping. Every breath sent stabbing pain resounding through his form, making him shudder.

He heard the soft rustle of the girl's clothing as she moved slowly, hesitantly away from the wall. He could hear her ragged breaths, her choked, hoarse whimpers as she wept.

"Please..." Abdes moaned, moving his hand weakly, scratching at the dirt, wanting to reach for her.

When she came to him, he felt her hands flutter against him. She touched his shoulder, struggling to roll him over, letting his head settle against the nest of her lap. Pain ripped through him at the movement, forcing a cry from him. He convulsed against her, arching his back, and he felt her hands against his face. "I...I'm sorry..." he heard her gasp, and then she began to sob again. "I'm sorry...I'm sorry..."

She leaned over him, holding him, her hair spilling out from beneath her mantle and against his cheeks. He could feel her tears falling against his face as she folded herself over him, shuddering against him. He tried to open his eyes, to look up at her, but he couldn't manage. He was fading into shadows, his mind abandoning him from the pain. "Please..." he groaned, and she pressed her fingertips against his mouth.

"It...it's alright," she whispered. "Hush...it's alright...it...please, it's alright..."

The pain was too much; he could not stand against it. He let it take him. He yielded to it, and it drew him under, dragging him in tow, smothering him with its oppressive weight as he passed out.

CHAPTER TWO

“Offer sacrifices to Aesculapius and his daughter, Meditrina, god and goddess of healing and restored health,” Abdes heard a man say quietly.

With these murmured words, a stabbing, agonizing pain ripped through his abdomen, and though he tried to twist away from it, to cry out in protest, he could not move. His entire body felt leaden and weak, stripped of any strength he could muster. He was also ablaze; he couldn’t breathe for the terrible heat.

“His wounds are too deep,” the man said. “I don’t dare suture. It would trap the fever in him. Watch me now—take strips of clean, undyed linen and soak in a mix of boiled, pressed basil leaves, tallow and honey. Pack the wounds with it—gently, do you see, Seneca?”

“Yes, Gallus,” said another man.

More pain speared through Abdes, and he managed a feeble, breathless moan. He felt a hand settle against his forehead, smoothing his hair back from his brow. The man whispered to him in soft, indistinguishable sounds and something pressed against his face, a cloth soaked in fragrant, blessedly cool water. Abdes gasped at the sensation against his flushed, burning skin and tried to turn his face against the rag.

“He won’t want to eat,” the man, Gallus, said. “Do not make him. It will only make things worse. Give him broth to drink. Plenty of fluids, as much as he will take.”

Abdes opened his eyes, his vision blurred and dazed. He blinked at a man leaning over him, little more than a

silhouetted figure. He tried to speak, opening his mouth and gasping softly. *Please*, he wanted to say. *Please, I...I am so hot...*

A moan escaped him, breathless and faint. The man moved, and Abdes saw his face swim into momentary focus. His large eyes settled kindly upon Abdes, his mouth lifted in a gentle smile. He drew the wondrously cool rag against Abdes' face again. It soothed him instantly and his eyelids fluttered closed. "It is alright, lad," he heard the man say softly, and then he slept.

"Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera," he heard someone say. His mind stirred from unconsciousness to semi-lucidity, and he thought it was Hamilcar, his brother, speaking to him.

"Ham..." he groaned, turning his face toward the sound of Ham's voice. He was still sweat-soaked and roasting alive, his entire body, from pate to heel wracked with heat and pain. He opened his eyes groggily and watched the world swim into hazy focus. He was in his bed, at home in Sidon, the small storeroom in which he and Ham slept.

"Is that your name?" Ham asked. For some reason, he was not lying in the cot with Abdes, as he usually did at night. He was sitting beside the bed, and Abdes could not make out his face with any clarity. His brother was a shadow-draped form. He felt Ham's hand settle gently against his brow, stroking his face.

"That...is the name they...they gave me," Abdes whispered, feeling his eyelids droop heavily. He was home. He thought it must be the night that their father, Moloch, had brought him to enlist in the army. Moloch had been angry with Abdes; over supper, he had railed at Abdes about some mistakes in the measurements of a large order of granite tiles they had cut and shipped south to Caesarea. Ham had tried to defend his younger brother, arguing loudly and vehemently, but Moloch would have none of it.

"Gross incompetence atop a history of laziness and stupidity," Moloch had snapped.

“He did not cut the stones wrong. I marked the measurements myself,” Ham had said. “Father, if a mistake has been made, it is on my account, not Abdes’.”

“I am sorry,” Abdes whispered to his brother, struggling to hold his eyes open. “It was my fault, Ham.”

“Do you remember what happened to you?” Ham asked, leaning toward him, brushing Abdes’ disheveled hair back from his face.

“They made me strip for them,” Abdes murmured. “They looked at me. Made me take an oath...sign my name to it.” He managed a feeble smile for Ham. “I shot well,” he whispered. “The bow you gave me...I...I out-shot their optios. They said I could bring it with me...the bow. I will take good care of it, Ham, I promise.”

He closed his eyes wearily, exhausted by this fleeting moment of speaking. “They put me with an archery auxiliary,” he breathed. “They called me ‘Pantera,’ because I told them you taught me to hunt with a bow. It means ‘hunter.’”

He trembled, feeling the sting of tears in his eyes. “I thought Father was going to sell me, Ham. I...I thought he meant to make a slave of me.”

Their mother, Dido, had died shortly after giving birth to Abdes; the trauma of her labor had left her bleeding uncontrollably. It was an offense for which Moloch had never forgiven Abdes. In the years that followed, Moloch had taken another wife, Tanith, and they had a son together named Mago. Tanith had been heavy with a second child when Abdes had been made to join the army. She had gone to great measures to convince Moloch that Dido had been unfaithful to him, that Abdes and Hamilcar were sired by another. It had not taken much manipulation. Moloch had never kept his doubts—or his disdain because of them—secret from his eldest sons.

“I will take good care of the bow,” Abdes whispered. “I promise, Ham.”

He opened his eyes again, blinking dazedly at his brother. “I’m sorry,” he said, his tears spilling.

Ham pressed his palm against Abdes' forehead, comforting him. He leaned toward his younger brother. "It's alright," he said softly, gently. As he spoke, Abdes saw he was not Ham at all; the man who looked down at him, his brows lifted with sympathy and concern, whose mouth drew downward somewhat with the weight of heavy worry was dimly familiar, but not his brother.

"It's alright," he said again, as Abdes' eyelids drooped closed, and his confused mind abandoned him to shadows.

The next time he remembered opening his eyes, the terrible, tremendous pain was gone. The heat of bright and brutal fever had waned, and he blinked, confused but lucid at an unfamiliar ceiling above him. He could feel blankets tucked loosely about him and drew his hand toward his face, lifting his arm from beneath the covers. He winced at the movement; there was pain, but nothing sharp. It was a simple, aching protest, as if he had been prone and still too long, and his limbs and joints were slow to rouse.

He sat up slowly, groaning and pressing the heel of his hand against his brow as his head swam dizzily. He felt a dull twinge of pain shiver through his abdomen, and moved his hand, pressing gingerly against his belly. He blinked down at himself, bewildered to discover a clean but unfamiliar tunic draping his form. He looked around, and his puzzlement mounted. He was resting in a cot in a small, unadorned chamber he had never seen before. He was alone. A small window carved in the far wall cast a dim glow of pale, diffused sunlight across the chamber. There was a closed door against the opposite wall, and a small table across from the cot.

Where am I? he thought. *What happened to me? How did I get here?*

He pushed aside the covers and swung his legs carefully toward the floor, grimacing at new aches and stiffness in his knees. He stood slowly, stumbling, his legs unfurling with all of the ease of rusted hinges forced into begrudging motion. Standing did not suit his tentative equilibrium, and he

groaned, closing his eyes and staggering as a wave of nausea swept over him.

There was a clay jug resting atop the table, and when his nausea passed, he limped toward it. He was thirsty. He had no memory of what had happened, or how he had come to be in that place, but he knew that with certainty—his mouth felt parched, his tongue thick and heavy with thirst. He reached the table and leaned against it wearily, feeling as spent as if he had just run across the breadth of Galilee.

He closed his eyes as he felt his mind swim again. His brows furrowed and he hung his head, shoving his hands against the table top and forcing himself to remain upright. He waited, drawing in slow, measured breaths until his unsteadiness passed. He opened his eyes, looking down into the jug. It was filled with water; his throat ached at the simple promise of it.

“Thank Astarte,” he whispered, his voice hoarse and croaking. He dipped his hand inside, cupping his palm and drawing a brief but blessed sip toward his mouth. He dunked his hand again and then splashed his face to clear the fog from his mind. He splayed his wet fingers through the crown of his hair, shoving it back from his face.

He lifted the jug between his hands and brought it to his mouth. The first sip had been only taunting, and rather than satiate any thirst, it had left him nearly desperate for more. He tilted his head back, gulping at the water, feeling it stream from the corners of his mouth, spilling down his chin and neck.

He drank greedily, until he taxed his poor gullet and choked. He dropped the pitcher as he stumbled back, gagging. It fell to the floor and shattered, spraying his feet and legs with broken pottery and water. Abdes crumpled to his knees, retching up the water he had only just swallowed; it spewed from his mouth and nose as his stomach wrenched in a wretched, agonizing knot. He cried out hoarsely, catching himself with one hand before he collapsed face-first into his vomit and pressed his free hand against his stomach, as if he hoped to stave the violent spasms with his palm.

Again, as his hand settled against his gut, he felt a distinctive ache, and all at once, he shuddered as memories flooded back upon him, unbidden and unwelcome. They flashed through his mind in a dizzying, terrifying montage of images. He remembered following Opilio through the market district of Sepphoris, chasing fleeting hints of his red tunic through the crowd. He remembered the two men—Roman soldiers—raping a girl and the piteous sounds of her mewling in pain and fear.

He remembered the flash of sunlight against a blade, and he convulsed, another strangled cry forced from him as he remembered it punching into his belly, burying deeply. His fingers hooked against the fabric of his tunic above this grim point of impact and he shuddered, nearly crumpling.

The door to the chamber flew open wide, and men rushed in, wearing the red tunics of Roman soldiers. Abdes jerked his head at the sudden, startling clamor of their heavy footfalls, and recoiled in alarm. “No!” he whimpered, pedaling his feet against the floor, slapping in the spilled water. He scooted against the wall and cowered there, terrified and confused.

“It’s alright, lad,” one of the men said. He approached Abdes, walking with a pronounced limp. He genuflected, heedless of the water and broken clay shards, and reached for the younger man. Abdes shied from his hands, drawing his shoulder toward his cheek, his eyes enormous with bewildered panic.

“Do...do not...” he gasped.

“It’s alright,” the man said again, quietly, gently. He kept his hands extended, but made no further move to touch Abdes. “Don’t be frightened. It’s alright.”

“Who are you?” Abdes said, his voice hoarse and strained. The man seemed vaguely familiar to him. He was older, with a long face and full, rounded features tugged toward the strong, broad measure of his jaw and chin. His eyes were large and piercing, an unusual shade caught between green and brown; his gaze was piercing and fiercely attentive beneath a frame of heavy brows. It was a face fully capable of

stern gravity or gentle empathy with only minor inflection; his brows lifted and it softened his entire countenance.

“My name is Marcus Vergilius Seneca,” the man told him. “I am the Praefectus Vigilum of Sepphoris. It is alright, Abdes.”

“Can you talk to me?” Seneca asked, helping Abdes sit once more against the bed. “Can you tell me what you remember? What happened to you?”

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said.

Seneca glanced over his shoulder as a young soldier stepped forward, carrying a satchel slung across his waist, a wax tablet and stylus in his hands. “He is an actarius,” Seneca told Abdes. “He will record your statement as official deposition. Do you understand, lad? Do you feel up to it?”

Abdes didn’t exactly understand, but he nodded anyway. “Yes, sir.”

When he was finished recounting, Abdes could tell by the vaguely disappointed look on Seneca’s face that whatever the Praefectus had been hoping for, Abdes had failed to provide.

“You remember nothing of their appearance? Their faces?” a tall, blue-eyed officer asked. Like Seneca, he had stood close at hand, listening intently and with a grave expression as Abdes had spoken. “You grappled with them. Surely you saw something of their faces?”

“I do not remember, sir,” Abdes said. “It happened very fast, sir, and I only remember their clothes. Their uniforms.”

The soldier opened his mouth to speak, his brows drawn, his mouth turned in a disapproving frown. “It is alright, Mallus,” Seneca said, glancing over his shoulder and holding up his hand. “Give him time. This is all still new to him. More will come as his strength restores.”

Abdes understood that some considerable time had passed since his attack. Though the places where he had been

stabbed still pained him, it was not unbearable; the ache of wounds that were fading and closed, nearly healed. “How long have I been here?” he asked quietly.

Seneca glanced at Mallus again, and then returned his gaze to Abdes. “Seven months.”

Abdes jerked as if he had been slapped. “What...?” he gasped.

“Your wounds were grievous,” Seneca said. “You lost a great deal of blood, and then fever set in, nearly took you. It is a blessing you survived. I summoned a physician I know—a friend of mine from Syria. He has seen me through some grave bouts of my own. I had hoped he could help you, but there were moments, lad—plenty of them—when I had my doubts.” He smiled. “There is strength in you. You fought with surely all that you have.”

For seven months? Abdes’ mind moaned in panic. I have been here seven months? Oh, gods, I have missed seven months of training! I don’t even know if the camp officers know where I am or what happened to me. What if they think I deserted? What if they wrote to Father? To Ham? Gods above, what if they told Ham I ran away?

“It’s alright,” Seneca said, as if he understood Abdes’ dismayed thoughts. “I contacted your auxiliary officers from the first. You have been turned over to my custody and charge.”

Abdes’ momentary relief was all-too brief, and he blinked at Seneca. “Custody?” he asked. He knew what the urban cohort was; Roman officials and soldiers who served as an auxiliary for King Herod, insuring his laws were followed in larger cities outside of Jerusalem. They were, in essence, a sanctioned police force. “Am I under arrest, sir?” Abdes whispered.

“With a story like the one you’ve given, you likely will be,” the officer, Mallus told him, drawing Abdes’ alarmed gaze.

“But it is what happened,” he said. “It’s what I can remember. The men who did this ran away. I didn’t see their faces.” He pressed his palm against his brow and closed his eyes, wishing he could shove recollection into his brain. “I

don't remember any more than this. Ask the girl for her account. She will say I'm telling the truth. She must have seen their faces. Ask her what they looked like."

"We cannot ask the girl," Mallus said. "She's dead."

Abdes blinked up at him in stricken confusion. "What?" he gasped. He stared at Seneca in aghast. "No," he whispered. "She isn't dead. She was there when they left. I remember. She touched me. She was crying."

"We found her body," Mallus said, and Abdes gasped again, a low, anguished sound.

Memories, fleeting and confusing, sifted through his mind: the girl's blood-smeared thighs, the quiet sounds of her weeping, the delicate brush of her hair against his face, her tears dropping softly against his cheeks.

It...it's alright. Hush...it's alright...it...please, it's alright...

"Her name was Jobina," Mallus said. "She was born in Besara, west of here, but came with her brothers to the city each day to work at their father's stall in the market. She was a pretty girl, or so we've been told. It was difficult to tell, what with her face swollen from strangulation, beaten until portions of her skull caved in."

Abdes looked up at him, his stomach wrenched with horror at the thought of this.

"We found her raped, strangled and stripped, dumped in another alley not ten strides from where you were lying," Mallus said. He leaned toward Abdes, his brows furrowed. "You didn't make it far enough away before passing out to keep yourself from being so apparent."

"Me?" Abdes whispered and then his eyes widened in shocked realization. "You think I...?" He shook his head, shying back on the cot. "I did not kill her. I did nothing. I told you what happened—all I can remember. It's the truth." He turned to Seneca in desperate implore. "I didn't kill her."

"Perhaps we should let the crowd decide," Mallus remarked to Seneca, arching one of his brows. To Abdes, he said, "The Jews would have your hide. They know a Jewish girl

was assaulted—and they know she’s dead. They know we’ve taken you into custody. They know your name, too—they have stood outside of this building these past months, demanding we give over Pantera.”

“Pantera...” Abdes whispered.

“Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera,” Mallus said. “That’s your name, isn’t it? The name you were given when you took your oath of allegiance to Rome? When you were sent to the Seventh Cohort of the Third Gallic archery auxiliary? We know all about you, Pantera. You assaulted that poor girl, and then murdered her, hiding her body before succumbing to your wounds.”

“No,” Abdes said, shaking his head again. “No, that is not true. I mean, my name is Pantera, but I did nothing. I didn’t—”

“How did you get those injuries?” Mallus snapped. “Did the girl fend you off? Did she wrestle your own blade from your hand and use it against you before you murdered her?”

“I didn’t kill her!” Abdes cried, stumbling to his feet, his eyes enormous with shock and panic. “I did nothing but try to help her! I don’t know what happened to her, but I am telling you the truth!”

Mallus stepped toward him, and Seneca rose, positioning himself deliberately in the soldier’s path. “That’s enough,” he said. Mallus glared at him, startled, and Seneca’s brows narrowed slightly. “I said enough, Tribune. I believe the boy.” His sharp tone softened slightly. “You are trying too hard to make things fit. This man’s account supports the evidence we have found in the most simple—and logical—fashion.”

“Shall I tell that to the outraged mob gathering on our grounds every day, sir?” Mallus asked. “The angry crowd demanding this man’s hide—demanding justice?”

“Tell them we will give them justice,” Seneca replied. “But not at this boy’s expense. Not without cause. And not when I believe him.”

He looked at Abdes again. “Tribune Mallus is right. Word of what happened has flown through Sepphoris, and there are people out there who would see trouble come because of it. I won’t lie to you. There are plenty among my cohort officers—and your training auxiliary besides—who thought it would be best to simply give the people what they want, as Mallus suggested; to punish you in proffered amends.”

Abdes blinked at him, stricken. “But I will not let that happen,” Seneca said gravely, holding Abdes’ gaze. “That’s why you’re here, and why you will remain here, in my charge.”

“I cannot return to the camp?” Abdes asked. The composite bow Ham had given him was there, tucked beneath the blankets of his pallet. “But my things are at my barrack.”

“Your belongings are gone,” Seneca said, his brows lifting to see the visible pain that crossed Abdes’ face. “I’m sorry, lad. The auxiliary took them in remittance for your training costs. They paid for your food and shelter for six months. They felt they had it due.”

Abdes looked down at his feet, stricken. *My bow*, he thought, his brows pinching, his lips drawing together in a stubborn line as he felt tears well in his eyes. He would be damned if he would cry in front of the Praefectus and his tribune like a distraught child, but his shame and remorse were nearly overwhelming. His pain did not necessarily come from the loss of the bow, but from the fact that Abdes had promised Ham he would take care of it. He had tried—just as he had tried to protect the Jewish girl from her attackers—but as with the poor girl, in this, too, he had failed. *I’m sorry, Ham*, Abdes thought.

Seneca rose to his feet, grunting softly and favoring his right leg. “Why do you not get some rest, lad?” he said. “I will give you some more time to recover your strength, and then you can begin.”

“Begin?” Abdes said, bewildered, looking up at him.

Seneca smiled at him and nodded once. “Yes, begin,” he said. “I said you’re in my charge now—part of my urban cohort. I am putting you to work, Abdes.”

CHAPTER THREE

As he reclaimed his strength and vigor, Abdes joined his new barrack mates of the urban cohort on the grounds of the citadel each morning to participate in their training exercises. He watched with breathless wonder as Seneca led rotating centuries on a daily basis in rigorous sword play and marching drills. There seemed nothing the Praefectus was incapable of, or incompetent at, and even though surely every man of the fifteen-hundred-member cohort had known Seneca far longer than Abdes, he could not help but notice that every one regarded the man with the same wide-eyed and breathless sort of awe that Abdes felt.

“They say he’s the descendant of a Greek king,” one of Abdes’ barrack mates named Atticus told him one morning. They stood together at rigid and observant attention as Seneca and a cohort *optio* sparred together with swords, offering demonstrations in the center of a gathered company. “Distant kin to the Spartan Leonidas—the lion’s son of legends. Seneca’s father was a Roman slave made free by that birthright. He was a *legatus* in Germania before coming here—the Fifth *Alaudae*. I’ve heard during a battle, when his standard bearer fell, Seneca charged the lines and took up the standard himself at the fronts. Caesar was so impressed when he found out, he gave him this post in Galilee.”

“Is that how he hurt his leg?” Abdes whispered. “Why he limps like that?”

Despite his handicap, Seneca moved through his sparring drill with a graceful ease that Abdes could only long to emulate. Seneca handled his sword as if it was an extension of

his arm, as comfortably as if the measure of the blade was a part of his form.

"I think it must be," Atticus said. "I don't know. Everyone has a different story about it." He leaned slightly toward Abdes. "They say he is blessed by the gods. Spears may strike him, and swords might cut him, but he cannot die. Apollo himself keeps him from it."

Abdes had been stupefied with wonder when, on his first day of duty, Seneca had brought him to the citadel's quartermaster to receive the standard uniform of a cohort infantry soldier. He had marveled over the leather breastplate overlaid with armor, polished Gallic helm, sandals that fit his feet, *baltens* ornamental belt, sword and dagger. He had to admit that while he had always somewhat scoffed at Opilio's pride in wearing his handed-down helmet and mail shirt, he could appreciate it as he donned the full and impressive armor of the urban cohort. He had never been made to feel like a soldier at the training camp; between the poor quality of his equipment, and the exhausting, thankless tasks he had been assigned, Abdes had always felt more like a slave. For the first time, he felt a tremulous and tangible pride at the prospect of being seen as part of the army. He felt like a soldier, and not just a boy dressed up and pretending.

"I...I do not have the money to pay for these, sir," a somewhat ashamed Abdes had told Seneca upon the presentation of his uniform. "My viaticum has all been spent, sir, and I..."

"I do not expect you to pay for them," Seneca had replied, startling Abdes into bewildered silence. "The soldiers of the urban cohort are the most visible in Sepphoris. To most of these citizens, you will be the only view they'll ever have of Rome. How you present that view, then, is of utmost importance to me. I mean to make sure it's a good one."

Seneca had allowed Abdes to write to his brother, albeit under strict instruction to not make any reference to his attack. The imperial mail system was by no means secure or necessarily private and Seneca didn't want anyone to suspect his true identity.

“Your name is Abdes,” Seneca had told him. “I don’t want anyone thinking otherwise. Too many people in Sepphoris have heard the name ‘Pantera.’ Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said.

He hated that it felt like lying to Ham, but he was so grateful for the chance to correspond again that he willingly agreed. *I have been sick for a time, but am on the mend*, he wrote to Ham. *I’m sorry if you’ve worried. I missed several months of my training, and they let me transfer to the urban cohort in Sepphoris. The Praefectus has been kind to me. He even let me take my name, Abdes, again. You can write to me in care of the municipal citadel here.*

Seneca had told the cohort that Abdes had come to them from the Third Gallic legion in Syria. It was not a complete lie, as Abdes had been originally assigned to the Third’s archery auxiliary. The other soldiers accepted Seneca’s explanations of Abdes’ identity and presence among them without qualm or hesitation. Seneca also made certain that any questions they might have had about Abdes’ qualifications were dispelled in full and from the start. He had put Abdes to the test that first day, making him demonstrate his skills against the archery ranks that supplemented the cohort. After besting every man the cohort called against him, including several decurions who commanded the archery ranks, Abdes had found himself accepted and congratulated by his new fellows—praise he’d never enjoyed before at the training camp.

By day, his activities in the cohort kept Abdes distracted from memories of his attack. At night, however, he knew no such reprieve. He constantly relived the assault in his dreams. Over and over, the images would dart through his mind; he would hear the young Jewish’s girls frightened, muffled mewls and see the fleeting, haunting image of blood smeared against the pale skin of her thighs.

He would try to change things, to save her. He would run in his dreams; he would rush toward the alley, the sounds of her weeping, her soft but frantic struggles. He would scream for her, crying himself hoarse. *No! Leave her alone! Leave her alone!*

But no matter his shrieks, speed or efforts, he was always too late. He could never arrive in time. No matter how furiously or desperately he would fight with the soldiers, the end never altered. He would feel the searing pain in his back and see the glint of light against the dagger shoved toward his belly. He would convulse at the impact, twisting himself against his pallet in the barrack, tearing his mind from sleep to awake in one abrupt, terrified, breathless instant.

Seneca expected Abdes to begin his duties with the cohort in earnest, including taking his turn as sentry at the citadel building. One morning at dawn, three weeks into his new routine, Abdes arrived at his post to discover a large, discontented group of Jewish clergymen gathered outside. He had not heard demonstrators protesting on the citadel grounds much of late. Seneca had ordered them dispersed immediately should they collect.

Seneca's warning, and his soldiers' intolerance of the protests had seemed to quell their fervent dedication, but that morning, it was renewed in vehement full. The cohort guards stood at the top of the steps leading into the citadel and blocked the crowd's passage, confining them to a grumbling gathering at the bottom of the steps.

"They're back again," Atticus said, his mouth turned in a thin, grim line as he nodded toward the group. "The Pharisees from the Sanhedrin, some of their students from the academy. They say they won't leave until Seneca comes out or lets one of them in to see him."

"Why?" Abdes asked, looking down the steps.

"I don't know," Atticus said. "I doubt they rightly need a cause to get stirred any more."

One of the men moved purposefully to the front of the crowd. He wore the white head scarf and blue-trimmed robes of a Pharisee priest and the hems of his overlapping tunics flapped about his ankles as he climbed the steps, approaching the guards. Atticus and another soldier stepped forward to greet him by crossing their spear shafts, stopping him. "Step back, please, sir," Atticus said.

The priest glared at him, his wide nostrils flaring, the corners of his mouth drawing down in a frown. "Where is the Praefectus?" he said. "Have you not told him we've come?"

"The Praefectus is unavailable, sir," Atticus replied. He motioned with his spear, giving it a demonstrative little push in suggestion. "Step back from the threshold, sir. You and your fellows will have to leave."

"Do you know who I am?" snapped the man, hoisting his chin defiantly. "I am Zadduc, of the House of Shammai, on the council of the Sanhedrin. I demand to see Praefectus Seneca at once."

"I am sorry, sir," Atticus said, his brows drawn, his expression stern. "The Praefectus has informed me of no visitors expected this morning, from the Sanhedrin or otherwise."

Zadduc's brows furrowed deeply and his hands folded into fists. "You cannot keep us from him," he said. "He cannot hide behind these walls forever. My students and fellows will stay here on this threshold the day through, if needs be, until he holds audience with me."

"If you would like audience with the Praefectus, sir, I would be glad to inform him," Atticus said. "He can send you word of his availability. Until then, sir, I will ask you again and for the last, sir, to leave these premises."

"We are not leaving without justice!" Zadduc shouted, his face infused with sudden, outraged color. "We want the man called Pantera! We want justice for the ones he has brutalized and stolen from us!"

At this demand, Abdes shied back, his eyes wide and alarmed, his heart hammering in sudden, frightened measure.

"We want justice for my brothers!" shouted a young man from the crowd. "What of Lamech and Heth?" He stormed up the steps, his face twisted and flushed with rage. He held a young boy of around four years hoisted against his hip while another, maybe twelve, scurried behind him.

"These children have no fathers now!" the young man cried angrily, nearly nose to nose with Atticus. "Where is the justice for them? For their mothers?"

Zadduc stopped his advance by catching his shoulder. "Judas, no..." he said quietly, shaking his head once as the young man turned to him.

"Seneca has promised us justice!" the young man, Judas, cried, his voice hoarse and shrill. "And we would see him hold to his word—not Herod's justice, but that of the Almighty, by the Laws he has given to his chosen people through our forefathers, Abraham and Moses!"

He turned back to the crowd and shouted, "Give over Pantera!" The call was picked up by the throng, and they began to shake their fists in the air, stomping their feet and chanting loudly.

"You will have Herod's justice or none at all," Abdes heard someone say loudly from behind him. He turned to find the tribune, Mallus striding across the threshold. He approached the crowd fearlessly, his brows furrowed, his gaze stern. "Those who have committed these offenses will be made to answer for them by King Herod's law and decree," Mallus said. "And only at such time as we are able to finish our investigations and tell you plainly—without hesitation or doubt—that here are your culprits. Here are the guilty parties."

He turned his gaze toward Zadduc and Judas, draping his hand against the pommel of his sword. "Tell your people to go home, Zadduc," he said. "Send them away—see these grounds cleared, or you will all learn for yourselves the measure of Herod's justice."

"We will keep here until Praefectus Seneca sees us," Zadduc said. "We will keep here until Seneca himself hears our demands for swift—"

"No, you will not," Mallus told him, and his fingers slowly, deliberately wrapped about his hilt. It was a gesture that did not escape Zadduc's or Judas' notice; they both shied, the anger in their faces waning to uncertainty. "Leave," Mallus said. "Or I will see you removed."

Zadduc and Judas drew back from Mallus, slowly descending the steps once more. At their retreat, the crowd took their cue, and began to disperse begrudgingly, amidst scathing looks from beneath furrowed brows. Mallus did not turn from them or loosen his hand from his sword until both Zadduc and Judas had reached the bottom of the stairs again. Thus satisfied, he turned to Abdes. "Come with me," he said, and he walked brusquely past Abdes and into the citadel again.

"Sir...?" Abdes asked. He was confused and stricken; his palm was sweat-slickened against the shaft of his spear, his heart still hammering. He couldn't stop shaking; he stood shied in the doorway, trembling like a leaf caught in a strong gust of wind.

"Come with me," Mallus said again, sparing Abdes a glance over his shoulder.

Abdes blinked at Atticus, but his friend merely shrugged, as puzzled as Abdes by the beckon. Abdes turned and hurried to match the tribune's swift stride. Mallus didn't like him, or believe his account of his attack. Abdes felt uncertain alarm fluttering through him to think that Mallus would reprimand him somehow for the morning's demonstration; that he would use it against Abdes to prove he was unfit for cohort service.

This fear only mounted when Mallus delivered him to Seneca's office. The Praefectus sat at an expansive writing table, in the process of reviewing several unfurled papyrus scrolls. He did not even glance up from his work as Mallus and Abdes entered, and Abdes stood hesitantly in the doorway, his eyes round and anxious as he waited, fully anticipating rebuke or dismissal from his duties.

"I heard Zadduc and his fellows outside yowling about Pantera again," Seneca said at length.

Abdes said nothing; his throat had constricted to a miniscule pinpoint through which he could force neither air nor breath. He closed his hands into fists lest the Praefectus look up and see him trembling in the doorway.

“Yes, sir,” Mallus said, realizing Abdes meant to remain mute. “I have dispatched them, sir, per your orders.”

“Thank you, Mallus,” Seneca said with a nod, still not looking up from his work. After another long moment of pronounced and prolonged silence, he glanced at Abdes. “Are you alright for it, lad?” he asked.

His face softened with his inquiry, the gruff brusqueness in his voice fading. Abdes nodded, tightening his fists, not wanting Seneca to realize just how badly the incident had affected and disturbed him. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“I will remove you from morning sentry duty,” Seneca said, looking back toward his scrolls. “I’ll write orders to that effect for your decurion.”

Abdes blinked, ashamed that his fear had been so plainly evident, even to so brief a glance. “I do not mind for it, sir,” he said, drawing Seneca’s gaze. Abdes forced his chin up, trying to project some semblance of nonchalant confidence he did not feel. “I would as soon stand for the duty, sir, like the rest of my decury, with your permission, sir.”

Seneca looked at him for a long moment. Despite the capacity for kindness his countenance could project, Abdes had come to realize that most often, he kept his face so stoically set, it was impossible to determine what thoughts he entertained. This was one such instance. “As you wish,” Seneca said, nodding once, lifting a stylus in hand and dipping the tapered tip into an ink well. He turned back to his scrolls.

“I want you to go with Tribune Mallus today,” he said. “There is a man in the lower district I need brought to me. You and Mallus will deliver him here.”

Abdes blinked at him in surprise, and then at Mallus with undisguised hesitation. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“Good,” Seneca said. He glanced up at Mallus. “He is yours, then.”

“Zadduc and his fellows rattled you this morning,” Mallus remarked as they left the citadel building together.

It was a statement, not an inquiry, and Abdes glanced at him, uncertainly. "I'm alright for it, sir," he said.

Mallus met his gaze. "They rattled me," he said and Abdes blinked in surprise, startled by this admission. The last thing he had considered as he had watched Mallus stride so boldly toward Zadduc and the demonstrators was that the tribune had been the least bit intimidated.

Mallus paused in midstride and turned to Abdes. "I owe you an apology. This entire Pantera debacle has placed a strain on Rome's governing here, and Seneca has charged me with trying to locate the ones responsible. You can see what I have been butting heads full-long against all the while. It has grown very frustrating for me, and I took it out against you when you first awoke among us. I was out of turn, and I am sorry for that."

Abdes looked at him, caught off guard. "I...I appreciate that, sir," he said.

Mallus nodded once, and then resumed his stride. Abdes walked alongside of him, quiet for a long moment. "Those men outside this morning..." he began.

"Do not let them get to you," Mallus said. "They are fond to shout out their righteous indignation, full of pompous guff and bluster—nothing more. They don't care about justice. They care about how their efforts make them look before their fellows."

"They wanted to kill me," Abdes said.

"No," Mallus said. "They wanted to kill Pantera. They know only a name, not a person or face." He glanced at Abdes. "Two bodies were discovered early this morning by a trader caravan on the road in from Tarichea. Two men, one strangled, the other with his head bashed open. That is why Zadduc and the others came today. Seneca ordered the remains delivered to the citadel."

"Who are they?" Abdes asked, stricken.

"We think they are Lamech and Heth ben Hezekiah," Mallus said. "A pair of brothers missing for about two weeks now. They hailed from Gamala to the east, but worked here in

the city, journeymen to a local contractor named Yoseph from Nazareth. That's who reported them missing, and who Seneca has sent us to summon."

"Lamech and Heth," Abdes said. "I know those names, sir. I heard the man outside speak of them."

We want justice for my brothers! What of Lamech and Heth?

Mallus nodded. "That was Judas ben Hezekiah," he said. "Their eldest brother. He's a scribe for the Sanhedrin. He is fond to preach against Herodian and Roman policy and authority as loudly and vehemently as he can at any opportunity. You might understand, then, why we would ask Lamech and Heth's employer to identify some personal effects, confirm the identities, rather than Judas."

"He thinks Pantera killed his brothers," Abdes said. "That is why they were here. That crowd thinks that Pantera murdered those men."

Mallus stopped and turned to him. He reached out, clapping his hand against Abdes' shoulder. "Pantera has become synonymous with Herod to them—and with Rome," he said. "They are powerless to rail against us. They may not like us, but they are frightened of us still the same, and they will not cross us. But now they have a name—they have a man to blame, to direct their hatred and rage against. They have been waiting for this—for just such a chance."

They walked again, falling side by side and in step, following a steeply sloping street toward the lower city district. "There is no shame in being unsettled by them, lad," Mallus said. "That was their intention. Seneca was earnest in his offer to remove you from morning duty."

"I don't want that, sir," Abdes said—a complete and unadulterated lie. The prospect of standing his ground in the face of another such gathering left him ashen.

Mallus nodded. "Still," he said. "You should consider the offer standing, if they come back again, and you change your mind."

Abdes did not say anything for a moment. He did not want to have this conversation. Mallus was gently but insistently presenting him with opportunities he longed to take.

“He is a good man, you know,” Mallus said. “Seneca, I mean. I have known him a long time. We were Praetorian Guards together in our youths. And after that, we were both officers in the Fifth Alaudae in Germania.”

Abdes stumbled clumsily, blinking in owlish awe. The Praetorian Guard was an elite cadre chosen especially for their integrity, skill and experience; selected exclusively at the discretion of Caesar himself. “Really, sir?”

Mallus nodded with a smile. “Seneca was my legatus in Germania; I was a tribune under him,” he said. “When he transferred to Sepphoris, he asked me to come with him.”

“Did you get to fight in Germania, sir?” Abdes asked, somewhat breathlessly. Mallus glanced at him, smiling again, either amused or charmed by his wonder.

“I did, yes,” he said. “More often than I would have liked. I was glad to leave it behind me.”

Abdes was quiet for a moment, longing to ask Mallus about Seneca’s limp, but uncertain whether he should broach the subject. “Atticus told me the Praefectus was injured during battle in Germania,” he said at length. “That he is supposed to be blessed by the gods.”

“I could say the same for you, Abdes,” Mallus said. “You survived a wounding that most who learned of it said was insurmountable. Do you feel so divinely blessed?”

Abdes blinked at him. “No, sir,” he said. “I feel very lucky...more so than I am rightly due, I’m sure.”

Mallus chuckled. “And so does Seneca,” he said. He offered no more than this, and Abdes did not press further.

As Mallus and Abdes made their way through the city, searching for the Nazarene contractor who had employed Lamech and Heth ben Hezekiah, Abdes grew more and more anxious. The comfortable associations he had felt on his first

day in Sepphoris, as the crowds had converged about him, reminding him of his home in Sidon, were gone. For the first time in his life, the presence of so many people, crowded into so narrow a margin of space; the stark and looming walls of the buildings lining the streets; the clamor and din of the market square in full swing left his uneasy.

Every sight, smell and sound—each bark of sudden laughter, fleeting fragment of conversation or jostle of an unfamiliar shoulder—left him shying closer and closer to Mallus, his eyes wide, his heart racing. Everything reminded him of the day of his attack; a whiff of salted fish set out on display at a passing stand; a flutter of sunlight reflected off of a glass vessel someone held up to admire; a toddler squirming in his mother's grasp, wailing in indignant outrage. It was all familiar to him, and no longer in a fond or pleasant way. The deeper they drew into the bustling heart of the city, the more his anxiety mounted, edging precariously toward outright and frantic fear.

When Mallus caught him by the arm, drawing him to an abrupt and unexpected halt in the crowd, Abdes jerked, his breath caught in a startled, alarmed gasp, his eyes wide. Mallus' brows lifted in concern. "Are you alright?"

Someone shoved against Abdes as they passed him; he stumbled forward, hunching his shoulders, his pallor ashen. "I...I am fine," he said, his voice hoarse and warbling.

Mallus drew him aside, finding some semblance of reprieve from the traffic beneath the cool, shadowed eaves of a portico. "No, you aren't," he said. "You're shaking. Gods above, lad, you're as white as a shade. What is it? What's wrong?"

"I'm fine," Abdes said, meeting Mallus' gaze, struggling to compose himself, to control the pounding of his heart. "I just...the crowd, sir. The close quarters...the heat, sir."

Mallus look unconvinced. If they returned to the citadel now, Seneca would know why. He and Mallus would both think Abdes was weak; they would never again trust him

to anything beyond the grounds of the acropolis. "I'm fine, sir," Abdes said again. "It has passed now."

Mallus looked at him for a long, hesitant moment. At last, he nodded, patting Abdes' shoulder. "Come on."

"Yes, sir," Abdes said.

They left the market district, heading west, and passed the tuguria, an area of numerous, adjacent brothels where prostitutes plied their wares. The low-slung, one-storey, mud-brick buildings were divided in the cramped quarters called cells; each had its own door leading out onto the street. Above each door, an individual prostitute displayed a crude placard stating her name and charges for services. Another wooden sign on the cell door indicated whether or not a young woman was occupied inside with a client.

Most of the prostitutes were young, their faces painted with cosmetics, their bodies draped in colorful fabrics. They wore brightly adorned, beaded jewelry about their throats, dangling from their ears, and they called out to passers-by in suggestive invite, hoping to lure company toward them. The sight of Mallus and Abdes in their Roman uniforms did not intimidate the women; rather, it seemed to incite them all the more. They would deliberately step into their paths, smiling coyly, murmuring greetings or softly spoken promises of what they might do to certain portions of Mallus' and Abdes' anatomies, either individually, or to both of them at once.

While Mallus seemed coolly unaffected by these invitations and beckons, Abdes' nervous apprehension returned in full. Flushed and flustered, his shoulders hunched, his gaze shyly averted, he drew close to Mallus, keeping as near as a shadow to the tribune. He glanced up long enough to notice a prostitute as they walked past her tugurium; as he caught sight of her face, he paused, stumbling slightly, his breath drawing to a halt.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen; high, rounded cheeks tapering into the delicate curve of her chin; large, dark, almond-shaped eyes framed by high brows. Her lips were full, sweetly curved, like the arms of a well-crafted bow. She was dressed in scarlet and blue silk, her

eyelids, cheeks and lips painted brightly. He could see her name on the sign above her cell door. *Salome*.

"You do not want to find fancy with that one, lad," Mallus said in a low voice, noticing Abdes' attention. "Salome is the most prized and coveted prostitute in Sepphoris, and damn likely all of Judea at that. She is the favored pet of some of the area's most wealthy and influential men—and no others. She's standing out there to lure men to the cells. They think they duck inside with her, only to find another in her place once the door closes."

Salome turned her gaze toward Abdes. When her eyes met his and then traveled slowly down the length of his form, taking him into account, studying his every measure, it was nearly palpable to him, like the delicate press of curious fingertips. He watched her lovely, shapely mouth unfurl in a delicate, glorious smile.

"A fresh lamb among the fold, Tribune Mallus?" a loud voice boomed. An enormous man, surely as broad in girth as he was lofty in height, lumbered toward them, clapping his hands together as if presented with unexpected treasure. He had a broad, somewhat flat face and small, dark eyes framed by the bushy tangle of his low brows. His round chin and swollen cheeks were adorned with a heavy growth of beard. His gaze darted from Mallus to Abdes and settled there, the corner of his mouth lifting in a wry smile as he studied the younger man. "And what a pretty little lamb he is," he remarked, leaving Abdes unsettled and blinking down at the ground.

"Not quite a lamb, Menachem," Mallus said, meeting the large man's gaze evenly, coolly. He kept his hand against Abdes' elbow, drawing him in tow as they moved past.

Menachem laughed, unoffended. "Why do you not let my ladies be the judge, Tribune?" he called affably. "Lamb or not, he will leave my flock a man!"

Mallus did not slow in the least to acknowledge the taunt. "That was Menachem, Salome's pander," he said with a frown. "He owns most of the tuguria in Sepphoris and the money-lending stands besides. He's one for trouble and if it doesn't come to him of its own accord, he'll go looking for it

gladly. Give him a broad berth if you see him again—the girl, Salome, too.”

Abdes glanced over his shoulder, and had one last glimpse of Salome standing outside of her tugurium cell. She was still watching him, still holding his gaze, and still smiling softly, mysteriously as she watched him leave.

CHAPTER FOUR

They found the Nazarene artisan, Yoseph, at work laying stone tiles at a residential courtyard. He was assisted by an older man with thick veins of coarse grey riddled through his dark hair. Yoseph was closer to Mallus' age, in his early to mid-forties; a tall man with broad, strong shoulders and limbs strapped with thick muscles. Mallus had told Abdes briefly about him as they had walked through the city.

"He's a Jew," Mallus had said. "But like most of the working class, he's fairly tolerant of Romans. He'd rather we just go away, but he metes out a living either way. He's a just man; a good fellow."

Yoseph was dressed for labor in a lightweight tunic and hastily lashed sash, his hair drawn back from his sweat-streaked, sun-darkened face by a bundled scarf. He looked up as Abdes and Mallus approached, pausing as he settled a heavy stone tile into place.

"Good morning, Yoseph," Mallus called out in Greek.

The older man with Yoseph had been raking a level measure of sand inside the wooden yard frame. At Mallus' voice, he looked up, drawing the blade of his calloused hand toward his brow to ward off the glare of the sun. He frowned visibly.

"Tribune," Yoseph said, nodding once in acknowledgement as he placed the tile and stood upright. He apparently knew Mallus well enough by sight not to be alarmed by his arrival and studied the tribune with a slightly puzzled pinch to his brows. He stooped and lifted a rag from the

ground, using it to wipe his hands. "Father, this is Tribune Mallus of the urban cohort," he said, glancing over his shoulder toward the older man. By way of introduction to Mallus, he said, "My wife's father, Cleophas."

"Sir," Mallus said, nodding politely to Cleophas. Cleophas' brows narrowed all the more, his frown deepening. "This is Tiberius Abdes," Mallus said, as Yoseph's inquisitive gaze settled on the younger man. "New to the cohort, a transfer from Syria."

"What can I do for you, Tribune?" Yoseph said, having spared an acknowledging nod at Abdes. His attention was not unkind or unduly suspicious, merely curious.

"We think Lamech and Heth have been found," Mallus said.

Yoseph raised his brow slightly. "I've heard. I sent word to Nazareth, that Maryam might come and help the women."

"Praefectus Seneca has asked you to come with us to the citadel," Mallus said. "To speak you with about it."

Cleophas uttered a soft snort. He looked about at the unfinished patio and then scowled at Mallus. "Praefectus Seneca doesn't pay Yoseph's wages," he said. "And he doesn't have a wife who's heavy with child, weeks from being due. Already, Yoseph will lose work traveling for your Caesar's registration. He can't afford to lose any more—not even part of a day."

"Have peace, Father, it's alright," Yoseph said, glancing again over his shoulder. He looked at Mallus again, and smiled in weary resignation. "I don't think any of that matters to the Praefectus, does it? I have my work, and he has his own."

Yoseph mopped at his face and beard with his rag and then tucked it beneath his girdle, reaching down for a waterskin. He tilted his head back, taking a long drink. "I'll go," he said to Mallus, drawing the cuff of his hand against his mouth. When Cleophas opened his mouth, drawing in a sharp breath to object, Yoseph turned to him. "You should rest your

back anyway, Father. This labor is hard on you. If the Praefectus speaks quickly enough, we can still beat the full heat of the afternoon and see this finished today.”

As Yoseph accompanied them back through the city, heading for the acropolis, Abdes listened as Mallus and Yoseph exchanged polite, idle conversation in Greek. “You haven’t registered with the census yet?” Mallus asked, drawing Yoseph’s gaze. “I thought Nazareth was taken along with Sepphoris last fall.”

Yoseph shook his head. “I’m not native to Nazareth. My family is of Bethlehem.”

“South in Judea?” Mallus asked, to which Yoseph nodded. “That’s a five-day trek.”

“At least,” Yoseph said, nodding again. “Probably longer, with my Maryam so uncomfortable, even to ride by mule.” Mallus glanced at him, his brow raised in curious inquiry. “She’s nearly due; a month now,” Yoseph said. “She’s had some false pains this past week. We’re afraid the baby will come early.”

Mallus offered some murmuring sounds in commiseration. They said nothing more for a long moment as they walked. Yoseph glanced over his shoulder now and again at Abdes, his initial curiosity likely roused all the more by Abdes’ silence, his shy and uncertain proximity to the tribune.

“Was it thieves?” Yoseph asked Mallus. “I’ve heard their bodies were found outside of the city walls. Do you think thieves attacked them?”

“I’m investigating the possibility,” Mallus said noncommittally.

“Why has the Praefectus summoned me?” Yoseph asked. “I’ve already told you what I know about Lamech and Heth. There’s nothing more I can offer.”

He drew to a halt, his eyes widening suddenly, his mouth turning in a frown. “Does he think I’m involved in this somehow?” he asked. “Is that why you’ve come? If it is, sir, we

should turn right around again. I'll bring my wife's father before him with me, and send for Maryam. Both will tell you I've been with Cleophas each day through—dawn until dusk—and home again in Nazareth for supper and evening prayers."

"Seneca doesn't think you're involved, Yoseph," Mallus said. "We found some items—personal effects with the bodies. We need to see if you can identify them."

Yoseph blinked at him, visibly startled. "What?" he said, and then he shook his head, drawing back a step. "No. No, I cannot do that."

"We don't know for sure they're Lamech and Heth," Mallus said. "And we can't ask Judas ben Hezekiah to cooperate—you know that, Yoseph. Already, he's been to the citadel this morning, where we had the bodies delivered, and made a stir. If you would only—"

"You don't understand," Yoseph said, shaking his head again. "I can't."

"It would not be the bodies, sir," Abdes said quietly in Aramaic, addressing Yoseph in his native dialect and visibly startling him. As he turned to Abdes, his brows lifted in surprise, Abdes lowered his head respectfully toward the ground. "Only some personal objects. You would not even need to cross the threshold of the citadel, sir. There's a courtyard beyond, and we could bring them to you there. I will hold them so that you might look at them. You wouldn't need to touch them. You wouldn't suffer contamination or impurity."

He glanced up, finding his offer had the effect he had desired. Yoseph looked at him, puzzled, curious, but no longer stern. "You speak Aramaic well," Yoseph said at length.

"Thank you, sir," Abdes said, lowering his gaze again. "I learned in Sidon, sir, my home."

Yoseph turned to Mallus. "Alright," he said. "I will look at them."

Mallus glanced at Abdes, his brow arched slightly. He had not understood their exchange; like most Romans, his Aramaic was limited to casual discourse, or marketplace

bartering. “The Praefectus would be most appreciative, sir,” he said.

As they walked again, Mallus fell back and in step with Abdes. “What did you say to him?” he asked softly, nearly a whisper.

Abdes told him of his offer. “Jewish men cannot enter a building that houses the dead, sir, or touch a dead body, its personal objects,” he said. “It is considered unclean.”

Mallus blinked at him, his brows lifted.

“I am sorry, sir,” Abdes said, thinking the tribune might not appreciate his intervention, no matter his good intentions. “I did not mean to overstep my bounds, sir. I only thought that if I spoke to him in Aramaic...his native language, sir, and let him know that we would respect his customs, that he might trust us.”

Mallus’ brows raised all the more. He smiled at Abdes, genuinely and visibly impressed. “And so he did,” he murmured, and he clapped his hand against Abdes’ shoulder. “Nicely done, lad.”

Yoseph waited for them in a small courtyard between the rear of the citadel building and the cohort barracks. When Abdes presented him with some items found with the bodies—a small leather money pouch with distinctive indigo stitching and the frayed remains of a brown and blue scarf that had been cinched about one of the dead men’s throats in a makeshift garrote—Yoseph’s face twisted with anguish, his eyes clouded with sorrow. He did not even need to speak aloud; that was all of the answer Mallus needed.

“Those belong to them,” Yoseph said quietly, hoarsely. He folded his arms across his chest, pressing his lips together in a thin line. He nodded once. “The pouch is Lamech’s, the scarf is Heth’s.”

“Thank you, sir,” Abdes said.

“I’m sorry, Yoseph,” Mallus said gently.

Abdes saw Seneca walk out the rear entrance of the citadel, striding toward them, his brisk pace marked by his distinctive, hobbling limp. "The Praefectus would like to speak with you, Yoseph," Mallus said. "It will not take long."

Yoseph nodded mutely, his mouth still tightly drawn, his arms still folded.

"Yoseph, good morning," Seneca said. "I'm sorry for the circumstances, for calling you away from your work."

"I'm at your discretion, sir," Yoseph replied.

"Abdes, report to the west entrance," Seneca said, without sparing a glance toward Abdes. "You can finish the sentry shift you missed this morning there."

Abdes blinked at him, wounded by the rebuff. He didn't understand what he might have done to disappoint Seneca, to warrant being sent away. He glanced at Mallus, and found the tribune no less surprised.

"I said you are dismissed, Abdes," Seneca said, turning to settle his heavy, impassive gaze on the younger man.

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, turning and walking away.

Abdes went to the western threshold of the citadel, as ordered. A group of Jewish women had gathered there, perhaps a dozen of them, all dressed in the black tunics and mantles of ritual mourners. They stood at the bottom of the steps, swaying together, their faces twisted in masks of lamentation, crying out and weeping, flapping their hands skyward and at the guards.

"It is not right," one of them moaned in Aramaic. "It is not right to keep them from us. Let our mourning begin as is our custom! Let us claim our honorable sons!"

"How long have they been here?" Abdes asked one of the soldiers. The three guards didn't seem to be paying much attention to the women. Either they didn't understand the Aramaic protests, or they simply didn't care.

“A couple of hours now, carrying on like this,” the soldier said. “We tried shooving them off, but they come right back again. I don’t know why they just don’t go home.”

“They’re waiting to begin their funereal preparations,” Abdes said. He noticed a young woman standing apart from the group; the only way he knew she was supposed to be among them was the fact that she, too, was dressed head-to-heel in black. Despite the shapeless drape of her clothing, he could see she was obviously and heavily pregnant. She was diminutive in stature, and her abdomen was so swollen, she was distended almost as broadly as she stood tall. The other women kept their backs to her, busied with their lamentations and pleas.

“It’s Jewish custom for the women to claim the bodies,” Abdes said, watching the pregnant girl shuffle away from the group, her footsteps slow and trudging, her hands against her belly. “It’s considered unclean for men to handle the dead. And it’s custom for the women to start their preparations as soon after death as they can.”

He walked down the steps, not noticing the other soldier’s surprise at his familiarity with Jewish practices. He was too busy watching the young woman, curious about her. Yoseph had mentioned that his wife was very pregnant, and that he had sent word to Nazareth, summoning her to help ready for the funerals. None of the other women gathered had made a move to help the girl or spared a backward glance in concern for her, despite the fact she was plainly uncomfortable. He wondered if she was a stranger to them, being from Nazareth, or if the women simply knew that Yoseph had been called to speak with Seneca about Lamech and Heth, and disapproved of his cooperation.

The girl moved slowly, approaching a low-lying retaining wall. She sat against it, lowering herself with deliberate care, her brows lifting in discomfort at the movement. Abdes eased his way through the women, shrugging off their fluttering hands as they grasped at him, pleading with him to have Lamech and Heth’s bodies released. When he moved past them, they turned away again for the threshold. If any noticed that he approached the pregnant girl,

they offered no acknowledgement or concern—despite the fact that rumors ran rampant in the city of a Roman soldier just like Abdes raping and murdering a hapless Jewish girl.

The other women might not have had the rumors in mind, but Yoseph's wife obviously did. She looked up at the sound of his footsteps drawing near, the moderate curiosity in her face waning immediately to frightened start. She shrank back along the wall, her hands darting for her belly, her eyes flown wide. She uttered an alarmed and breathless little mewl, staring at him, stricken.

"I beg your pardon, good woman," Abdes said, addressing her in Aramaic, hoping that this would put her somewhat at ease, as it had Yoseph. When it became obvious to him that it had not, to judge by her ashen expression, her enormous, fearful eyes, he genuflected in front of her, turning his eyes toward the ground courteously.

"My name is Tiberius Julius Abdes," he said, again in Aramaic, keeping his voice quiet, his cadence gentle. He reached up, unfettering the chin straps of his helmet. His hair spilled out in a tousled, sweat-dampened tumble against his brows as he removed the helm. He hoped that this subtle gesture might help her focus on his face, not his uniform, and help her distinguish between the soldier and the young man. "If I may, good woman, are you Maryam, wife to Yoseph of Nazareth?"

"Yes, sir," she said after an uncertain, hesitant moment. "I...I am."

He looked up. Maryam was younger than even his own eighteen years, no more than fourteen at the most. She had a round face and small, delicate features complemented by enormous, dark eyes. She blinked at him as he met her gaze, and then the fear in her face softened. Her lips parted and she gasped quietly, her eyes widening, her hand darting against her belly.

"Are you hurting?" Abdes asked her, concerned. "I have only just met your husband's acquaintance this morning, and he told me you are nearly due. Are you in pain?"

She blinked at him again, and then lowered her gaze, color blooming in her cheeks as she smiled. "I am alright," she said. "I'm uncomfortable that's all. I thought sitting might help."

She glanced up again, looking at him so intently that he felt somewhat flustered by her attention. "Yoseph is here," he said. "On the citadel grounds. I could send for him, or I could bring you to him...?"

Maryam shook her head. "No, thank you, sir," she said.

Again, she looked at him with a sort of inquisitive wonder. He realized it was not just a curious interest she demonstrated; it was as if she recognized him from somewhere. He canted his head slightly, raising his brow, smiling at her in puzzlement. "Begging your pardon, good woman, but have we met before?"

Maryam lowered her eyes to her belly, that shy color stoking in her cheeks again. "I don't think so," she said. "I don't come to Sepphoris very often. And I don't know any soldiers."

He felt like an idiot. Of course she was staring at him. This was probably the closest she had ever been to a Roman soldier in uniform before—and rather than fascinate her, his proximity likely disconcerted her. Obviously, she was in no condition to rise to her feet and remove herself from his company without seeming rude or brusque. She wanted him to leave; he had simply afforded her no avenue of courteous escape.

"I am sorry," he said, rising to his feet. "I beg your pardon for troubling you. I offer my condolences, good woman, on the loss of your friends."

"I didn't know them," Maryam said. He looked at her, curious, raising his brow. "Lamech and Heth ben Hezekiah. These others knew them fondly and well, but I've never even seen their faces."

"I thought they worked for your husband?" Abdes asked.

Maryam nodded. "They did, sir," she said. "Here in Sepphoris. They did not come to Nazareth. Yoseph and my father met them each morning. Yoseph invited them many times to join us for supper, but they had families of their own. They never came."

At the mention of the dead men's families, Abdes remembered the two boys in Judas ben Hezekiah's company that morning. "I saw them," he said quietly. "Their sons earlier today, outside of the citadel. They were with their uncle."

"It's very sad," Maryam said, gazing somewhat forlornly beyond Abdes' hip toward the gathering of mourners. "Yoseph told me they were good men, hard workers. It's been difficult for him since they disappeared. His work keeps him busy, and he had counted on younger backs and strong arms to help him see it all done. My father helps as best he can, but he is older now, and it is hard on him." She rubbed her belly again slowly. "It will be hard for us without them," she said softly. "Especially now."

"I'm sorry," he said again, because he didn't know what else to say, but something spoken seemed necessary.

"Will they let us take the bodies today?" she asked. "It is customary to begin our funeral rites as soon as possible. Already, they have been dead some time, and I know that their families want to begin."

"I don't know," he said. "It's not mine to decide." She looked up at him, seeming expectant and somewhat sorrowful, and he felt obliged to say more. "If it was, I would let you."

She nodded again. "Thank you for that," she said quietly, returning her gaze to her belly, her hands. "For your kindness. Good day to you, sir."

"And to you, good woman," Abdes said. He nodded once, and then turned, leaving her, drawing his helmet back atop his head as he returned to the citadel threshold.

CHAPTER FIVE

That night, Abdes dreamed of the girl's muffled tears, her stifled mewls and whimpers. He dreamed of the fleeting glimpse of her legs around the soldier's hips.

Jobina. Her name was Jobina, a young Jewish girl from Besara. He knew that now. He had a name to place with her frightened voice, her pitiful cries, and it tore into his heart like the twisting cut of a knife. He dreamed of moving forward, rushing toward her, crying out.

"Get away from her!" he shouted, planting his hand against one soldier's breastplate and shoving him back. Abdes pivoted, his brows furrowed, and he lunged at the man raping her, pushing him furiously, sending him sprawling sideways.

He could see them; dark-skinned faces framed by thick, bushy brows and heavy beards. He saw their faces—their dark eyes, their high cheeks and long, large noses.

He dreamed that when he fell, punched through the back and stomach with their knives, he heard them running away. "Get out of here—go," one of them said hoarsely to the other in Aramaic. "Run!"

He had seen their faces; he had heard them speak. In the dream, even as the pain overtook him, Abdes realized.

They weren't soldiers. Both of them...they were Jews...!

He sat up against his pallet in the barrack, gasping sharply for breath. Momentarily disoriented in the shadow-draped, silent chamber, he looked wildly about, his hair sleepily

askew, his eyes wide, his heart hammering beneath his breast. It wasn't until one of the young men sleeping near him grumbled softly in his sleep, rustling his blankets as he rolled over on his pallet that Abdes realized where he was. He groaned softly, forking his fingers through his hair and shoving it back from his sweat-dampened brow.

"Gods..." he whispered, his voice tremulous and hoarse. He was shaking, his entire body trembling and he closed his eyes, his brows furrowing.

They weren't Roman soldiers, he thought, remembering their beards, their suntanned faces. He remembered one of them speaking in Aramaic, his voice panicked and hoarse.

Get out of here—go. Run!

"They weren't Roman soldiers," Abdes whispered, shoving aside his blankets. He fumbled about until he found his sandals, and then drew them on, cinching them tight. He rose to his feet, stumbling clumsily in the dark as he struggled into his clothing, his uniform.

"What are you doing?" he heard Atticus croak sleepily. He lay in front of Abdes, and rolled to look up at him, frowning blearily in the darkness. "Where are you going?"

"I have to see the Praefectus," Abdes said. "Cover for me at the morning watch if I'm late."

"Late?" Atticus asked. He propped himself up on his elbows, his bewildered frown deepening. "What are you talking about?"

"Never mind—just cover for me, Atticus," Abdes said. He stooped, snatching his helmet by the chin straps and carried it in hand as he ran out of the barrack. He darted past the building guards and down the front steps, bolting across the courtyard toward the citadel beyond. The sun was only a dim and distant glow on the horizon; a hint of warm color infusing through the darkness of the night. He tucked his helmet beneath his arm, trying to strap his belt and scabbard about his waist as he ran, to tug his plate armor into proper place across his shoulders.

The sentries at the citadel blinked at him curiously as he ran up the steps and ducked past them into the main foyer. He headed for Seneca's office. He had remembered something; the Praefectus would want to know about it. *It couldn't have been just a dream*, he thought, his hobnailed sandal soles clattering noisily against the polished stone floor. *I know it wasn't. Seneca said my memory might return in full as I grew stronger and he was right. It wasn't a dream. It was memory.*

The pair of soldiers posted outside of Seneca's closed office door were as surprised to see him as those at the threshold, although they proved less inclined to allow him to pass. "Hoah, now, soldier," one of them said, stepping forward and planting his palm against Abdes' shoulder to stay him. "You can't just barge into the Praefectus' office at all hours and unannounced."

"I have to see him," Abdes said. He danced back from the guard's hand and tried to duck around him, only to be caught again. "Please, it's important. I know he's here—I can see the light underneath the door."

"He's here," the guard agreed, keeping his hand squarely against Abdes' chest. "But you can't see him. He's in conference, not to be disturbed."

"Conference?" Abdes asked, blinking in bewilderment. Dawn had not even broken yet and he could not fathom with whom Seneca might keep such an early appointment.

"Yes, conference," the guard said, and he offered Abdes a little push backward, making him stumble.

"But...but I..." Abdes said helplessly, glancing toward the door. The other soldier at the threshold met his gaze and shook his head in mute but plain warning: *Don't try it, kid.*

"What's going on here?" Abdes heard Mallus say. He turned to find the tribune striding briskly down the corridor toward them. "What's all of this ruckus?"

"No ruckus, sir," the soldier in front of Abdes said, stiffening to rigid attention at Mallus' approach. "Begging your pardon, sir, but this soldier—"

"I have to see the Praefectus, sir," Abdes said, stepping in front of Mallus, his brows lifted in implore. "Please, sir, it's important. I had a dream—"

"Sir, if I may, the Praefectus has asked to not be disturbed," said the soldier. "He is meeting with Zadduc of the Sanhedrin council, sir. He left very specific instruction."

"Of course he did," Mallus said, nodding. Abdes blinked at him in dismay.

"But I..." he began. Mallus took him by the arm and drew him in tow, leading him away from the office. "Please, sir, you don't understand. I saw them. They turned to me. I could see their faces. I remember—"

Mallus ducked into an alcove, pulling Abdes along with him. "Abdes," he said. "Settle yourself and slow down, lad. You're all in a state."

"I saw their faces, sir," Abdes said, and Mallus blinked at him, startled. "The men who attacked me—I had a dream about them. I saw their faces. I remember, sir."

Mallus leaned toward him, keeping his hand firmly against Abdes' arm. "You're certain of this?" he whispered, sparing a quick, cautious glance toward the corridor to be sure they were beyond the sentries' earshot.

Abdes nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. "I've been having nightmares about what happened almost every night, only this time, I remembered something. I remembered their faces."

He stepped toward Mallus, lifting his chin to speak quietly but fervently against the tribune's ear. "They weren't Roman soldiers," he said, feeling the sharp, startled intake of Mallus' breath against his cheek. "They were dressed like Romans—in full uniforms, sir—but they were bearded. They spoke to one another in Aramaic. I remember now."

He leaned back from Mallus, and the tribune met his wide-eyed gaze. "They were Jews, sir," Abdes whispered.

"You're sure of this?" Mallus asked, and Abdes nodded. "What you are saying is very important—it is vital, lad. You are positive?"

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said. “It wasn’t a dream. It was a memory, I know it.”

Mallus held his gaze, his blue eyes piercing and stern. “Would you know them again to see them?”

“Yes, sir, I would,” Abdes said. “We have to go to the Praefectus. We have to tell him. The guard said he is meeting with that Pharisee priest, Zadduc right now. We could—”

Mallus shook his head, drawing Abdes silent. “Let me tell Seneca,” Mallus said. “I don’t want Zadduc even suspecting who you are.”

“But if he knew the truth—” Abdes began.

“Abdes, listen to me,” Mallus said. “Zadduc wouldn’t accept the truth if we handed him incontrovertible evidence. I know him—trust me. He is zealous in his views. His mind is fixed on your guilt, and nothing you have told me will convince him otherwise. Let me approach Seneca. You go and take up your guard post—say nothing of this to anyone. Let me explain to Seneca and then we will decide what comes next.”

Abdes blinked at him, troubled, but nodded. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“I know why Zadduc is here,” Mallus said quietly. “He has written to Herod about the matter of Pantera. He is demanding the King himself see justice brought to bear.”

Abdes’ eyes widened. “Do not worry for that,” Mallus whispered. “Seneca has anticipated it long before now. He wrote to Herod himself after you were brought to us, once he was sure you would survive your injuries.”

Mallus smirked. “Zadduc expects to find an ally in Herod,” he said. “He’ll be disappointed. The King has more on his mind at the moment than any petty squabbles between the Sanhedrin and the Roman Praefectus. His son, Antipater, has challenged his will; contested the matter to Caesar himself. Herod’s expecting company in Jerusalem—the Roman legatus, Publius Varus is on his way there from Syria as we speak. Herod’s been readying for his arrival. Like I said, lad, more on his mind.”

He dropped Abdes a wink, his smile widening. "Herod wrote Seneca in reply, telling him this matter is wholly within his jurisdiction and capacity to resolve by the law. He will abide by any course Seneca chooses. Which means we have time, Abdes."

"Time, sir?" Abdes said, and Mallus nodded.

"You and I, investigating this," he said. "Finding out more about these two Jewish men who attacked you—and bringing them to justice for it."

Abdes took his sentry post at the citadel's main entrance, standing alongside of Atticus and another soldier from their decury as the sun rose. "What was with you this morning?" Atticus asked. "Tearing out of the barrack in a state."

Abdes glanced at him, and then away again. "I had a dream, that's all."

There were men gathered at the foot of the stairs, some dressed in the vestments of priests and Sanhedrin officials, others in the garb of rabbinical students and scribes. These were members of Zadduc's entourage, the usual lot who gathered to protest and demonstrate. That morning, they were uncharacteristically silent and subdued, contenting themselves to speak in small groups, offering prayers together and murmuring in quiet conversation.

"I heard that Sanhedrin priest, Zadduc, is inside," Atticus said quietly, leaning toward Abdes. "They say he arrived several hours ago, and has been behind Seneca's door ever since."

Abdes nodded. He scanned among the faces of Zadduc's followers, and saw Judas ben Hezekiah. He was wrapped in black, and surrounded by those who obviously sought to comfort him. He knelt against the ground, enfolded by his fellows. He rocked back and forth, moaning quietly as they spoke quietly to him, reciting prayers. As with most aspects of their lives and religious practices, Jewish mourning customs were strictly regimented. Judas observed the

traditional grieving phase, in which he could publicly lament and mourn the discovery of his brothers' bodies. After Lamech and Heth were buried, Judas' isolation would begin; he would keep to his home for seven days of meditation, prayer and personal reflection. He would not work or bathe. If he had a wife, he would not enjoy her conjugal company. He would not even take the comfort of his bed at night, keeping to the floor in prostration. He would continue to wear black for thirty days following his brothers' internments.

Judas' grief was poignant and apparent. Abdes watched as he lifted his face skyward, his eyes closed, his cheeks glossy with a sheen of tears. He hooked his fingers toward the new dawn and cried out hoarsely, a warbling, mournful wail. He would not be able to express his sorrow and pain after the burial. Jewish custom demanded that he hold his peace; that silence was the price of consolation in mourning.

Three young men sitting with Judas leaned against him at his cry, and he hung his head, shuddering as they offered him comfort. "Those are her brothers," Atticus whispered, drawing Abdes' gaze. Atticus nodded toward the young men surrounding Judas. "The girl who was killed. The one they say that soldier, Pantera, murdered. They're her kin."

"Jobina," Abdes said, his heart seized with sudden sorrow. "Her name was Jobina."

When Zadduc emerged from the citadel, he marched swiftly past the threshold, shoving Abdes and Atticus aside. His fists were clenched, his chin hoisted defiantly, his heavy brows furrowed in a scowl. Apparently, Mallus had been right; whatever Zadduc had expected to come from his meeting with Seneca, he had obviously been disappointed.

His followers rose to their feet, gathering around him as he approached. Abdes watched Judas go to the priest, his dark eyes round and hopeful. When Zadduc spoke to him, quiet words Abdes could not discern from his vantage, Judas' face twisted with outrage, his brows drawing together. "No," he said, shaking his head.

Even as Jobina's brothers tried to restrain him, Judas rushed forward toward the citadel, his fists bared, his face

flushed with fury. "No!" he screamed, as they caught him. He struggled against them, swinging his fists, spittle flying from his lips and against his beard. "We will have justice!" Judas shrieked, his baleful, angry eyes sweeping across Abdes and the other sentries. "Let Rome think this makes them great! Let Herod think this makes him a king! The Almighty's wrath will rain upon you—it will sweep you under with the force of His might!"

Abdes drew back a hesitant step, his eyes widening. Judas shoved his forefinger toward the citadel; he pointed out no one in particular, but to Abdes, it felt exactly as if his accusation leveled squarely at him. "I will see you answer, Pantera!" Judas screamed, thrashing against his fellows. "I will know justice by your hide! They cannot keep me from you! They cannot keep the Almighty's wrath from you!"

As Zadduc and the others led Judas away, he fell still and stopped resisting. He slumped, his cries waning to loud, hoarse sobs, and Jobina's brothers gathered around him again, leading him in stumbling tow from the citadel. "I...I will see it," Judas moaned, shuddering. "I will see you answer for it, Pantera."

"Gods above," Atticus whispered, wide-eyed and grasping his spear so tightly his knuckles had blanched. He uttered a low sigh as he relaxed his grip, as color restored in his fingers. He glanced at Abdes and raised his brows. "There was something."

Abdes had been clutching at his own spear fiercely, his palms soaked in sudden, clammy sweat. He forced his fingers to loosen, feeling his bated, aghast breath shudder from his chest.

"I'd hate to be that fellow Pantera, who ever he is," said the other guard. "I hear they're keeping him locked up tight somewhere inside. Nobody knows where he is but the Praefectus."

"Better that way," Atticus said. "Zadduc has a lot of silver to his purse. He'd pay someone a pretty sum to find out where they've got him." He frowned slightly. "And rightly so, you ask me. He's brought this all on us. Couldn't keep his rot

damn member in his tunic, and then he had to go and throttle the girl, too. You can pay for that, you know. At the tuguria, they have girls who will let you choke them raw for an extra pair of denarii.”

“Maybe he’s innocent,” Abdes whispered, still ashen and trembling.

Atticus spat. “He’s guilty, alright,” he muttered. “You ask me, the Praefectus knows it, too. He’s just keeping him hidden until all of this blows past us.”

“Good luck to that,” said the other soldier, shaking his head.

When Abdes’ turn at the threshold was finished, he walked with Atticus back inside the citadel. He heard his decurion, Melitus, calling out to his name, and he paused, turning at the beckon.

“Yes, sir?” he said, as Melitus broke from a brisk jog, catching up to him.

“Back to the barrack, Atticus,” Melitus said, nodding at the younger man who had also stopped. “Go on now. I did not call for you.”

“Yes, sir,” Atticus said, giving Abdes a puzzled and wary glance, as if to say, *What have you gotten into?* He turned and walked away, leaving Abdes and the decurion alone.

“Come with me,” Melitus said to Abdes.

“Sir?” Abdes asked, hesitantly. He didn’t know what he might have done to warrant trouble.

“The Praefectus has summoned you,” Melitus said, walking away from Abdes. “Come on, keep in step.”

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said, hurrying after him. If Seneca had called for him, it meant Mallus had talked to him, relayed Abdes’ dream to him. Abdes felt a tremulous shiver of excitement. His revelation had undoubtedly pleased the Praefectus, who had long been confident that Abdes’ memories of his attack would return to him. Surely, Seneca

wanted to speak with Abdes at length about his dream. Mallus had mentioned aiding in his investigation. Abdes wondered—with eager anticipation—if Seneca meant to reassign him from his decury directly to Mallus' charge.

Abdes was surprised, then, to find not Mallus awaiting him in Seneca's office, but a centurion, one whose stern, sharply angled face was completely unfamiliar to him.

"Close the door behind you as you go, Decurion," Seneca said to Melitus, waving his hand slightly in dismissal.

"Yes, sir," Melitus said, taking his leave.

Abdes remained just beyond the threshold, looking uncertainly between the Praefectus and the centurion. "Abdes, this is Lucius Marius Pulcher," Seneca said. He had been leaning his hip comfortably against the edge of his table, marking a relaxed pose. He stood in full now, limping toward Abdes. "Centurion Pulcher is charged with overseeing the public works of Sepphoris; the market district measures, streets and public buildings, the aqueducts and cisterns."

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, bewildered, nodding his head in respectful deference to Pulcher.

"You'll be serving under Centurion Pulcher from now on," Seneca said, drawing Abdes' surprised gaze. "You can read and write," Seneca said. "Mallus has informed me you are also fluently multilingual. You will be well-suited in Pulcher's charge, as his actarius."

An actarius? Abdes thought, dismayed. *He wants me to be this man's scribe?*

Seneca approached Abdes, looking him in the eye. "Tribune Mallus told me you had some reservations in the city yesterday," he said. His tone of voice, his expression were impassive and Abdes couldn't tell if he offered commiseration or condemnation. "Which is understandable, given your circumstances. He said you overcame them admirably."

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, still bewildered. "Thank you, sir."

Seneca turned and walked slowly toward Pulcher. "When I was a boy, I fell off of my horse," he said. "I hit the ground hard, scraped my hands and chin, knocked the wind and wits from myself." He glanced at Abdes over his shoulder. "I was fortunate that I didn't break any bones, or hurt myself worse than this, but it frightened me. My father tried to see me dusted off and on my feet again, back in my saddle, but I didn't want to. Do you know what he told me?"

"No, sir," Abdes said.

Seneca raised his brow. "He told me I had already known a taste of a fall. Some men went their lives through without having such benefit, and there was a lesson in it. The lesson, Abdes, was to plant my ass in the saddle and ride again anyway, all the wiser for having known what it felt like."

Abdes blinked at him, uncertainly.

"Your work with Pulcher will keep you deep in this city," Seneca said, which made Abdes suddenly grow rigid in bright, anxious alarm. "The lower district, the market square. Every day, you'll be out in the midst of it in some capacity." He walked to his writing table, to a papyrus scroll that rested unfurled atop it.

"I...but, sir, I..." Abdes said. *I can't do that*, he thought helplessly, remembering how paralyzing and overwhelming his terror had felt yesterday. It had been ridiculous and unwarranted, and Abdes had known this fully, but had nonetheless been helpless against it. *Please don't make me do that. I can't.*

Seneca had lifted a stylus and dipped it in an ink well, leaning over to write. He paused, looking over his shoulder expectantly at Abdes. "You what, Abdes?" he said.

I can't do that, Abdes thought, stricken and ashen. He was shaking, helpless to prevent himself, trembling pate to heel at the simple, petrifying concept of venturing back into the crowded lower district. *Please, gods above, sir, don't ask that of me.*

"You what, Abdes?" Seneca said again, his tone patient, nearly condescending. Abdes blinked in new hurt to realize Seneca fully understood his apprehension. He knew

Abdes was terrified to return to the city, and he was making him do it anyway.

Why? Abdes wanted to ask him, confused, wounded. He couldn't seem to summon his voice. *Why would you do this to me? Why are you punishing me? What did I do?*

When Abdes wouldn't answer, Seneca nodded once, and looked down at his scroll again. "I'm signing your official writ of orders," he said. "I will see them delivered to Melitus. Every morning, you will meet Pulcher at dawn by the east entrance. He can tell you the rest of his expectations from there."

"But...but, sir," Abdes said quietly, forcing himself to speak, to summon words. "What about Tribune Mallus, sir? I thought that I...that he and I, sir...we would be..."

Seneca awarded him a long moment of grave regard that left Abdes blinking down at his feet, rebuked. "Mallus has his duties, and you have yours," Seneca said. "If I was you, lad, I would concern myself more with the latter than the former."

Abdes nodded mutely, hurt and bewildered. *But what about my dream?* he thought. *I saw their faces. I remembered what they looked like. I thought that's what you wanted of me. Why are you punishing me?*

Seneca looked back down at his table as he finished writing up Abdes' orders. "Plant your ass in the saddle and ride, Abdes," he told the younger man, rolling the scroll closed between his hands. "You have tasted of the fall, and overcame it once." He glanced at Abdes, his gaze heavy and stern. "You can do it again."

CHAPTER SIX

Abdes planted his ass in the saddle and rode, although he did not feel wiser for it. For six weeks, he trundled a wool satchel filled with little, folding, wax writing tablets across his chest as he followed Centurion Pulcher throughout the city of Sepphoris. Every day was an exercise in fear for him; his overwhelming, inexplicable panic seized him every time he set foot beyond the safe perimeters of the citadel grounds. Every time he entered the market district, engulfed in the crowds, he would struggle to steel himself against the memories that wanted to attack him, tearing and gnashing at his heart and mind. Every flash of red clothing he caught in the crowd reminded him vividly of his attack; every accidental shatter of pottery or glass saw him jerking, as skittish as a nervous foal. It grew no easier, no matter how often he went in Pulcher's company, and every night, when he would finish his long hours of transcriptions, transferring his reports and citations from the wax tablets to ink against papyrus scrolls at the citadel, he would lie awake on his pallet, trembling and restless with the anxious prospect of enduring it all again the next morning.

He couldn't talk to anyone about it. None of his barrack mates knew of his attack. He couldn't tell them or make them understand his irrational fear or despair. They knew something troubled him; it was obvious in the way he withdrew from them, even during those few, fleeting moments he knew in the mornings and evenings in their company. The tentative friendships he had been forming seemed with falter and fade. He had no time to spend with them anymore, and they were helpless to comfort him.

I cannot bear it, Ham, he had written to his brother. I don't understand what I did to deserve this. I've tried so hard to figure it out, but I can't. I tried to please Seneca, but it is a hopeless cause. He's set his mind against me, Ham—I know it. I've displeased him, and he's making me answer for it.

Pulcher proved no comfort or companion to him, either. The centurion was dour and quiet. The only attention he paid to Abdes came on the occasions when Abdes' mind would wander, when Pulcher would be absorbed with his endless, mundane inspections of market place vending scales, sidewalk and roadway cobbles or public building mortar. Abdes would grow distracted, his awareness of the crowds around him unsettling him, and then Pulcher would offer him a snapping beckon and a disapproving scowl that drew his gaze, and made him blink down at his tablet, rebuked and shamed.

For six weeks, Abdes suffered. He did not see Mallus, even in passing, as if Seneca and Pulcher went to extraordinary lengths to keep Abdes from his newfound friend. He was lonely and alone.

He considered this as he stared down at his tablet, watching the shadow of his stylus cut a darkened diagonal across the pale, opaque surface of the wax. It was summer in Galilee, the driest, hottest season of the year and the sun beat down unabated against the city. The air was thick with oppressive heat; already, Abdes was sweat-soaked beneath the confines of his tunic and armor. He could feel sweat trickling in miniscule, creeping rivulets from the crown of his hairline, beneath the lip of his helmet, sliding down his neck, beading against his forehead.

He could hear Pulcher speaking with one of the market vendors, but he did not pay attention to their words, letting their voices blend together in his mind in a garbled drone. He was exhausted and drowsy. Between his long hours every night at his transcriptions, and the nightmares that continued to plague him without mercy, he knew precious little occasion for restful sleep. As he stood beneath the warm sun, beneath the stifling weight of his uniform and helmet, he felt his eyelids droop unintentionally.

“Seven unciae, actarius,” Pulcher said, his voice sharp and startling. He slapped the back of his hand against the underside of Abdes’ tablet, snapping his attention wide awake and bright once more. He blinked, jerking in surprise, looking up at the centurion.

“Sir...?” he said.

Pulcher glowered at him, his brows furrowed. “This scale is seven unciae off,” he said. “Nearly a libra in full—that’s a citation of record. Mark it.”

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said, nodding, writing in his tablet.

Pulcher’s pronouncement apparently displeased the vendor, a man named Eliezer. He stood nearby, in the company of another dressed in resplendent, colorful vestments. This was Naftali; he was a merchant and property-owner. He leased a grand majority of the vending space available in Sepphoris’ market district to prospective vendors, such as Eliezer.

“Seven unciae?” Eliezer exclaimed, blinking indignantly at Pulcher. “I beg your pardon, sir. I set this scale myself, and it is fairly done.”

Pulcher tested vending scales with a set of small lead weights he carried with him. By law, they had to be set within exact iotas of standard measure. At Eliezer’s protest, Pulcher turned to him, utterly unflustered by his outrage. “I am looking at your scale, sir,” he said. “And I am telling you it’s seven unciae off.”

Abdes had to admit that Pulcher’s cool, brusque demeanor served him well in his work. Eliezer was not the first vendor they had encountered in the last six weeks who had questioned Pulcher’s determinations. Some had even outrightly accused Rome of cheating, of issuing warrants without cause in order to reap more profits for Herod in the form of fines. No matter how hot, hostile or hyper the vendors became, Pulcher remained astonishingly unfazed, his characteristic and customary aloofness apparently not a simple façade.

“Are you calling me a cheat?” Eliezer snapped, his face flushed with bright, angry color. He stepped toward Pulcher.

He stood almost a full head shorter than the tall, lanky centurion and had to hoist his chin in order to meet Pulcher's gaze and affect proper ire. "I say the cheat here is you, sir! I know about your inspections—just last week, you cited three others up the way, all honest men, just like me! Your lead is too heavy!"

"Centurion Pulcher," Naftali said, catching Eliezer by the shoulder and drawing him back. Naftali stepped forward, smiling broadly and disarmingly at Pulcher as he draped his hand against the centurion's shoulder and leaned toward him. "I implore you, good sir. Surely there has been some mistake, or accidental misalignment of these scales. Eliezer is an honest man. Those aren't words I offer lightly or without cause."

"I do not make mistakes, sir," Pulcher said, stepping pointedly beyond Naftali's intimate proximity. "As for accidental misalignments, I suggest your man, Eliezer, demonstrates better care in the future. If your merchants dislike being fined, sir, you might bid them be as honest with their scales as they claim to be with their mouths." He glanced at Abdes. "Seven unciae off. Mark it and have the citation delivered in the morrow."

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, his stylus scribbling madly.

As they walked away, Eliezer's glare boring holes into their spines, Pulcher leaned down to speak quietly toward Abdes' ear. "Do I need to start carrying my vine cane with me, actarius?" he asked, making Abdes flinch in shamed rebuke. "That I might slap it against your ass to keep your mind upon your tasks?"

"No, sir," Abdes said quietly, his cheeks ablaze with mortified color.

Pulcher nodded once, drawing ahead of Abdes. "Good," he said.

They moved to the next vending stall, and Naftali scurried after them, having done his best to offer brief consolation to Eliezer. As Naftali fluttered around Pulcher, a broad but insincere grin smeared across the lower quadrant of his face as he offered flattery to the centurion on behalf of this

next merchant, Abdes looked around. It was the height of the afternoon; the market was crowded to full capacity.

He eyed the crowd swarming past him anxiously, keeping himself as near to the stall and out of the flow of traffic as possible. He did better if he kept his gaze averted toward his tablets; if he did not have to look at the crowd, if he did his best to focus on his work, then he was less aware of the close quarters of the market, the unsettling proximity of so many people. Even from his fleeting, sweeping glance around him, he could feel his heart wanting to hitch in mounting anxiety, his hands wanting to tremble.

He started to look down again, to fix his gaze on his notes, and then he blinked, catching sight of the Nazarene contractor, Yoseph, easing his way through the throng toward him. Yoseph hadn't seen Abdes, but Abdes recognized him plainly enough. For that moment, he forgot himself, his duties and anxieties; Yoseph was a familiar, friendly face, and Abdes was nearly desperate for any sort of such company.

"Yoseph, sir, hullo," he called out in Aramaic, stepping away from the booth.

Yoseph caught his gaze around jostling heads and shoulders. It took him a moment before recognition settled, and then the suspicion in his eyes from having taken Abdes' helmet and uniform into account faded. "Hullo to you," he called back.

He shouldered his way over to Abdes, smiling at the younger man. "Abdes, is it not? From Sidon?" He offered his hand in amicable greeting, and Abdes folded his tablet closed against his stylus, tucking it beneath his arm to accept the clasp.

"Yes, sir," Abdes said. "It is good to see you again, sir."

Yoseph pivoted slightly, allowing Abdes a glimpse of someone shorter in stature, shielded behind his shoulder. "This is Maryam, my wife," Yoseph said. "Maryam, this is Abdes of Sidon. I told you about him, remember? The day back in the spring when I met with the Praefectus...?"

Maryam stepped forward, cradling a snoozing, swaddling-bound infant in her arms. She looked up at Abdes, her eyes round with surprise, her cheeks graced with a sudden hint of shy color. “Yes, of course,” she murmured, dropping her head in a polite nod.

The last time Abdes had seen her, she had been fully due with child, her small, slight form swollen and distended with her pregnancy. He blinked in surprise to see her now. She had recovered in full, and not even the shapeless drape of her tunics and mantle could disguise the fact that she was as slender and delicate as a winter-barren tree branch. She smiled up at him, still childlike enough in her delicate, wide-eyed appearance to pass for Yoseph’s daughter, not his bride.

“My husband told me about your courtesy in respecting our faith,” she said, averting her gaze to her baby. “He has spoken very well of you, sir.”

She acted as if she’d never met him before. Abdes could appreciate that; Jews typically did not associate with Gentiles, and Roman soldiers in particular, and for a woman to do so, even in casual introduction, would be severely frowned upon. She obviously hadn’t told Yoseph of their encounter. “I am pleased to meet you, good woman,” he said, nodding courteously to her.

“And this...” Yoseph said, draping his hand against Maryam’s shoulder and guiding her forward to present the baby. “This is our lamb—our son, Yeshua.”

Abdes looked down at the sleeping baby. He had never been in such close proximity to an infant before, and took a hedging, uncertain step back. He glanced between Yoseph and Maryam and realized they expected something of him, some manner of appreciative acknowledgement of their child. “He’s...little,” he said, for lack of anything else coming to mind.

Yoseph laughed. Abdes glanced at Maryam, and found her studying him much as she had on the day they had met, with a sort of soft wonder in her eyes, a smile lifting the corners of her mouth.

He heard a loud, distinctive harrumphing sound from behind him, just as Maryam's gaze averted beyond his shoulder, her pretty smile faltering. Abdes cringed inwardly.

"I...my apologies, sir," he stammered, turning to find Pulcher looming behind him, his face set in customary disapproval. "I beg your pardon. I have found some familiar faces, and I only meant to offer passing greetings, sir."

"It's my fault entirely," Yoseph said, still smiling broadly with good cheer. Abdes might have warned Yoseph that such affectations were lost upon Pulcher. Yoseph realized this quickly enough for himself when Pulcher's stern expression didn't soften in the slightest. He stepped forward, his own smile faltering. "My apologies, sir," he said. "My name is Yoseph of Nazareth. I am acquainted with the Praefectus, sir, and have met this young soldier through that association. I would beg pardon for any inconvenience to you, sir."

The mention of Seneca's name was enough to force a thin, polite smile onto Pulcher's lips, probably just as Yoseph had intended. Abdes looked at Yoseph, meeting his gaze briefly, grateful for his intervention.

"No inconvenience, sir," Pulcher told Yoseph with a nod. "Though I appreciate your courtesy. If you would pardon us, Yoseph of Nazareth, my scribe and I have duties to attend to."

He said "my scribe" with the same sort of dismissive tone he might have used to refer to his dog. He might have granted Abdes at least a modicum of dignity in front of Yoseph and Maryam, but apparently Pulcher harbored no such tender sympathies. He had reminded Abdes of his place, and brought it plainly and apparently to Yoseph's and Maryam's attention, as well. Abdes felt shamed color stoke in his cheek, and looked down at the ground.

"You are fortunate to have his services, sir, if I may say," Maryam said quietly. Abdes blinked up at her in surprise. He found her looking at him, her mouth unfurled softly again. "He seems a good man to me," Maryam told Pulcher, without turning her eyes from Abdes'.

Pulcher offered another harrumphing sound. “Yes, well,” he murmured. “I will take that into account, good woman.”

Abdes trailed Pulcher through the market for the next several hours, until he was nearly dizzy and stumbling from the heat. At last, Pulcher led him beneath the blessedly cool eaves of a portico outlying a large public bath house. Abdes slipped his helmet from his head and canted his head back, leaning against the wall and relishing the momentary reprieve of the shade.

“Here,” Pulcher said, offering him a waterskin.

“Thank you, sir,” Abdes said. He drank greedily, savoring the cool water as it spilled against his parched tongue and down his throat. He felt it trail down from the corners of his mouth in wondrous little rivulets, traveling slowly, purposefully toward his throat. He lowered the skin, gasping softly, blinking against beads of sweat caught in his eyelashes.

“How many citations today?” Pulcher asked. He knew how many; Abdes knew it—and Pulcher was fully aware that he knew. He never allowed Abdes more than a momentary pause from semblance of work, no matter how trifling. Pulcher himself, on the other hand, seemed fully inclined to rest if the occasion presented itself—which it did now, apparently. He sat against the ground, drinking from his waterskin while Abdes squatted, drawing tablets from his satchel and sorting through them, skimming his notations.

“Seven, sir,” he said. He looked over at Pulcher. “That’s a lot for one day, isn’t it?”

Pulcher nodded, lowering the waterskin from his mouth. He swished about a mouthful and then swallowed. “It is, yes,” he said. “I’ve been seeing a lot more of them lately, these ‘misaligned’ scales, as Naftali calls them.” He raised his brow thoughtfully, without looking at Abdes. “I’m going to chance my schedule of inspections,” he remarked. “I’ve kept to this order for four years now. Let’s see what happens if we arrive unannounced and unexpected.”

Abdes didn't understand why Pulcher would consider this, but he nodded. A change in their schedule meant less time in the market for the moment; that was as blessed an announcement as he had heard in ages.

Pulcher drew his legs beneath him and stood. He approached the colonnade, his brows narrowing slightly as something caught his attention. Abdes followed his gaze and saw that someone had scrawled in thick, blood-red paint against the blanched stone of one of the broad columns. *WHERE IS HEROD'S JUSTICE FOR PANTERA?* the lettering screamed.

They had seen a lot of such vandalism on public and municipal buildings, written in charcoal or painted in bright, furious tones. *Give over Pantera*, they demanded. Sometimes the messages were less clear or vehement, the Roman numerals *LXXVII*—seventy-seven—although neither Abdes nor Pulcher understood whatever message this was meant to impart.

"Mark this for the record," Pulcher said without looking at Abdes.

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, sifting again through his tablets, looking for an empty one.

"Go inside and requisition a bucket, some rags," Pulcher said, and Abdes looked up at him, scowling safely without notice because the centurion had his back to him. "Go to the well and fill the bucket. Wash this off of here."

"Yes, sir," Abdes muttered, still scowling. He had known that was coming. For every incident they had encountered, Pulcher had ordered Abdes to make it disappear. The charcoal writing was easy enough to eradicate, but the painted examples—like this one—were pains in his ass, sometimes taking hours spent in the grueling sun, rags and brushes in hand, scrubbing at walls and columns.

"Where will you be, sir?" he asked. Pulcher used those occasions when Abdes would wash the vandalism away to rest. Sometimes, he'd sit close at hand—but always in a spot of cool comfort—watching Abdes or dozing, while other times, he'd retreat indoors at a public building or bath house in which to

wait for Abdes to finish. Their current proximity to a bath house wasn't lost upon Abdes, nor was it on Pulcher, apparently.

"I'll be inside," Pulcher said, already walking toward the entrance. "Bathing away some of this wretched heat."

"Rot bastard," Abdes muttered, scrubbing at the column. The damnable paint was tenacious; he had been at it for an hour at least already, and his arms and shoulders were aching with exertion. He had removed off his breastplate and belt, laying them aside with his helmet. He had stripped off his red overtunic, and worked in his undershirt, which was drenched and sticking to him unpleasantly with sweat. He was shaking with fatigue and indignant outrage toward his centurion, who remained somewhere inside, soaking himself comfortably, undoubtedly enjoying conversation and wine while he was at it.

"Bastard stinking rot," Abdes seethed as he scoured. His fingertips were pruning from the water, reddened and chapped with his efforts. And still, the rot damn writing remained, virtually unscathed.

WHERE IS HEROD'S JUSTICE FOR PANTERA?
it cried at him brazenly, obstinately.

"Here it is," Abdes whispered, lowering his aching, strained arms momentarily. His shoulders screamed in begrudging protest and he grimaced, both in pain and at the writing. "It's right damn in front of you."

"Why are you doing that?"

Abdes had been so distracted by his exhausting, aching efforts that he had completely forgotten that he was still in the city, with people about, passing by and close at hand. He had not even thought to be anxious or alarmed, but at the sound of this small voice, immediately behind him, he whirled, his eyes flown wide, his breath tangling as he danced clumsily backward.

He had attracted an audience without realizing it. A group of ten young boys stood behind him, watching him with

undisguised fascination. At his stumbling recoil, they giggled together.

Abdes managed to reclaim his footing, his breath escaping him in a shuddering sigh. He forked his fingers through his sweaty hair, shoving it back from his face, and he closed his eyes, feeling the sudden, frantic measure of his heart slow toward some semblance of normal pace again.

“Why are you doing that?” one of the boys asked again.

“Did your father tell you to?” another chimed.

Abdes opened his eyes and blinked at them. They were probably sons of merchants from the nearby market district. One among them in particular looked familiar; Abdes had likely seen him before during Pulcher’s inspections.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “My father didn’t tell me to. My centurion did.”

“Are you Roman?” asked one of the boys, his dark eyes round and curious.

“What’s your name?” said another.

“Were you bad?” a third said, his voice overlapping his fellows’. “Is that why you’re washing the column?”

Abdes chuckled slightly, nervously, caught between being charmed and annoyed by their persistent interest. He squatted, resting his weight on the balls of his toes, his elbows on his knees, taking advantage of the moment to rest his aching back. “My name is Abdes,” he said in Aramaic. “I’m a Roman soldier, yes. I’m only washing the column because I was told to. That’s my job.”

At his address in their native dialect, the boys’ eyes widened in fascinated delight. They converged upon him, drawing near, their high, eager voices rushing together in an excited din. “Can I touch your armor?” one of them asked, already leaning over and tugging at his discarded breastplate.

“Yes,” Abdes said, laughing in genuine amusement now.

“What’s this?” another asked, holding up a length of red fabric.

“That’s my scarf,” Abdes said. “I wear it under my armor to keep it from rubbing against my neck.”

“Is this your helmet? Can I wear it?” asked a boy who had already hefted the helmet between his hands. It was far too big for the diminutive circumference of his head; the browline covered his eyes in full, while the cheek guards, if fettered together, would have smacked him squarely in the collar.

“Is this your sword?” gasped another, discovering Abdes’ balteus. He lifted the belt in one hand, reaching for the sheathed blade with the other. Abdes leaned toward him, gently removing both from his eager grasp.

“Yes, and it’s sharp,” he said. “You can’t play with it.”

“Have you stabbed anyone with it?” the boy asked, all adulating and awestruck eyes upon Abdes.

“Do you get to fight in battles?” asked another, pressing himself against Abdes’ shoulder, marveling over the sword.

“Did you get to fight the Arabs from Petra in Jerusalem?” asked another.

“My uncle says that Romans are bad men,” said the boy who looked dimly familiar to Abdes. While his friends had surged forward, he had remained rooted in place, keeping a wary, suspicious distance from Abdes. He studied Abdes, his brows pinched, his small hands closed into fists. At his words, loud enough to rise about the excited chatter, the other boys fell silent with uncertainty.

“My uncle told me Roman soldiers hunt down our women and hurt them,” the boy said, as Abdes blinked at him, caught of guard by the tremulous vehemence in his voice. “That they hunted down my father and left him to rot in the bushes outside of the city.”

Abdes jerked as if he’d been physically slapped. Now he understood why this boy looked so familiar. He had indeed seen him before—at the citadel on the day Lamech and Heth

ben Hezekial's bodies had been discovered. The boy had been accompanied by Judas ben Hezekiah. He had followed his uncle up the citadel steps, shied against Judas' hip.

These children have no fathers now! Judas had raged. *Where is the justice for them? For their mothers?*

Abdes rose to his feet, his brows lifting as he looked down at the boy. "That isn't true, lad," he said quietly. "We don't know who killed your father. But we—"

"You're lying!" the boy shouted. "You know who killed my father! He killed my father!" He pointed at the column behind Abdes, at the words, *Where is Herod's justice for Pantera?* Tears spilled down the boy's flushed cheeks, and his breath fluttered raggedly from his chest. "Pantera killed my father! A Roman soldier named Pantera! The Almighty will punish him for it! He...he will punish you all!"

He whirled about and ran away, his angry cries dissolving into sobs. One of the other boys broke away from Abdes, hurrying after his friend. "Jacob!" he called.

The other children looked up at Abdes, visibly torn between wanting to stay with him in their curiosity, or flee with their friend, Jacob, because they believed his furious, grief-stricken words. The latter seemingly won out over the former, because they scampered off, leaving Abdes alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Months passed; summer waned into the brief hint that was autumn in Galilee before yielding to the cold, rainy months of winter. Just as Abdes seemed at last to be growing accustomed to the bustle of the city again, as he had begun to realize his anxiety among the crowds less and less, Pulcher abruptly changed their routine, wrenching Abdes into new and wholly unfamiliar duties, leaving him flustered anew.

True to his word, Pulcher had changed the schedule by which he inspected the market, and now, with rain upon them, he had turned his attentions in full to the city's aqueducts and cisterns. One morning, while a steady, cold drizzle pelted down from the overhanging ceiling of low-lying clouds, Pulcher led Abdes from the city and out toward the Bet Netofa valley along the outlying Esdraelon plains.

They were accompanied by a small, scrawny man named Tarfon, a Jewish contractor under retainer by the city to oversee maintenance of the aqueducts and water supply. He was a pompous, self-important little man, who used the power and authority vested in him as an obvious—at least to Abdes—effort to compensate for his slight build and short stature. Abdes hadn't liked him from the moment of their introduction, when Tarfon's dark, beady eyes had swept perfunctorily up and down the length of his form, and then he had smirked.

"Phoenician?" he had asked, coming to this deduction by Abdes' name. "You don't look it. I thought Phoenicians had darker complexions."

“My ancestors were Greek, sir,” Abdes had replied. “By way of Ionia.”

Tarfon had continued to smirk. “Didn’t the Ionian Greeks betray their fellows of the mainland?” he asked. “Turned tail on them in the Persian War, siding with Xerxes?”

It was the first time—but not the last—that Tarfon had tried to demonstrate his own perceived superiority by simultaneously expressing the benefits of a well-rounded education, and by trying to make Abdes feel stupid in light of it.

“I wouldn’t know, sir,” Abdes had replied, holding Tarfon’s gaze. “As it was five hundred years ago, and I wasn’t around to see.”

Pulcher’s idea of inspecting the aqueducts consisted of having Abdes repeatedly wriggle down the narrow confines of vertical access wells, holding an oil lamp in his hand while verifying whether or not the water flowed at proper capacity. The access wells were used to repair the underground ducts. They had hand- and footholds carved into the walls, but these were meant to be useful when the water flow below had been staved, the channels empty so that one could climb down into them. They were worthless to Abdes, who was forced to dangle head-first down inside each shaft, trusting—against his better judgment—to Tarfon and Pulcher to hold fast to his ankles and keep him from falling.

Abdes’ efforts seemed to thoroughly delight Tarfon, particularly when Abdes discovered one duct in which the water flow had somehow stopped. The water had backed up into the access well; a realization that had come too late as Abdes had been lowered into the shaft. He had smacked face-first into the icy, stagnant water; his lamp had been lost, his clothes soaked to the middle of his back, and he had damn near drowned before Pulcher and Tarfon had managed to haul him out, sputtering and choking, from the well.

He sat against the ground, shuddering violently and sopping. His teeth chattered, and his hand jerked uncontrollably as he struggled to level his stylus against his tablet. Pulcher wanted him to make a note of the problem.

Neither he nor Tarfon seemed particularly moved by Abdes' near-drowning, or his misery in its aftermath. They stood together nearby, staring down the access well, discussing the status of the duct below.

"You have to expect this sort of thing," Tarfon remarked. "This won't be the last place you'll see it before next summer. I'll tell you right now what happened—the damn duct wall caved in, damming up the flow. They used rot-grade concrete to line the ducts down there. It's too porous. We've had heavy rains these past weeks and a wet spring on top of it. The water's been soaking deep into the ground."

He hooked his thumbs beneath his sash and swaggered slightly, pleased that his expertise was being called to the forefront. "Water soaks into that concrete, spreads those little holes and cracks in it until they just can't hold any more and it collapses. There's your cause right there, Centurion Pulcher. Unclog this spot, and the same will happen further up or down the line. You want to prevent it, you'll need to stave the flow from the reservoir and lay some good piping. Lead pipe, not concrete—that would hold well. We told those engineers from Rome all of that from the start when they hollowed this out. They should have listened."

Pulcher looked at Tarfon for a long moment. "Shall I have my scribe note your observations on Rome's attention to quality control for the record?" he asked, making Tarfon blink at him, his smug smile faltering with uncertainty. "I'd be glad to see your comments forwarded to the Senate for their consideration."

Tarfon's smile faded in full. "I was only making a statement," he said. "Not offering any offense. The Praefectus pays me too kindly for anything like that. Rome's far off from here, and they have more on their minds with troubles closer to home, that's all I meant."

"I assure you, sir, that the quality of water flow to this city is of pertinence and interest to Rome," Pulcher said. "Any statements offered to the contrary could well be misconstrued."

“Of course,” Tarfon offered in a small voice, struggling to smile. “Of course, sir, I understand completely, sir.”

Pulcher walked away. “I will have your writs delivered to you in the morning,” he said to Tarfon without pausing to look over his shoulder. “Get this water moving.”

“Yes, sir,” Tarfon said.

Pulcher paused as he tromped past Abdes long enough to unfasten the brooch holding his red cloak in place against his shoulder. He swung the damp sheet of wool from his back, and dropped it unceremoniously against Abdes’ lap. “Come on,” he said, walking again. “Draw that about you lest you catch your death.”

That night, Abdes sat in his customary little room at the citadel, hunched over his writing table, transcribing his notes from tablet to scroll. His entire body ached in ways he had never experienced or imagined possible before. He still felt chilled to the marrow, even in dry clothes. He had developed a runny nose, which he felt certain was only a precursor to some godforsaken malaise sure to come in lieu of his impromptu dousing.

He was so tired, he thought he might weep. It had long since grown dark outside beyond the narrow window of his office. Abdes set aside his stylus and pressed the heels of his hands against his brow, cradling his head, letting his weary eyes droop closed.

If he didn’t finish his scrolls, and leave them at the records office for the morning, Pulcher would admonish him. Abdes had inadvertently—and, he realized in the retrospect, stupidly—set himself up for this by diligently completing his transcriptions in such timely fashion from the first. Pulcher had never specifically said this was required of Abdes but now that Abdes had developed the habit, Pulcher expected it.

It doesn’t matter anyway, Abdes thought, sighing heavily. No matter when my head hits my pallet, I’ll only know a couple of hours sleep before the nightmares start again. I won’t find any rest.

He opened his eyes, lowering his hands. He glanced to the left of his table and saw a slender papyrus scroll he had nearly forgotten. It was a letter from Ham. Abdes had received it upon his return to the citadel that evening. He hadn't had the chance to read it yet. He lifted it in hand, unfurling it, smiling fondly to think of his brother. It had been some time since Ham had last written to him, and Abdes had been lonely without the comfort of his words.

His smile faded abruptly as he read.

Father is dead, Abdes, Ham had written. A fever came upon him, and he succumbed to it three nights ago. Don't worry for the arrangements—T. has seen to them. He's already laid to the ground. Let dirt return to dirt, I say.

T. was Ham's shorthand for *Tanith*, their stepmother. Ham had never made any great secret of his disdain for the woman—who was only three years older than Ham—and thus refused to refer to her by her full, given name. Ham had told Abdes once that shortly after Tanith and their father, Moloch had married, Tanith had tried to seduce him, to coax him into her bed. When he had refused her, she had grown furious. Their father's venomous conviction that neither Ham nor Abdes were his sons by blood kin had seemed to develop shortly thereafter.

Moloch's will was brief and to the point, Ham wrote. He left us nothing, Abdes. It all belongs to Mago and T. He said he understood that Mother was unfaithful to him, that we were bastard sons of some illicit, misbegotten affair. He said he had wasted far too many years, and far too much money on us and at last, he was cutting his ties to us in full.

Abdes blinked against sudden, anguished tears. His hands began to tremble and the papyrus fluttered between them. He staggered until he could lean his hip against the table and steady himself.

I'm contesting the matter, Ham wrote. What he has done violates the law, and I've written to no less than Publius Quinctilius Varus, the Roman legatus of Syria to attest to our legitimate claim and beseech his intervention. The matter of our birth, however, is another matter entirely. With no evidence except for our own testimony, we'll be hard pressed if made to prove our blood ties to Father. If that's what is

meant to be, I say let it be. Let T. have his money. Some things cannot be bought or bartered for—a small but significant lesson that alas, Father never realized. I'm not as pained by this revelation as I might have expected because I suspected its coming all along. Even before Father sent you away, I had grown to recognize my place in his esteem, and yours.

Abdes might have realized his place in Moloch's regard all along, but to see irrefutable evidence of it now left him shocked, unable to breathe.

I informed the legatus that he could forward his reply to your attention, in the charge of Marcus Vergilius Seneca, the Praefectus of Sepphoris, as I'm leaving Sidon for Jerusalem, Ham wrote. I've heard from merchants passing through that Herod offers dutiful employ to men of demonstrated skill, and I expect to be able to find a journeyman's position within short measure of my arrival. I'll pass through Sepphoris along my route, and hope to find some time with you. I've missed you so much, Abdes, and the sight of your face would bolster within me that which feels crumbled and decayed at the moment.

Abdes heard the soft scrape of a sandal sole at his threshold, and he jerked at the sound, his eyes flown wide, his voice escaping him in a startled, breathless whimper. The papyrus scroll fell from his hands, slapping lightly against the floor.

"I'm sorry," Mallus said from the doorway. "I didn't mean to startle you, lad."

"Mallus," Abdes whispered. His eyes burned with tears, but he struggled to control them. He lowered his face, his cheeks hot and flushed, his breath constricted in his throat. "I...I was just..."

Mallus might not have seen him in months, but he realized at once that something was wrong. He walked across the room, his blue eyes wide and sharp with concern. "What is it?" he asked. "Abdes, what's wrong?"

He touched Abdes' shoulder. There was something so poignant and kind in the gesture that Abdes felt helpless against it. He was so tired, his mind vulnerable and exhausted, and he was so instantly flooded with emotion, with grief, he couldn't bear it. He blinked at Mallus, trembling and then

shoved his hands over his face, his tears spilling. "I...I'm sorry...!" he gasped.

"Hoah, lad..." Mallus said, startled. He let the younger man embrace him, weeping against his shoulder. "What's happened?" Mallus whispered against Abdes' ear. "Are you hurt, lad? Has someone hurt you?"

Abdes shook his head, shuddering against the tribune. "My...my father," he said, shaking uncontrollably. "My father is dead..."

"Gods above," Mallus breathed, holding him all the more fiercely. "I'm sorry. I'm here, lad. It's alright. It's alright."

Abdes huddled against him, weeping. He seemed to stand there an eternity, stricken by sorrow, until at last the strength waned in his knees, and Mallus helped him sit against his stool. "I'm sorry," Abdes whispered, over and over, ashamed of himself, that Mallus would see him in such a state. "I'm sorry...please, I just...I..."

"Abdes," Mallus said, genuflecting before him. "There is no shame in it, lad. No shame."

Abdes nodded, more tears spilling. "My brother wrote to me," he whispered. "I...I almost forgot to read it, and then I saw it on the table, and I..."

Mallus reached down, lifting the unfurled, fallen scroll in his hand. He glanced at Abdes, his brow raised inquisitively, and when Abdes nodded, Mallus skimmed the letter. As he read, his brows lifted; Abdes heard the soft, distinct intake of his breath, and then Mallus looked at him. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

Abdes didn't say anything; he simply pressed his lips together and nodded. He was humiliated to have broken down in front of Mallus, ashamed that he had proven so fragile and frail. Mallus seemed to understand from his sudden, rigid posture, the way he drew his arms tightly about himself, his shoulders hunched, his eyes downcast and stricken, that he was struggling to compose himself.

"I'll be right back," Mallus said, rising to his feet. He set the scroll against the table top and turned, leaving the room.

Abdes blinked after him, confused and abashed. He wasn't going to return; Abdes knew it. Abdes had just shamed himself irreparably in front of the only man in the entire urban cohort who had showed him any respect or kind regard. In that one moment of humiliating weakness, Abdes had just proven to Mallus, too, that he was undeserving. He pressed his hand over his face and cursed himself.

"Here," he heard Mallus say, and he looked up, startled and dumbfounded. The tribune closed the door behind him as he entered, carrying in his hands a clay jug of wine and a pair of cups.

"It is neat," Mallus said, referring to the wine, and the fact that it was not diluted with water. He set the cups on Abdes' table and poured hearty dollops into each of them. "Have you ever taken it that way?"

He took a cup in each hand and presented one to Abdes. Abdes reached for it, his hand trembling as he curled his fingers about the cup. "No, sir," he said, shaking his head.

"It is strong stuff," Mallus said, and he tapped his cup against Abdes'. "But it helps."

Abdes watched Mallus press the rim of his cup to his mouth. He tilted his head back, draining the wine in a solitary swallow. Abdes looked down at the deep, burgundy liquid and then closed his eyes. He did exactly as Mallus had, canting his head back, and nearly choked as the powerful, acrid liquor seared down his throat.

He sputtered, coughing, his eyes smarting as the essence of the wine, the vapors seeped swiftly through his nose, as the pungent liquor pooled in a heavy, hot puddle in his belly. He gasped for breath, blinking owlishly.

"Ready for another?" Mallus asked him, already refilling his own cup.

Abdes blinked against his reflexive tears. "Yes, sir," he whispered, nodding, his voice ragged. He offered his cup as Mallus reached for it.

"Mallus," the tribune said, pouring another intimidating quantity of wine for Abdes.

Abdes looked up at him, puzzled. "My name," Mallus told him gently. "It's just Mallus, lad. I think you and I have gone beyond courteous protocol, haven't we?"

He smiled as he handed Abdes the cup. "Yes, sir," Abdes said. "I...I mean, Mallus."

Mallus nodded once, again swallowing his wine in a single gulp. "Drink it," he said, hoarsely, pointing to Abdes' cup. "The quicker it goes down, the quicker you feel it—and the less you taste of it."

Mallus had been right. The neat wine was potent, but it helped. Abdes had swallowed four cupfuls of it and, as the dim heat pooled in his stomach, radiating throughout his form in slow-moving, insistent fingertips, it had at least numbed his mind and heart, if not comforted. As he had felt it gently clasp hold of his mind, he'd been able to stave his tears in full; his breath had returned to normal from its helpless hiccupping, and he'd found himself remarkably calm.

He and Mallus sat together, side by side on the floor, their backs against the wall, the bottle of wine between them. "I don't know why I wept for him," Abdes said. "I mean, the rot bastard never wanted me anyway."

"Every man wants a good lad for his son," Mallus said. "I'm the youngest of five—two older brothers, and two sisters besides. Do you think my father loved me any less? I would not be where I am today if he did."

Abdes looked at him. "What is he like?"

"My father?" Mallus smiled. "Oh, he is a magnanimous fellow, Abdes. Quintas Suplicius Megellus is his name. He was one of Augustus' grandest champions in the

Senate, petitioning to have him declared Pater Patriae and Caesar.”

Abdes looked at Mallus in wonder. “Your father is a Senator?”

“He is indeed,” Mallus replied, smiling proudly. “The wisest man I’ve ever known, although he’d say he paled to my mother. He used to tell me ‘I am just the boat, my lad, while your mother—she is the wind and sails that guide me to greatness.’”

Abdes looked down at his wine. “I never knew my mother,” he said. “She died when I was born. She bled for me. I made something inside her bleed.”

Mallus didn’t say anything. Abdes could feel his gentle gaze against him, but he did not lift his eyes. “Moloch...my father...never forgave me for that,” he whispered.

“It was not your fault,” Mallus said softly.

“I was always making mistakes by him,” Abdes said. “I couldn’t do anything to please him, no matter how hard I tried.”

Mallus poured Abdes another heaping cup and glanced at the younger man. “Do you like working with Centurion Pulcher?” he asked after a moment. “In all honesty, Abdes.”

Abdes shook his head. “No, sir,” he said. “I don’t think the centurion likes me very much.”

“Pulcher doesn’t like anyone very much, except for himself,” Mallus remarked, drawing Abdes’ gaze. When the corner of Mallus’ mouth hooked wryly, Abdes laughed. “He’s an arrogant, self-absorbed bastard,” Mallus said. “Never seen even a passing moment of battle. He wears the uniform; he has the title, but he’s an administrator of Rome—not a soldier.”

He poured himself some more wine and sipped at it. “It’s my fault you’re with him,” he said quietly. Abdes blinked at him, his smile faltering, his brows lifting in bewilderment. “The day Zadduc came to hold counsel with Seneca, when you told me about your dream, I went to Seneca straight away,”

Mallus said. "It wasn't the first time I've spoken up against Seneca on your behalf—or the last, by my breath. You can mark me at that, lad."

Abdes blinked at him again, feeling the cold slither of dismay creep through his gut. "Against the Praefectus, sir?"

Mallus nodded, looking across the room. "He's a hard man," he murmured. "I've known him nearly twenty years, since we were more boys yet than men. When Augustus was still called Octavian and this season of Roman peace, as we know it now, was just a far-off ambition, a distant dream." He sipped his wine again. "He expects every man under him to prove his worth, but not by a man's individual standards of merit, mind you. Seneca expects it by his own."

"I went to him. I told him about your anxieties in the city on that day we went to collect the Nazarene, Yoseph," Mallus said. "I meant no harm. I was concerned for you. I was troubled by the effect your attack had on you. I told him because I thought it would be best for you that he should know, so that we could help you. Slowly, Abdes. I thought making you endure so much that was so unfamiliar would only have ill effect on you."

He looked at Abdes. "Seneca took that as weakness," he said. "I didn't mean for him to. I should have thought...I have known him long enough to understand the way his mind works, but I was worried. I asked him to put you in my charge. I told him I would look after you. You would be a help to me—you're bright and curious. You can read and write, speak Aramaic. I could use a man like you in my company. And at the same time, I thought I could help you...ease you beyond the fears and uncertainties left behind from what happened. The gods know, I can appreciate the horrors that can seize a man's mind in the aftermath of violence. I've seen it myself. I've been through enough battles to be haunted by them."

He canted his head back, draining his cup. "But Seneca decided you were weak for it," he said. "When I told him about your dream, the memories that returned to you, he looked me squarely in the eye and said 'memories are memories, and dreams are just dreams.'"

Abdes said nothing. He looked down at his wine, crestfallen.

“He’s a practical man,” Mallus said. “I can appreciate his point of view, even if I don’t agree with it.”

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said.

“But then he tendered you to Pulcher’s charge. I was furious with him for that.” Mallus hung his head, curling his free hand into a fist, his brows furrowing. “He knew Pulcher’s duties would bring you every day into the city. ‘You break a horse of its insecurities for the saddle by strapping one on it every day,’ that is what he told me. As if a man is no less than a horse.”

Plant your ass in the saddle and ride, Abdes, Seneca had told him. Abdes understood now; he had been afraid that he had disappointed the Praefectus somehow, that he was being punished by his assignment to Pulcher.

Mallus glanced at him. “You’ve held your own in this, Abdes,” he said softly. “I’m sorry I brought it upon you, but you’ve done well. I’ve noticed the late hours you keep here. I’ve read through the reports you tender. You’ve taken circumstances that would break an ordinary man’s resolve, and made the best of them.

“Your father was wrong about you,” Mallus told him, tapping his cup against Abdes’. “And Seneca is, too.” He smiled, dropping Abdes a wink. “I, however, am not,” he said. “You’re a good man, and you have the makings of a fine soldier of Rome.”

“Thank you, sir,” Abdes said, a pleased smile coaxed from the corners of his mouth. He and Mallus drank together.

“You’re welcome, lad,” Mallus said.

“Have you any sons, Mallus?” Abdes asked. “Any children of your own?”

Mallus laughed. “No,” he said. “I’m not even married. It’s against the laws of Rome, you know, as long as you serve under her commission. We’re wed to the army. The bridegrooms of the empire, that’s you and me, lad—all of us.

Insufferable in our damn loyalty.” He glanced at Abdes, his brow raised. “Why?”

Abdes looked down at the floor. “I...you would be good at it, I think,” he said quietly. “Being a father, I mean. I think you would make a very good father.” *I wish you were mine*, he thought, a sudden and somewhat forlorn realization. Mallus was everything Moloch was not: kind, just in his regard, even-tempered, sympathetic. He had been fair to Abdes. He had given Abdes the opportunity to prove himself. He had taken Abdes as much under his wing as he could to encourage him. He had stood against his superior officer—and long-time friend—on Abdes’ behalf. No one but Ham had ever made such efforts for him before. *I wish you were my father, Mallus*, he thought again.

Mallus looked at him for a long moment, his expression softening as he smiled, as if he had been privy to this poignant insight. “When is your brother coming to Sepphoris?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Abdes said. “He told me he would send word when he arrived.”

“How long has it been since you last saw him?”

Abdes blinked down at his hands, forlornly. “Gods...a year, at least. More than that, surely.”

“Let me know,” Mallus said. “I will speak to Seneca and see if I cannot arrange for some leave time for you. I’ve known him long enough to have some favors due. I’ll call him on them, if I have to.”

“I would appreciate that, sir,” Abdes said, surprised by his offer. “Thank you.”

“Mallus,” Mallus reminded him, pouring him some more wine. “And you’re welcome.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

In light of Abdes' conversation with Mallus, he didn't expect Seneca to grant him any leave when Ham arrived in Sepphoris, despite the tribune's confident assurances that he could arrange for it. When Ham sent a brief note to the citadel a week later, saying he was in the city, and had taken a room at an inn in the lower district, Seneca summoned Abdes to his office first thing the following morning.

Pulcher relayed this message, and delivered Abdes personally to the Praefectus. Abdes had followed the centurion, his eyes on the floor, his heart settled unhappily in the pit of his stomach. It didn't bode well. Seneca already thought he was weak and Abdes didn't expect him to find room in his heart for any tender sympathies in Abdes' regard. Even if Mallus had told the Praefectus about Moloch's death, Abdes feared Seneca would simply say that such grief was only another frailty on Abdes' part.

You break a horse of its insecurities for the saddle by strapping one on it every day. Seneca's words, relayed by Mallus, echoed in Abdes' mind with every footstep as he walked behind Pulcher along the citadel corridor.

He was surprised to find Mallus in Seneca's company that morning. As the guards closed the office doors behind them, Abdes stood uncertainly and rigidly at attention beyond the threshold, in closed conference with the Praefectus and the two officers.

"Mallus told me about your father," Seneca said. He was sitting at his writing table, while Mallus stood to his immediate left. Abdes glanced at the tribune, uncertainly.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Seneca nodded, rising to his feet. He winced slightly, pressing his hands against the table heavily, as if the movement pained him. "Such tidings are never welcome," he said, limping toward Abdes.

Abdes looked again at Mallus, hesitantly. Mallus wore an impassive expression, but it wavered for a fleeting moment; the corner of his mouth hooked in gentle encouragement.

"No, sir," Abdes said, looking back at Seneca as he approached.

Seneca stood in front of him for a long moment, studying him until Abdes reflexively, instinctively lowered his gaze to the floor. He didn't know what reaction he'd anticipated. Mallus' quick smile had given him momentary hope, but when Seneca said nothing, not offering even a quick word of comfort, pity or commiseration, he felt the dismayed knot in his gut twist anew, tightening.

"Your brother has arrived from Sidon?" Seneca asked.

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, keeping his gaze fixed on his toes, steeling himself for Seneca's denial, his rebuke.

"I've spoken with Pulcher already this morning," Seneca said. "And he's agreed to relieve you of duty. I'm giving you two days' leave."

Abdes blinked up at him in surprise. He glanced over Seneca's shoulder toward Mallus and again, the tribune smiled at him. *You did this*, Abdes thought, struggling to hold his mouth in line, not to break out in a broad, stupefied grin. *You did this for me.*

"You are to report to your barrack by dusk tomorrow," Seneca said, drawing his gaze. "If you're late, you'll be flogged for dereliction. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Abdes said.

Seneca nodded once. He held out his hand, offering something to Abdes—a small hide money pouch. “There are four denarii there,” he said, in response to Abdes’ startled and bewildered gaze. “And advance on your wages. I thought you could make use of them.”

Abdes closed his fingers around the small pouch, feeling the coins within. He knew that this, too, was Mallus’ doing. He had said he had favors due from Seneca, but this was more than Abdes might of even hoped for. Again, he glanced toward Mallus. His friend dropped him a wink, and Abdes smiled, despite himself.

“Thank you, sir,” Abdes said to Seneca. He looked toward Pulcher and found him scowling. Apparently absolving Abdes of his indentured servitude for two days had not been something of which he’d readily or eagerly approved. “Thank you, sir,” Abdes told him.

Pulcher nodded once, the corners of his mouth tugging downward.

Abdes met Mallus’ gaze one last time, smiling at him gratefully. *Thank you, Mallus*, he thought.

“You’re welcome,” Seneca said.

“Astarte, Eshmun and Hadad above,” Ham said when he opened the door to his inn room and found Abdes on his doorstep. “Look at you!”

Abdes didn’t even manage more than a smile in greeting before Ham clapped his hand against the nape of his neck and jerked him against him in a fierce, smothering embrace. “I expected to find a Roman soldier in full regalia on my stoop,” Ham laughed against Abdes’ ear, kissing him. “And here’s my brother, instead—scrawny as ever, and just as short, rot your hide!”

He stepped back, tousling Abdes’ hair in playful fondness.

“I’m in disguise,” Abdes said, as Ham drew him into the room and closed the door. Abdes wore the clothes of a

common man: dull-colored tunics, an unadorned girdle and head scarf. That had been one of the conditions of his leave, firmly emphasized by Seneca before his dismissal from the Praefectus' office.

You'll take nothing of Roman uniform with you. You're to dress in common garb and call yourself Abdes.

"No one's to know I'm with Rome," he told Ham, and at this, his brother's bright expression faltered, growing somber.

"I know," he said quietly. "I only arrived yesterday, and already I've heard. And seen. 'Where is Herod's justice for Pantera' written on the walls. What is going on, Abdes?" He pressed his hand against Abdes' face, his brows lifted in frightened worry. "What sort of madness have they seen you into?"

Abdes closed his eyes, turning his cheek against Ham's palm. "The worst sort," he whispered.

He told Ham everything; all of the details he had been unable to share in his letters, he shared now freely and in full. The more he spoke, the wider Ham's eyes grew, the more ashen his pallor became and the more agape his mouth dropped. When Abdes unfettered his girdle and reluctantly drew up the hem of his tunic to show Ham his scars, his brother uttered a pained, hoarse gasp.

"Astarte have mercy, Abdes," he whispered, stricken.

"She must have," Abdes said, meeting Ham's gaze. "I don't know how I survived otherwise, Ham."

Ham embraced him tightly. "I couldn't tell you," Abdes said. "I'm sorry. They told me I couldn't say anything in my letters."

"And now they think you've done all of this?" Ham said. "They think you murdered that girl—killed those men?"

"Not the cohort," Abdes said, shaking his head. "The Jews. They hate Rome anyway. Mallus told me they've never been able to rail against the cohort before, but they can now. They feel safe with someone to blame."

“Well, that’s it,” Ham said. He turned loose of his brother and began to pace restlessly, swiftly, his hands closed into fists, his brows narrowed. “That’s it, then, Abdes. I’m not going to Jerusalem. I’m staying here—right here with you.”

“What?” Abdes blinked at him, startled. “Ham, you can’t—”

“You’re my brother,” Ham said, turning to him. “You’ve been alone here too long and I won’t abandon you to this. I’ll find a job here, and I’ll stay.”

“But you could make more money in Jerusalem...” Abdes began in bewildered protest.

“If I cared about money, Abdes, I’d have kept in Sidon,” Ham snapped, his voice sharp, startling Abdes. “Tanith offered to pay me to stay. Mago’s a kid. He can’t run Father’s business. She offered me twice again my wages. If I cared about money, I’d still be there, not here.”

Abdes blinked at him, cowed by his loud voice, his harsh tone. Ham’s angry expression, the sudden color flushed in his face faded and he sighed, hanging his head, forking his fingers through his hair. “I abandoned you to the army in the first place, Abdes,” he said quietly. “And I won’t leave you alone to this. Not now.”

“You didn’t abandon me, Ham,” Abdes said. He walked toward his brother, his brows lifted in implore. “It wasn’t your fault, Ham. I marked the measurements on those tiles we sent to Caesara, not you. You just told Father that because you thought it would help me. I marked them wrong, Ham, and cut the tiles too small. He was right to be angry with me, to send me away. I did it all of the time—you know that. I was always making mistakes, costing Father money, ruining things and I—”

“You were not,” Ham said. His hand darted out, his fingertips pressing against Abdes’ mouth, startling him into silence. “You were not, Abdes,” Ham said again. He held his younger brother’s gaze for a long moment, and then lowered his hand. He turned around, pacing again.

“What about this Nazarene contractor you told me about—Yoseph?” Ham asked.

Abdes cocked his head, puzzled anew. “What about him?”

“His assistants are dead. You said his father is older. He might need a good worker, someone reliable to help him.”

“He’s a Jew...” Abdes began.

Ham flapped his hand dismissively. “So? I don’t care, as long as he doesn’t care that I worship our Phoenician gods. And the Roman pantheon. And any other deity I can offer a bit of homage to in exchange for favor.”

“I haven’t seen him in months,” Abdes said. “Surely he’s hired someone to replace Lamech and Heth by now.”

“Well, we won’t know until we ask, right?” Ham asked, glancing at him with his brow arched. “And if not him, then someone else.”

“You mean it, then?” Abdes whispered. “You’ll stay here, Ham?”

“Of course I mean it,” Ham said, laughing quietly. He drew Abdes against him, holding him fondly. “Gods above, I love you, Abdes. You’re going to need a pry bar to get me loose of you from now on.”

Abdes laughed against his shoulder, closing his eyes against the heat of grateful tears. “We could go today,” he said as Ham stepped back from him. “To Nazareth, to pay Yoseph call. He’s home by dusk, and it’s not a far walk. We could—”

“—go tomorrow,” Ham finished for him with a mischievous grin. “We’re not going anywhere today except to buy some wine, and find ourselves the company of the finest whores this town has to offer.”

“Ham, no,” Abdes laughed, shaking his head.

“Abdes, yes,” Ham said, still grinning. He produced a swollen money pouch from beneath his girdle and dangled it in front of Abdes’ face, shaking it to make the coins inside jangle.

“My treat. Or Tanith’s treat, I should say. I consider this my severance pay.”

“No,” Abdes said, shaking his head again, backing away. “I mean it, Ham. No.”

Ham caught him by the back of the neck, drawing him near, leaning his forehead against Abdes’. “I mean it, too,” he said. “Yes.”

No amount of protest on Abdes’ part would change Ham’s mind, and no amount of wine would make Abdes any more enthusiastic about Ham’s idea to visit the city’s tuguria.

“Ham, no, please,” Abdes said, trying yet again and with equal futility, as Ham took him by the wrist and led him in stumbling, laughing tow from the inn. Night had fallen. The two had spent the day in Ham’s room, draining three bottles of wine dry. Even with his gullet full, his head swimming, his footsteps clumsy and staggering, Abdes wasn’t drunk enough to face the prostitutes. “I...I can’t...”

“Yes, you can,” Ham said. “That’s the benefit of the tuguria—the ladies there are fairly well a sure bet once they’ve got your money in hand.”

He marched Abdes through the city, and straight into the modest crowd gathered outside of the brothels. “Here’s one,” he said, nodding toward a young woman as they approached. “A veritable flower.”

Abdes stumbled as Ham shoved him forward, deliberately in front of the girl. Abdes blinked at her, stricken and ashen. “Hullo, lamb,” she said, smiling for him.

“How much, woman?” Ham asked, leaning over Abdes’ shoulders, keeping his hand firmly planted against Abdes’ back to keep him from ducking and darting.

The placard above the prostitute’s cell gave her name as Rishona. Rishona’s eyes traveled slowly down the length of Abdes’ form, studying him, leaving him flustered and embarrassed. She glanced up at Ham, her brow lifted. For a moment, she seemed to look beyond them, her attention

distracted, but then her gaze settled again upon Abdes and her smile widened. "A quinarius," she said.

"Sold!" Ham exclaimed, even as Abdes drew in breath to object. Ham reached over his shoulder, passing Rishona some coins, and then he shoved Abdes forward. "Show him no mercy, woman!"

"Ham..." Abdes said, turning in wide-eyed aghast at his brother, even as Rishona caught his hand and led him into the tuguria cell. She swept him smartly about and ushered him in ahead of her.

He blinked at the back side of the cell wall. It was a sparse room, with only a stone cot overlaid with blankets for adornment. He heard the door close behind him, and he was paralyzed, swaying unsteadily from the wine. She didn't say anything, and he didn't turn around. He couldn't. The chamber was illuminated with the soft, golden glow of lamplight. He watched his shadow dance and flutter against the mud-brick wall before him. He couldn't breathe; he stood rooted in spot, immobilized, a steady tremble spreading suddenly from his shoulders down toward his feet.

He heard the soft rustle of fabric as she moved, the whisper of her bare feet against the floor as she approached him, and he flinched, hunching his shoulders.

"Is this your first time in a woman's company?" she asked, her voice floating in a soft, rhythmic cadence from over his shoulder.

He shook his head. He found himself all at once coated in a clammy, anxious sweat. He closed his fingers into fists, feeling the tacky sensation of it against his palm. When her fingertips brushed against the nape of his neck, trailing in his hair, he gasped softly, jerking in nervous start. "No," he said, forcing his voice from the tightened confines of his throat. "No, I...I just...I have had too...too much wine, I think..."

He felt the swells of her breasts press against his back, her breath draw lightly, warm against his neck, and he closed his eyes, his heart racing anxiously. She had anointed herself

with some sort of floral-infused oil and the sweet fragrance of it surrounded her in a delicate, wondrous cloud. "Tell me your name," she whispered, lifting her chin to let her lips dance against his ear, sending a new tremble through him; this time, warm and pleasant.

"Abdes," he whispered, his breath shuddering from him as the tip of her tongue slowly, delicately drew against his ear lobe.

"Close your eyes, Abdes," she breathed, and he did. Her hands draped against his shoulders, turning him to face her. He started to open his eyes, feeling dizzy at the motion, unsteady from the wine with them closed, and her hand settled lightly against his face. "Close your eyes."

She stepped against him, and he stumbled backward, the sensation of her full, heavy breasts against his chest leaving him breathless. He felt the back of his legs strike the edge of the cot, and he whimpered softly in start, starting to reflexively open his eyes. Again her hand stayed him. "Sit," she breathed, her lips so near to his mouth, he could draw her breath as his own—if he had been capable of breathing at the moment.

He sat back against the cot. She knelt between his legs, sliding herself slowly against him, letting his thighs enfold her hips, her waist. Her breasts settled against his chest, and then her mouth brushed against the slope of his throat, the underside of his jaw. She began to kiss him, her lips trailing along the angle of his chin toward his ear. It was delicate, deliberate friction, so wonderful, he gasped softly, tilting his head toward her shoulder. She drew her tongue against his throat, small, firm, concentric circles against the point where his pulse fluttered in quickening rhythm beneath his flesh. When she moved, letting her teeth tug lightly against the lobe of his ear, he gasped again, trembling against her.

"Do you want me to stop?" she whispered.

He shook his head. She had stoked something deep and visceral within him, a growing, tremulous warmth. He could feel himself hardening against her, responding to her touch, her kiss. All at once, his anxieties had dissipated in full. "No."

“Open your eyes, Abdes,” she said.

He did, and the dimly lit chamber swam into murky view. He blinked dazedly, and then drew back in surprise as he saw her face, only scarce margins of space from his own. It was not Rishona, the girl Ham had paid for.

“Salome?” he whispered. He was hallucinating; surely, the wine had addled his brain and he was seeing things. He imagined Salome’s beautiful face, her large, dark eyes, her full and generous mouth lifting in a smile.

“You know me,” she said softly, and then she kissed him, pressing her mouth against his, drawing his breath and wits from him.

This can’t be real, he thought, as her lips parted against his own, as her tongue slipped into his mouth, drawing against his. She leaned toward him, pressing her breasts firmly against him, letting her tongue delve deeply into his mouth. He opened his mouth to draw her in, canting his head back. *This can’t be real...!*

“I know you, too,” Salome breathed, smiling, her nose touching his. Her hand moved between his legs, reaching beneath the hem of his tunic. Her fingers curled slowly, deliberately about him, and his eyelids fluttered closed, his breath shuddering from him. “You’re a soldier, aren’t you, Abdes? A Roman soldier.”

Her hand began to move and he moaned. “Yes,” he said, his voice strangled and strained.

“I’ve seen you,” she said, and the rhythm of her hand quickened. “In your uniform, your armor at the markets.”

“Yes,” he whimpered, gasping for breath.

“You’ve seen me, too,” she said. “Have you wanted me, Abdes? Have you wanted this?”

Salome is the most prized and coveted prostitute in Sepphoris, Mallus had told him. And damn likely all of Judea at that. She is the favored pet of some of the area’s most wealthy and influential men—and no others.

Abdes opened his eyes, gasping again, his eyelids fluttering as her hand coaxed him, quickening against him, leaving him reeling. From the first time he had seen her, she had haunted him, her beautiful face infused within his mind. Mallus' words of warning

Trust me. Keep away from her.

were forgotten as Salome held his gaze, letting her lips dance against his in fleeting, soft kisses as he struggled for breath.

"Yes," he whimpered, nodding. "Yes, I...I have wanted this...I've wanted you, Salome..."

She straddled him on the cot, her thighs folding over his hips. When she lowered herself, settling against him, and he slid easily inside of her, he moaned, his voice muffled as she kissed him. Salome began to move, quick, hard thrusts that delivered him deeply into her. She tugged against his tunic, drawing it up his chest toward his neck, of him, and he struggled it over his head, casting it aside.

He pressed his hands against her breasts, feeling her hardened nipples strain through the thin, colorful fabric. She moaned at his touch, pulling his head down toward her bosom, letting him kiss her there. He drew his tongue against her nipple, making her moan again, her fingers tightening in his hair, and he shoved the draping folds of silk aside to taste the sweetness of her bare skin. He kissed her breasts hungrily, guided by her hands and encouraged by her soft, urgent sounds of pleasure.

She writhed against him, marking a powerful, strident rhythm until his body was drenched in sweat, his breath shuddering with the desperate need for release. When her hips delivered her mercies upon him, it was tremendous, excruciating and exquisite all at once. Abdes arched his back from the wall, his hands clamped against her hips as he jerked in climax. Nothing he had ever coaxed himself to was like this; even his clumsy encounter with the girl in Sidon had not drawn anything so powerful from him. In the aftermath of such massive, overwhelming release, he crumpled against Salome's

shoulder, clutching at her, gasping for exhausted breath, trembling uncontrollably.

“Gods...” he panted. “Gods above...!”

Salome drew her arms gently about him, her fingertips trailing lightly through his hair, stroking his disheveled waves. Her cheek pressed against his ear and she tilted her head, kissing his shoulder softly. He trembled beneath her, naked, and her hand left his hair, tracing slowly, delicately along the musculature of his back. He felt her fingertips linger against the sensitive stripe of flesh where the blade had punched through him. “Who did this to you?” she whispered.

He shook his head, his eyes closed, still shivering against her. “I...I don’t know,” he said, his voice hoarse and exhausted. “I don’t remember.”

She leaned back, her gaze traveling down his chest, toward the lean muscles stacked against the plain of his stomach. Again, she touched his scar, her brows lifting as if with pity. “And this?” she asked, looking up at him.

He shook his head, mesmerized by her. “I don’t remember.”

In the golden glow of the oil lamp, she was absolutely radiant. Her eyes were enormous, glistening moistly in the soft light. Her dark hair tumbled about her face in haphazard curls and her skin was flushed and dewy with a light sheen of perspiration. “Gods above, you’re beautiful,” he whispered.

Salome likely heard that every day of her life—and from men of far better merits than anything Abdes called her own. Still, she smiled; whether amused or charmed by his adulation, he couldn’t tell.

She said nothing. She shifted her weight, sliding abruptly away from him, leaving him to gasp softly at the sudden chill filling the space where her warm body had only just been. She took his hand gently, and pressed something against his palm. Abdes looked down and saw a small bronze coin—not the dupondia or denarii used for market bartering, but one specifically minted for the tuguria. Panders distributed them in exchange for advanced purchases of services from

individual prostitutes. This token was marked with the distinctive double sigma Greek characters, signifying Salome's name, and the city in which she worked, Sepphoris.

Abdes blinked up at her. This token for Salome's company surely fetched at least twenty times again what Ham had bartered for Rishona. Salome had just given him a pass ordinarily—and exclusively—reserved for those wealthy patrons to whom she extended regular preference.

She met his gaze, but said nothing. She only smiled again, fleeting and enigmatic, before drawing the scarlet cape of her mantle about her shoulder. She turned and walked away, leaving him alone in the cell.

The next morning, Abdes woke in Ham's inn room, his head throbbing from his overindulgence in wine the night before. He brought his hand to his face as he sat up, feeling groggy and disoriented. His eyelids fluttered dazedly, and he groaned, shutting them against the glare of sunlight in the chamber.

"Good morrow," Ham said cheerfully, already up and about and tromping past his pallet on the floor, offering him an affable hair-tousling as he passed.

"Stop," Abdes growled, shrugging his shoulder to dislodge Ham's hand.

"How are you feeling?" Ham asked, not the least bit offended by Abdes' grouchiness.

"Awful," Abdes croaked. He opened his eyes experimentally and watched the room swim into bleary view. "What happened last night?"

Ham laughed. "What happened?" He walked across the room again, tousling Abdes' hair for a second time. Abdes hunched his shoulders, swatting irritably at his brother.

"Stop, I said."

"I stood for a seeming eternity outside of a tugurium cell making idle conversation with the good ladies of its employ, waiting for you to stumble out from behind closed

doors,” Ham said. “And that’s after having spent some measure of my own time and energy in a neighboring cell. You ask me what happened?” He laughed again. “You were ridden long and hard, from the sounds of things, Abdes.”

Abdes blinked down at the blankets swathed about his hips. He remembered now, the tuguria, Salome. Her fragrance lingered in his clothing. He could draw the delicate, faint scent of her against his nose.

“I picked well, didn’t I?” Ham asked, standing over Abdes and grinning. “Rishona was worth the price of admission?”

“Rishona?” Abdes looked up at him, bewildered. “I...I was not with Rishona. I was with Salome.” *Wasn’t I? Or was I drunk and imagined it was Salome?*

“Rishona, Salome, Mariasha, Zerlinda.” Ham shrugged. “Call her whatever you’d like.”

Abdes’ money pouch lay on the floor beside his pallet. He remembered the token Salome had given to him, and he reached for the pouch, puzzled.

“Are you hungry?” Ham asked.

“No,” Abdes murmured, overturning the contents of the pouch against his blankets.

“I have some flat bread and figs,” Ham said. “I drew some water, if you’re thirsty.”

Abdes looked down at the four denarii Seneca had given him the day before. He also saw the copper coin, the tugurium token minted with the double sigma inscriptions—Salome’s personal coin.

It was real, he thought, his eyes widening, his breath drawing still. It really happened, then. It wasn’t just a dream.

He had been with Salome last night. She had deliberately traded places with Rishona. She had chosen his company—and then given him her own personal token to insure his company would continue.

CHAPTER NINE

“That’s one thing I’ve never understood about Jews,” Ham remarked. He and Abdes walked together, following the southeast road from Sepphoris toward Nazareth. Abdes’ eyes were distantly settled upon the ground, his shoulders slouched beneath the drape of his mantle against the chilly air. The sky overhead was grey; the ground underfoot was soft with mud. He had been lost in thought, his mind drawing him again and again toward Salome, replaying every moment he had spent with her. It still felt unreal to him, some wondrous dream from which he expected at any moment to awake.

“What?” he said, glancing at his brother, disturbed from these pleasant recollections.

“All of these rules and laws they follow in homage to a solitary god they say is responsible for everything,” Ham said, walking with his hands tucked for warmth beneath his mantle. “No travel, bartering or work for a whole day—sundown to sundown. That’s just laziness, if you ask me.”

He was talking about the Jewish custom of observing a day of rest, the Sabbath. He had probably been talking about this for awhile now; Abdes had been aware of Ham’s voice droning on and on, but he hadn’t been paying attention. He’d been imagining Salome’s fragrance, the firm warmth of her breasts pressed against him, the impossible softness of her skin against his hands, the delicate flavor of her mouth as she had kissed him.

They were going to Nazareth on the Sabbath, following the dirt road as it twisted and twined its way through

a rolling landscape of rain-drenched green. Witchgrass nodded in the gentle tug of breeze blown inland from the Mediterranean Sea. Along the valley plains between rolling hills, vineyards and rows of olive and fruit trees were pressed together, like the ranks and files of advancing phalanxes. Dense pine forests and tangled scrub, juniper and underbrush marked ragged perimeters and diagonals across distant fields.

They had passed few, if any other travelers en route; only an occasional donkey caravan led by Gentile fishermen from the Sea of Galilee to their west bringing in shipments to the Sepphoris markets. Jews did not travel on the Sabbath, or participate in the market. The highway, which was ordinarily busy and bustling, was relatively quiet as a result.

"Jews," Ham said, shaking his head. "They think they're the chosen people of their god. If I was to consider myself chosen, I'd at least pick a god who seems to show a bit more preferential treatment. Everyone conquers the Jews—they're as bad as the Phoenicians. Their god seems a bit remiss in his favor. Now with a pantheon, you lose the blessing of one god, and you simply appeal to another. Sooner or later, you'll find one to accommodate you."

It was midday by the time they reached the village of Nazareth. A small, agricultural settlement, Nazareth sat atop a low-rising, southward sloping plateau; a village of closely arranged, small, mud-brick homes with the peak of Mount Tabor looming to the east like a distant, diligent sentry.

Yoseph answered Abdes' knock at his door with a puzzled, surprised expression. Abdes could hear the sounds of a baby squealing from inside and caught a whiff of aromatic fragrances of food wafting out from the house. When Abdes offered flustered, somewhat awkward greeting, Yoseph clasped him by the hand as if he was a fond and familiar face.

"Abdes, hullo. Good to see you, lad—and you besides...Hamilcar, did you say?" he said, smiling broadly. "Won't you come inside and join us? We were about to sit for our midday meal."

Abdes glanced at Ham uncertainly, feeling somewhat abashed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I beg your pardon, I...I didn't mean to interrupt..."

"Not at all," Yoseph said, drawing Abdes inside. Ham followed behind him, exchanging friendly hand clasps as Yoseph leaned past his brother's shoulder to greet him properly. "Maryam," Yoseph called. "Maryam, we have company."

Yoseph's house was modest, but comfortable; a main communal room and kitchen area, an adjacent room for sleeping and an adjoining storage room. Oil lamps cast a dim, golden glow across the main room and a domed oven graced the wall near the front door. Coals had been left to dwindle; tending a fire was forbidden during the Sabbath, but Yoseph had obviously stoked it well the day before, and the room was pleasantly warm. Large stoneware jugs and baskets of food stuffs stood against the walls; dried vegetables and cloth bags were suspended from the exposed beams of the ceiling. The dirt floor had been swept smooth and level and the low table in the center was framed by blankets draped against the ground for comfort. Bread and stoneware dishes had been arranged for the meal on the table top, and Abdes saw the source of the wondrous aroma: a pot of stew left to simmer on a rack atop the coal bed.

"Maryam, woman, what are you doing?" Yoseph called.

"He was wet," Maryam said, entering from the sleeping room. She bounced Yeshua in her arms; he was nearly naked, save for a loincloth wrapped about his bottom, and squirming against her grasp. "He might take a nap if you weren't so excited and shouting. You know he—" Her voice cut off abruptly, her eyes widening as she caught sight of Abdes and Ham.

"Do you remember Abdes of Sidon?" Yoseph asked.

Maryam's gaze cut from Ham to Abdes. She blinked at him, and then lowered her eyes, her mouth lifting in a soft smile as her hand darted toward her face. She wore no mantle; her dark hair was bundled in a loose plait that fell nearly to the

small of her back. “Yes,” she said, nodding, tucking wayward strands of hair that had worked free of her braid behind her ears. “Yes, I...of course I do.”

She swatted at her tunics, as if smoothing wrinkles. She looked up at Abdes, smiling again, shifting Yeshua’s wriggling weight. “Hullo, Abdes. Such a...such a surprise to see you.”

“This is his brother, Hamilcar,” Yoseph said. “He’s traveled from Phoenicia to Galilee, Abdes told me. He is an experienced craftsman looking for work in Sepphoris.”

“Really?” Maryam blinked in surprise, looking from Ham toward Abdes. Judging by the delight in her face, Abdes surmised that Yoseph hadn’t hired any others to replace Lamech or Heth.

“Our father owned a profitable artisan shop in Sidon, good woman,” Ham said. “I have worked for him since I could toddle upright.”

“I’ve invited them to join us,” Yoseph said.

“That’s very kind of you, sir, but I...” Abdes began, feeling sheepish at his intrusion.

“Of course,” Maryam said, nodding. “We have plenty.” She met Abdes’ gaze, her smile widening. “Please. You’d be welcome.”

They rested around the small table, and Abdes listened quietly as Yoseph offered ritual prayers before the meal. He held his breath the entire time, glancing at Ham to his right out of the corner of his eye. Ham’s eyes were closed, his head lowered in appropriate, courteous deference. *Please don’t say anything*, Abdes thought, because he knew Ham well enough to know he’d share the points of view he’d offered of Jewish traditions along the road to Nazareth as freely—and heedlessly—with a Jew as he would his brother. *Just sit there and be quiet, Ham.*

Fortunately, Ham was sharp enough to realize if he expected to gain dutiful employment from Yoseph, opening

his negotiations by insulting his religious beliefs was not in his best interest. He remained politely mute during the entire prayer. As Maryam served them each a bowl of vegetable stew, they passed around dried figs, olives and sliced cheeses. Yoseph poured cupfuls of sweet wine, and their conversation turned toward work.

Yoseph and Ham turned their attentions to one another, as Ham offered details of his experiences in Moloch's shop in Sidon. Maryam sat to Abdes' left, with Yeshua settled and squirming against the nest of her lap. He had grown since the last time Abdes had seen him; considerably, in fact, and Abdes lost track of Ham's conversation as he watched the baby gnawing toothlessly on a wedge of cheese Maryam offered him.

Yeshua seemed perfectly content to babble to himself; even as he ate, he uttered a nonstop stream of gurgles and garbled sounds, as if he considered himself a perfectly attuned part of the conversation at the table. His little round head and full cheeks were framed by a tousled, wispy headful of fine, dark hair. His eyes were enormous, seeming to swallow his entire countenance. He blinked at Abdes, drool bubbled and glossy on his lips as he sucked on his cheese. Abdes blinked back, curious and apprehensive.

Tanith had kept his youngest brother, Mago, fairly well isolated from Abdes and Ham during most of his infancy. Abdes was entranced and wholly unfamiliar with babies. He'd never been so near to one for so long, and no matter how he tried to pay attention to Ham and Yoseph, he kept finding himself distracted at each coo or slurp, every giggle and squeal.

Yeshua dropped the cheese against Maryam's lap and flapped his arms madly, opening his mouth and uttering a shrill, delighted shriek that caused Abdes to jump, his eyes flown wide.

"He likes you," Maryam said, drawing his startled gaze. She had been watching Abdes' reaction to her son all the while, even though he hadn't realized it. She smiled at him gently, the corners of her mouth lifting.

“What?” Abdes asked. He looked down at Yeshua as the baby again waved his arms in Abdes’ direction. Again, he yowled happily, his peal of delight dissolving into a moist and indecipherable gurgling.

“He likes you,” Maryam said again.

Abdes smiled politely, not entirely convinced. “How can you tell?”

“He keeps watching you,” Maryam said, reaching down and retrieving the fallen cheese, returning it to Yeshua’s pawing, fervent grasp. He immediately crammed the cheese between his lips and resumed his suckling, his dark eyes round and fixed on Abdes. “See? He likes you.”

“I don’t doubt you’re experienced, Hamilcar,” Yoseph said. “And I appreciate that you and Abdes would come all of this way to see me. But I must be honest with you. I haven’t replaced Lamech and Heth because I really haven’t needed to. My father-in-law has been working with me...”

Abdes glanced at Maryam as Yoseph spoke and did not miss the way her brows crimped slightly in disapproval at this comment.

“And with the baby now among us, my purse has grown a little tighter,” Yoseph said. “Some things we’ve had to learn to live without. I couldn’t offer you work that would provide you anywhere near the wages you made in Sidon. And with your experience, you could make a far better living elsewhere, like south in—”

“I don’t need much by wages,” Ham interjected. “Enough to feed myself, see a room letted at an inn, perhaps the occasional jug of wine. It’d be worth it to me a thousandfold, sir, to be able to stay near to Abdes.”

“The jobs I accept...they would seem very modest by your standards,” Yoseph said, looking sheepish at Ham’s earnest implore. “You’ve worked on projects of a sort of scale I cannot begin to accommodate...”

“I’ve always thought it wasn’t the scope of the work that mattered so much as the quality,” Ham said. At this,

Yoseph fell silent, looking at the other man for a long moment. At last, he smiled, laughing quietly and lifting his cup to Ham.

“True enough, lad,” he said, as Ham tapped his cup against his.

Maryam rose to her feet, grunting softly as Yeshua squirmed against her. “I think I’ll take the lamb for a walk,” she said, drawing Yoseph’s momentary gaze. “The day’s mild enough, and it’s not raining.” Yoseph nodded his approval and Maryam glanced down at Abdes. “Maybe you’d like to join us?”

Abdes blinked at her, surprised, and then glanced at Yoseph. He knew what she was doing, of course; Ham’s employment seemed a certain and sealed deal. She meant to leave it between Yoseph and Ham to hash out the details. It was a good idea, and Abdes rose to his feet. “I would be pleased to, good woman,” he said.

“That was very kind of you, Abdes,” Maryam said as they walked along. They marked a leisurely pace, strolling side by side along the narrow streets of Nazareth. She carried Yeshua tucked against her shoulder, bouncing him lightly as he chewed on the edge of the mantle she’d drawn over her head. Yeshua seemed to have a proclivity for chewing on things. Maryam had explained that he was beginning to cut his teeth, and that gnawing helped ease the irritation in his tender gums.

Abdes glanced at her, his brow raised inquisitively, and she smiled at him. “To have thought of us,” she said. “To bring your brother to meet Yoseph.” Her bright expression faltered, and she looked down at the ground. “He’s a proud man, and he wouldn’t admit it, but he’s had to turn down work these past months. He cannot keep up with what he has, not by himself. My father tries to help, but he hurt his back some time ago, and he doesn’t need to be taxing it.”

She looked up at him. “I’m very grateful that you came.”

Her earnest praise left him flustered. He felt color stoke warmly in his cheeks, and he lowered his gaze. "Thank you for that," he said.

"Why did Hamilcar travel here from Sidon?" she asked.

"He was on his way to Jerusalem," Abdes said. "We supplied a lot of stone for Herod's building projects there and in Caesarea. He figured he could find easy work there for the king."

"I mean, why did he leave Sidon?" she asked, drawing his gaze. "You said your father owned a large business there, that he's only recently died. Your brother seems very knowledgeable and skilled. Why didn't he take over in your father's stead?"

"Because my father didn't leave it to him," Abdes said after an uncertain moment. "We have another brother, Mago, from his second marriage. When he died, he left his business to Mago."

"Wouldn't he be younger than you or Hamilcar?" she asked, frowning with puzzlement.

"Yes," Abdes said, nodding once. "He is six years younger than me, ten younger than Ham." He glanced at Maryam. "My father did what he thought was best. He wanted to make sure his business was left to one he knew was of blood kin. For whatever reason, my father did not have that confidence in me or Ham."

He didn't understand why he had just told her that; why he had just confided in her. There was something in Maryam's quiet, gentle attention that seemed to loosen his tongue, soften his guard and leave him feeling inexplicably but decidedly at ease in her company. She was childlike in her appearance but womanly in her demeanor, an amalgamation that Abdes found both engaging and somewhat unnerving. The soft pity that lifted her brows, apparent and poignant in her eyes as he spoke, left him immediately abashed by his candor. He looked away, shamed color blazing in his cheeks.

“My father died when I was three,” Maryam said, and he blinked at her in surprise. “Cleophas is my mother’s second husband. He’s the only father I have any memory of, and he has always treated me as no less than his daughter. It’s love that bonds a parent and child, not blood, he used to tell me.”

She smiled and he could not help but to smile back. Again it occurred to him that her youthful appearance belied some quiet, inner strength, the wisdom of a woman twice again her age.

Maryam looked away, catching sight of an old man shuffling along the narrow street toward him. His clothes were threadbare and in need of mending, and he leaned heavily against a wooden staff as he approached. His beard and hair were blanched grey, with no discernable clue as to what color they might have been in his youth. He looked scruffy and dirty and more than a little disreputable, and when Maryam called out to him, smiling as warmly as if she spied an old friend, or familiar kin, Abdes blinked at her in new surprise.

“Gabriel,” Maryam said, lifting her hand in beckon. “Hullo!”

“Maryam Nazarene, the Almighty’s blessings to you,” the old man, Gabriel said as he limped toward them. He lowered his head politely. “Good Sabbath to you, woman, and to the company you keep.”

Abdes had seen the old man’s sort before in Sepphoris. He had watched Pulcher chase plenty of people in similar states from public thresholds or lots. He was a beggar, a panhandler vagrant, who lived off of the charity of others.

“Good Sabbath to you, Gabriel,” Maryam said, completely unoffended or wary of his appearance. Abdes wondered momentarily what Yoseph would think of her gracious—and familiar—greeting to the old man. He and his wife survived on a very meager income, it seemed. Abdes imagined if Yoseph was hesitant to hire assistants because he couldn’t afford to pay them, he would be none too pleased to discover his young wife giving money to beggars in the meanwhile.

“This is Abdes of Sidon, who has come to pay us call from Sepphoris,” Maryam said. “Abdes, please, this is Gabriel, a dear friend.”

Gabriel nodded in deference to Abdes. “Good sir, may the Almighty bless you on his Sabbath,” he said.

“And...and you, as well, sir,” Abdes said.

“And your lamb, if I may,” Gabriel said, smiling broadly at Yeshua and revealing a significant lack of front teeth. He reached out with one misshapen hand to tickle beneath Yeshua’s chin, drawing a happy squeal from the boy.

“Here, sir,” Abdes said, stepping deliberately between Maryam and Gabriel. The old man blinked up at him in bewilderment, and Abdes reached beneath his girdle, drawing out his money pouch. He’d be damned if he’d let the old wretch plead a coin from Maryam, or bother her any more. He fished out one of his denarii and held it out, his brows drawn to clearly impart his disapproval, wanting simply to be rid of the man.

“Abdes...” Maryam said quietly, hooking her hand against his sleeve. Abdes felt Yeshua’s little hands slap against the back of his tunic as she drew near. “You do not...”

Gabriel chuckled, peering closely at the coin for a moment before realizing what it was. “You are gracious, good sir,” he said, and then he utterly confounded Abdes by folding his gnarled fingers gently against Abdes’, closing them about the coin. “But my lambs are set to graze today. I have nothing to proffer in exchange.”

Abdes blinked at him as if he was witless. “What?”

“Gabriel, there is bread and stew at my house,” Maryam said, stepping around Abdes. “Why don’t you go to the front door? Yoseph will bring you some. We have plenty, and you’re always welcome.”

Gabriel nodded, smiling. “I would be very grateful,” he said. He patted her hand and then patted Abdes’ again. “You are both very kind, sweet children.”

As he shuffled away, Abdes stared after him, baffled. “I...I don’t understand,” he said, opening his hand and blinking down at the coin against his palm. “Why didn’t he take it?”

“Because he didn’t have anything to sell you in return,” Maryam said, drawing his bewildered gaze. She smiled at him. “That’s just his way of things. He has no home of his own, or kin. He just tends his flock outside of the city. He never asks for money—for anything, really, but I offer what I can. I’ve seen people be cruel to him sometimes. He’s so gentle, and I feel badly for him.”

She looked after Gabriel with a shadow of sorrow in her eyes.

“He’s a shepherd?” Abdes asked, and she nodded.

“And a good man, although I know he looks affright.” She glanced up at Abdes. “I know what you thought of him. Most people do. I think he must be an Essenic Jew. He’s never told me, but I’ve wondered. The way he shares everything; how he doesn’t take charity. He always gives something back—if I feed him one day, the next, he’ll bring me milk or cheese, or give Yoseph a lamb for sacrifice. The Essenes live like he does, apart from everyone, but sharing everything.”

“They’re mystics, aren’t they?” Abdes asked. “The Essenes—they believe in spirits and prophecies.”

“Angels and demons,” Maryam said, nodding. “Denizens of the Almighty sent to battle evil and protect the faithful.” She smiled slightly. “The sort of stuff Yoseph says is illogical and fanciful. I don’t know, though. Some people say Gabriel’s a priest who survived King Herod’s massacre of the Essenic monastery in Qumran four years ago. That’s about when he showed up around here, anyway.

“They also say he’s a seer,” she said, looking up at Abdes. “Yoseph says that’s nonsense, too, but I don’t know. Gabriel knew I was with child before anyone else—even me.”

Abdes raised his brow at her, and she nodded. “He came to me and offered me the Almighty’s blessings. He told me I’d know my own lamb soon, a son.” She smiled as Yeshua

nuzzled against her, sleepy and shy all of a sudden. “And so I have,” she said softly, canting her face to kiss his plump little cheek.

She glanced at Abdes. “Would you like to hold him?”

Abdes’ eyes grew wide. “What? Oh, no, I...I shouldn’t...I...”

She stepped toward him before he could sputter out firm protest. He stiffened immediately as he felt her settle Yeshua against the rigid crooks of his arms. “Here,” she said softly, looking up to meet Abdes’ alarmed gaze. She giggled, color blooming in her cheeks. “It’s alright.”

“But I...what if I drop him...?” Abdes asked, his eyes widening all the more as she drew back, leaving him to support Yeshua’s sudden, slight weight in his arms. “I...I’ve never...”

“It’s alright,” Maryam said again, smiling. “You’re doing fine. You won’t drop him.”

She looked at him with such unexpected confidence, trusting him so completely and wholeheartedly with this—her most precious possession—that he couldn’t argue or object. She smiled at him, nodding in encouragement, and he looked down at Yeshua. The baby was very drowsy; even his new, unfamiliar perch didn’t seem to unsettle him. Abdes cradled him against his chest, watching the baby’s large, dark eyes blink sleepily up at him.

“Hullo,” Abdes said quietly, the tension draining from his shoulders and arms. Yeshua reached up, brushing his miniscule fingers against Abdes’ lips, making him smile. In that moment, everything in the world was forgotten; the night before with Salome, his brother’s conversation with Yoseph, the pain and shame he had harbored since receiving news of his father’s death and his frustrations and fears in his work for the cohort. It was all simply gone, abandoned by his mind when he looked down at the baby, when those small, delicate fingertips danced against his mouth, as if deliberately coaxing a smile from him. “Hullo, Yeshua,” he murmured.

He looked up at Maryam, and smiled helplessly at her. “He likes you,” she said softly, drawing near to him, draping her hand against his arm.

“Do you think so?” he asked, looking down again. Yeshua’s eyes had fluttered closed and his little mouth was pursed and slightly ajar. Abdes heard the soft murmur of his breath as he dozed. Abdes smiled again. “He’s beautiful,” he whispered.

They walked together, and Abdes carried Yeshua nestled against his chest. Maryam seemed visibly pleased that Abdes had recovered from his initial horror, and was actually enjoying the proximity to the baby. “You don’t have children of your own? You or Hamilcar?” she asked.

He laughed. “Oh, no,” he said. “We’re not even married. I can’t marry, not in the army. It’s not allowed by law.” He paused thoughtfully, and then borrowed Mallus’ words. “I’m wed to the army, you could say—a bridegroom of the empire.”

She laughed at this. “My stepmother never let me hold Mago,” he admitted to her, smiling sheepishly. “I never even saw much of him until he was old enough to walk. I don’t think she trusted me not to drop him.”

“I trust you,” Maryam said. “You’re doing very well, Abdes.”

A group of four women walked past them, also apparently enjoying an afternoon stroll. Abdes couldn’t help but notice their quiet conversation died as they passed and they shot him dark, suspicious glances from beneath furrowed brows. Nazareth was a small village; no more than twenty-five families called it home, and he was readily recognized as a stranger among them.

Maryam murmured polite salutations as they brushed past, seeming unbothered by their regard. As they walked away from the women, Abdes heard one of them speak softly, but distinctly to another. He couldn’t make out everything they

said, but he heard her hiss “Pantera” and he stumbled, his eyes flying wide, his breath choked in his throat.

“Abdes?” Maryam asked, concerned and startled.

Abdes turned, his heart hammering in sudden alarm beneath his breast. Yeshua must have felt this quickened, fervent measure against him, because he stirred, his little arms wriggling feebly. The women kept walking, but he met their gazes as they glanced over their shoulders toward him. When they noticed his attention, they whipped about once more, and hurried away, folded together and whispering.

Gods above, they know who I am, he thought in dismay. How can they know? How could they possibly know?

“Abdes, what is it?” Maryam asked. She glanced behind them, watching the women. “What’s wrong?”

He blinked at her, stricken. *They’ve seen me with her, he thought. Gods above, they saw me with Maryam—they know who she is. They know us both. They know she is with me.*

He couldn’t begin to fathom the rebuke the Jews in Nazareth would heap upon Maryam—not to mention the ones in Sepphoris against Yoseph—once word spread that the infamous—and hated—Pantera had paid them call.

What have I done? he thought, anguished, distraught.

“Abdes,” Maryam said, touching his arm, her brows lifted in worry. “What is it?”

“I...I have to go,” he said. Maryam blinked, gasping softly in surprise as he stepped toward her, returning Yeshua. He felt the baby’s fingers pluck lightly against his tunic, as if Yeshua sought to catch him, stay him.

“What?” Maryam said. “Abdes, what has—?”

“I have to leave,” he said. “I’m sorry. It’s getting late, and I...I’m due back at the barrack by dusk.”

Astarte help me, what have I done? he thought.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to Maryam. “I’m sorry.”

CHAPTER TEN

Abdes didn't sleep at all that night. He lay against his pallet in the darkened barrack, watching the shifting patterns of pale glow and shadows as moonlight waxed and waned through the chamber windows. He listened to the sounds of his barrack mates sleeping and envied them. He rested on his side, his knees drawn toward his belly, his hands toward his face, curled in a childlike posture beneath his blankets as he trembled in the dark.

He kept seeing the faces of the Nazarene women in his mind; their drawn brows, their dark gazes draped in shadows from the folds of their mantles. He kept hearing their whispers as they leaned together, frowning. *Pantera*, one of them had hissed. *Pantera*.

He thought of Judas ben Hezekiah shrieking on the grounds outside of the citadel. *I will see you answer, Pantera! I will know justice by your hide! They cannot keep me from you! They cannot keep the Almighty's wrath from you!*

He felt stricken to imagine Judas' reaction when he found out that Yoseph—a fellow Jew, and his brothers' former employer—had welcomed the man he believed to be their murderer in his home. Already, Yoseph's tolerant view of Roman officials in Sepphoris and his cooperation in their investigations probably marked him unfavorably in the eyes of his fellows.

Abdes closed his eyes, imagining the enraged mob that gathered with Judas and Zadduc daily turning their fury against Nazareth, storming Yoseph's home, dragging him from his

bed. He could hear their screams of outrage echoing in his mind, directed not against him this time, or Herod or Rome, but against Yoseph as they beat him with their fists, kicked him as he crumpled, breathless and bleeding to the ground. He imagined poor Maryam, her large eyes wide with horror and anguish as she cowered at her doorstep, clutching at her son, watching helplessly as the crowd pummeled her husband, hurled stones at him, punishing him.

“Gods,” he whispered, splaying his fingers and covering his face with his hands. He shuddered, gasping softly in the darkness. “Gods above...”

“What is wrong with you?” Ham had asked, as they had walked back toward Sepphoris. He had been as bewildered as Maryam and Yoseph by his brother’s admittedly bizarre behavior, his frantic, frightened insistence that they leave Nazareth. Ham had needed to nearly jog to keep up with Abdes’ harried pace along the highway, and when he had at last reached out, catching Abdes by the sleeve in concern, Abdes had whirled toward him, wide-eyed and breathless, jerking away as if Ham’s fingers had burned him.

“What’s wrong?” Ham had asked, confused and alarmed. In all of his life, he had likely never seen Abdes in such a panicked state, so unsettled that he jumped at every unfamiliar sound, shied from every traveler who passed them along the road. Ham had stepped toward him, his brows lifted in bewildered implore, reaching for his brother. “Abdes,” he had said softly. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Abdes hadn’t told him. He hadn’t said anything; he had danced clumsily away from Ham’s outstretched hands, shaking his head, hurrying along again. When Abdes had returned to Sepphoris, parting company with Ham, he had gone to the citadel, searching desperately for Mallus. He wanted to tell the tribune what had happened, to beg for his help, to send soldiers to Nazareth to keep Maryam and Yoseph safe. He had been told that Mallus had left the grounds to go to Seneca’s house and join the Praefectus for supper.

He had no one to turn to, and spent the night through seized with bright, relentless alarm. At dawn’s first light, he

rose, shrugging his way into his uniform, his body trembling with fatigue. He felt leaden with it; more so than lack of sleep, his merciless fear had left him exhausted. He hurried to the citadel, hoping for the first time that Judas and his followers would be gathered there, screaming for his hide. *If they're here, they can't have bothered Maryam and Yoseph*, he told himself. *Please let them be here. Please.*

To his utter, astonished relief, they were. He could hear them as he crossed the citadel foyer for the customary place where he and Pulcher met each morning. To his surprise, Pulcher was not already there, waiting for him. Ordinarily, the centurion beat him, no matter how early Abdes rose, or his best attempts at punctuality.

He walked past the guards at the side entrance and stepped out onto the citadel grounds. The crowd customarily gathered at the main threshold, and though he couldn't see them from his vantage, he could hear them clearly. Their cries grew louder, sharper with protest; obviously, sentries had been dispatched to send them away.

He turned to go back inside, and saw a small, silhouetted figure walking toward the citadel. He stumbled to a halt as he realized it was Maryam. It was only first light, but Yoseph would have already been on his way to the city for his day's work, as he and Ham had been scheduled to meet at dawn. Maryam was unchaperoned, and to Abdes' dismay, he could plainly see she didn't have Yeshua with her. She would no more leave her home and venture into the city, leaving Yeshua alone in Nazareth, then she would willingly barter the baby for silver.

"Gods above!" Abdes gasped, breaking into a sprint, rushing toward her. *Something has happened*, he thought. *The crowd came to Nazareth before gathering here! They have murdered Yoseph! Astarte and Eshmud have mercy, they've hurt the baby!*

"Maryam!" he cried out hoarsely, panicked. "Maryam!"

She paused as he approached, her smile wavering to uncertainty. When he stumbled to a winded halt in front of her, grasping her by the shoulders and staring at her in wide-eyed, desperate implore, she recoiled, her expression

bewildered. “Are you alright?” he gasped at her. “What’s happened? Where...where is the baby? Did they hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” Maryam said. “Nothing has happened. Yeshua is at my mother’s house.” When he blinked at her, confused, she reached for him. “Abdes, what is wrong?” she whispered, her brows lifting in worry. “No one hurt me.”

“I...but...but I...” Abdes backed away from her, shying from her proffered touch. He looked around, still confused, and nearly convinced that at any moment Judas ben Hezekiah would leap out from some corner or shadow and charge at them. “I thought something was wrong. I thought something had happened.”

“Happened?” she asked. “No, Abdes. Nothing happened.”

He looked at her, bewildered. “What are you doing here?” he asked. “I just...I didn’t expect to see you. It surprised me.”

It had done more than surprise him; it had scared him nearly witless. “I came with Yoseph to the city today,” Maryam said. “To visit with my mother for awhile. She enjoys spending some time alone with Yeshua, and I thought I’d come to see you.”

“Your family is in Sepphoris?” he asked, surprised and confused.

She nodded. “I was born and raised here,” she said. “I didn’t move to Nazareth until I married Yoseph.”

He realized his own foolishness and laughed hoarsely, softly. *I have just made an ass out of myself*, he thought. *I’ve gone mad, and I’ve just proven it to Maryam.*

“You’re shaking, Abdes,” she said softly. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “I’m tired, that’s all. Forgive me, Maryam, I didn’t sleep well last night, and I...with the protestors and all, the screaming and yelling, I just...it has me on edge.”

She turned her face toward the front of the citadel. The sounds of the crowd had faded as they had been forcibly dispersed, but obviously, she had heard them, too, upon her approach. "Are they here every day?" she asked.

"Yes," Abdes said.

"About that soldier, Pantera?" she asked. "Yoseph has told me about it, and I saw writing on some walls in the lower district with his name."

There would be something Pulcher would undoubtedly set Abdes to that day, he realized glumly. "Yes, they can be diligent in their hatred," he said.

She looked at him, her expression gentle, her eyes filled with kind sympathy. "It must be hard for you," she said softly. "For you all to have to listen to that...see it every day."

Abdes managed a laugh. "It's lost its novelty," he admitted, and she smiled.

"I brought you something," she said. For the first time, he noticed she carried a small, cloth-wrapped bundle in one hand and a slim papyrus scroll tucked beneath her arm. She offered the little package to him, smiling hopefully, hesitantly, shy color stoked in her cheeks.

"Me?" he asked, surprised. He took the bundle, blinking at it, feeling absurdly touched. "You didn't have to..."

"It's not much," Maryam said. "The rest of flat bread from yesterday. You seemed to like it."

The bread she had served with the Sabbath meal had been made in conventional fashion, small panels of dough pressed flat and cooked against a cinder bed. She had flavored the barley meal with honey; it had been sweet, each bite nearly melting to the taste.

"I did like it," he said, pleased and bewildered by the gesture. "It was some of the best bread I've ever had, I think."

Maryam smiled, delighted by his praise. "I've heard that the rations they give you here with the army are..."

"Flavorless as plaster?" he suggested, and when she laughed, he felt any lingering anxiety wane. He laughed with her, grateful for the reprieve, for this moment of release. "I will guard this with my life," he said, pressing the bundle of bread against his breastplate. "If anyone else finds out I've got real food, they'll riot to get their hands on it."

She laughed again, drawing her hand to her mouth, her cheeks bright with blush. "I could bring you some more next week," she said. "If you'd like."

She said this with a tremulous, hesitant hopefulness in her voice, her eyes round and earnest. She had grown up in Sepphoris, and lived now in a tight, tiny community in which she was likely viewed as a stranger. She obviously didn't travel often to Sepphoris, at least enough to maintain acquaintances outside of her family, as evidenced by the unfamiliar ostracism she'd received when she came to help with Lamech's and Heth's funeral arrangements. She was considered an outsider in both places, and although she had her husband for comfort and some companionship, he worked from dawn until dusk—and was twice again her age, if not more. She kept to her home day in and day out with only her child for company, and Maryam was still little more than a child herself.

She might have understood the duties and routines of mothering and wifehood, might have had the wisdom of a woman within her slight measure, but Maryam was still young. Abdes was her age, no older than by a few years at most. She longed for a friend of like age and frame of mind, someone she could relate to. He realized it as she looked up at him, making her tentative offer to visit him again.

She's lonely.

He understood her longing, her isolation and unhappiness. *Because it's mine, too*, he thought sadly, moved for her.

"I'd like that, Maryam," he said, smiling for her. He saw her eyes avert beyond his shoulder and widen. He pivoted and found Pulcher striding briskly toward them, his face set in visible disapproval at Abdes' dalliance.

“Centurion Pulcher, sir,” he said, hunching his shoulders, bracing himself for Pulcher’s rebuke. “I...forgive me, sir, I was only...”

“Save you breath, actarius,” Pulcher said. “If you were ever on time for anything, I might be more disappointed.”

Abdes blinked down at the ground, abashed. “Yes, sir.”

Pulcher looked at Maryam for a long moment. “Good woman,” he said by way of greeting, nodding his head once politely.

“Good morning, sir,” Maryam said. She still looked intimidated, wide-eyed with trepidation, but she seemed to muster some mettle, stepping forward again and lifting her chin to address the centurion eye-to-eye. “I had hoped to see you, sir.”

Abdes and Pulcher blinked at her in simultaneous surprise. “Me, good woman?” Pulcher asked.

“Yes, sir,” Maryam said. “I’d hoped to give this to you, sir.” She drew the scroll from beneath her arm and offered it to him. “This soldier has been very kind to my husband and family, sir. I wanted you to know how much we appreciate his efforts on our behalf, sir.”

“Efforts?” Pulcher asked, sparing Abdes a dubious glance. He unfurled the scroll and skimmed through the correspondence.

“I thought you would like to know that not every Jewish citizen finds fault with your cohort, sir,” Maryam said. “And that every Roman soldier isn’t a menace, as some would have us think. I had hoped you might share this with the Praefectus, sir.”

Abdes blinked at Maryam, stupefied and moved beyond breath. He hadn’t even known she was literate; most people of common birth—and girls especially—never learned to read or write. That aside, he knew how much money she had paid for the scroll, as he had priced such items himself at the market on the day he had been attacked. Jews were forbidden to write correspondences on the Sabbath; it was

unlikely Maryam and Yoseph kept ink, a stylus or papyrus around, and he realized she had braved the market that morning before coming to the citadel. She had spent a significant sum from her family's already strained budget to write a letter on his behalf. "Maryam..." he whispered, touched. Maryam glanced at him, and smiled.

Pulcher rolled the scroll closed between his hands. "Yes, well," he said in a terse, clipped and decidedly uncomfortable voice. "The cohort appreciates that you'd make time for such kind mention," he said. "I will bring this to the Praefectus' attention personally, good woman."

"Thank you, sir," Maryam said, holding Abdes' gaze, smiling at him again.

"Pretty girl," Pulcher remarked as he led Abdes back toward the citadel. Abdes was somewhat puzzled as to why they didn't just head out into the city from the grounds, and had realized to his dismay that Pulcher probably intended to scold him. The centurion glanced over his shoulder as they mounted the steps, approaching the threshold. "She's a Jew?"

"Yes, sir," Abdes said.

"I didn't think Jews associated with Gentiles," Pulcher said. "Least of all, with Roman soldiers."

"I...she seems a bit...liberal in her faith, sir," Abdes said clumsily.

Pulcher made a soft, harrumphing sound, glancing at Abdes again. "If you get her pregnant, the Praefectus will order your spine laid open with the lash."

Abdes staggered, his eyes flown wide. "What?" he asked, blinking. "I...no, sir, I...she is only an acquaintance, sir. A friend. I...I am not laying with her."

Pulcher paused, looking at him evenly, not believing him in the least.

"She is married, sir," Abdes said rather helplessly.

Pulcher harrumphed again. “You’ve been forewarned, actarius,” he said simply, turning and continuing his stride.

Abdes’ bewilderment only grew as Pulcher delivered him to a small antechamber near the decurion quartermaster’s office. Abdes hesitated in the doorway, anxiously surveying the heaping piles of scrolls stacked nearly to his chin atop a writing table, spilled upon the floor.

“The quartermaster’s decury has just completed their annual inventory,” Pulcher said. “You’re to audit their reports and verify the accuracy of each representative equipment count.”

Abdes blinked at him, startled.

“You’re also to cross-reference this year’s recorded inventory with audits from the previous two years,” Pulcher said. “And note any discrepancies you find in comparison.”

Abdes looked around in mounting dismay at the mess of scrolls before him. “Orders from the Praefectus, actarius,” Pulcher said, walking past him, leaving the cramped little office. “I had counsel with him this morning on the matter.”

Abdes’ stomach twisted into an unhappy knot. His gaze traveled slowly about the room, at the haphazard mess that has been left for him to sort out. “Gods above,” he muttered.

“Keep in file, actarius,” Pulcher called from the corridor. “The quicker your introduction, the sooner you can get started—and the quicker, one would assume, you can see this finished.”

Abdes slouched, hunching his shoulders in begrudging resignation. He turned, following the centurion. His apprehension and dismay only increased as Pulcher walked him through the six enormous storage chambers comprising the citadel’s armory, and he saw firsthand the seemingly endless racks and shelving units stacked and packed with armor, armaments and clothing. “How much is kept here?” he asked.

"I don't know," Pulcher replied. "I'm not the quartermaster. Only he, his staff and the Praefectus monitor the inventory." He glanced at Abdes, his brow arched with undisguised amusement. "And now you, I suppose, when this is done."

Bastard, Abdes thought, glowering at him, closing his hands into fists. He understood perfectly now. Seneca had given him two days of leave, but he hadn't wanted to; Mallus had proven true to his word and called Seneca on a favor to guarantee his graciousness. Seneca had brought Abdes to task for it—this wretched task.

As enthusiastic as Abdes felt about the assignment, the quartermaster decurion, a large, burly man named Hostus Aelius Pertinax was even more so.

"Five years now, I've overseen this armory," he growled upon his introduction to Abdes. He folded his thick arms over his strapping chest and glowered between Pulcher and the younger man. "Five years now, I've tendered my inventory, and never once has a Praefectus questioned me on my count or seen my men through this sort of rot damn inconvenience. If Seneca has doubts about my integrity, he ought to just call me on them face to face—not send some rot-whelp, stylus-wagging clerk to double-check my accounts."

Abdes bristled at this, returning the decurion's glare. "I'm sure the Praefectus has his reasons, Decurion Pertinax," Pulcher said dryly.

Pertinax swung his scathing gaze toward the centurion. "I'm sure he does," he said, with a snort. "And I'm rot damn sure it's got nothing to do with my staff's record keeping or accounting, and all in the world to do with impressing the Pater. Caesar just appointed that proconsul from Africa as legatus of Syria—what's his name? Varus. And Varus is little more than kin, and somewhat less than kind to Caesar. Seneca sups with him in Rome—there's benefit, I should damn well think. If Caesar takes Judea from King Herod, I'd just wager Seneca holds some hope that he'll see himself made a new legatus, too."

“I’ll be glad to share your opinions with the Praefectus—” Pulcher began coolly, but Pertinax stepped toward him, hoisting his wide chin in defiance.

“Go right ahead, Centurion Pulcher,” he snapped. He shoved his forefinger at Abdes, an abrupt and forceful gesture that made Abdes draw back, startled. “And tell the good Praefectus I’d share them myself—gladly, even—if he’d show me more regard than to send some tablet-bearing pup to my armory to validate my numbers!”

“Soonest begun, soonest done,” Pulcher told Abdes, as he abandoned him to the tiny office, the mountains of papyrus scrolls.

“Bastard,” Abdes muttered, sitting motionless and helplessly surrounded by the paperwork. They were in no discernable order he’d been able to observe; obviously bent on making his task as difficult as possible, Pertinax and his decury had simply stuffed all of the scrolls in the room, paying no mind to chronology or sequence.

“Rot damn bastard,” Abdes muttered, slapping aside a pile of scrolls, sending them scattering from the table.

For the next two weeks, from dawn until well after dark, Abdes worked on the audit, until his head ached him nonstop, his mind exhausted and taxed from counting equipment and comparing his totals to those recorded in the inventory ledgers. He also had to compare individual recordings, insuring that each piece of equipment, as denoted by etched serial numbers, corresponded with a piece accounted for by this same number in the records. There were one thousand, five hundred soldiers appointed to the urban cohort’s six divisional centuries; the armory was originally outfitted with provisions to equip up to twice that number at any given time, as well as to supplement any legions crossing through Galilee and in need. Each helmet, shield, sword, spear, sheath, dagger, belt, tunic, pair of sandals, leggings, chain mail shirt, leather breastplate and armor overlay issued by the

quartermaster had been inscribed with an identifying serial number. As each was issued, the number of each piece was noted and attributed in the ledger scrolls to the recipient soldier. For each that was returned, it was likewise noted in the ledgers. Every piece of equipment had to be strictly accounted for at all times given their value, and relative scarcity.

It proved mind-numbing work, more exhausting and mundane than the worst of Abdes' previous actarius duties. At least with Pulcher, he'd had almost-daily calamities to break the monotony: merchants screaming at them, calling them cheats; vandalism on buildings to shock and appall them; broken channels of aqueducts to marvel and swear over. In the armory, there was nothing but occasional, passing encounters with Pertinax or his scribes to award Abdes sullen glowers and muttered insults.

Several times during the course of his audit, Abdes discovered totals that didn't match the armory records. He dreaded these moments more than any other; he was then forced to return to the stock rooms and count the equipment in question again, wasting whole days by matching hundreds of serial numbers yet again. Each time, he had realized the mistake was his own accounting error, not any by Pertinax's clerks. In the end, when he had at last finished, he had validated the entire inventory report Pertinax's staff had originally compiled, finding no equipment unaccounted for whatsoever.

Which only served to confirm in the decurion's mind the complete futility of the entire, disruptive procedure.

"I could've damn well told you that myself from the start!" he yelled, standing over Abdes' table and glaring at him. "I did damn well tell you that from the start!"

Having spent the last weeks enduring Pertinax's hostility, as well as the residual disdain the decurion had imparted to all of his staff, Abdes was fairly well exasperated. "I did find some discrepancies I'll report to the Praefectus," he said, meeting Pertinax's gaze evenly and finding a momentary glimmer of satisfaction to watch outrage flash in the big man's eyes.

“What discrepancies?” Pertinax snapped. “You just told me your accounts match my own.”

Abdes pushed his stool back from the table and stood, deliberately taking his time in unrolling several lengthy scrolls before him, allowing Pertinax to sputter impatiently. “These are reports from the last two annual inventories,” Abdes told him, looking up. “And this is the inventory for this year. Last year, some equipment is missing that’s accounted for both in the previous year and in this one.”

He tapped his fingertip against several ledger notations. “These helmets, number 1,214 and 432, and these breastplates, 789 and 1,178, along with two imperial-issue daggers—numbers 183 and 911, and two belts, 1002 and 1319. I’ve checked through the registers; these items haven’t been distributed or requisitioned back into inventory, according to the records. They just disappeared.”

He glanced up and found Pertinax scowling at him, puzzled. “But they’re accounted for this year?”

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said. “They were missing last year, and weren’t issued or returned by anyone I could find record of.”

Pertinax remained unenlightened. “But they’re accounted for,” he said again.

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said. “I counted them on the racks myself.”

“Then where’s the problem, actarius?” Pertinax asked sharply, his brows furrowing with aggravation. Like Pulcher, he seemed to have developed a fondness for letting Abdes’ meager title drop with thinly veiled disdain from his tongue.

Abdes returned his glower evenly, tired of his tantrums. “The problem, Decurion,” he said, lending the same note of contempt to this courteous referral as Pertinax had offered him. “Is that your clerks seem fully capable of putting together a reliable accounting of every piece of equipment in your charge—as you have repeatedly pointed out. I don’t doubt this competence was upon them two years ago and again this year, but somehow remiss for the year in between. If your

men don't miscount, then there's no logical reason that this equipment—which wasn't issued or returned by any cohort soldiers in the meantime—would be missing."

Pertinax glared at him, his broad face infused with bright, outraged color. "What precisely are you suggesting?"

Abdes arched his brow, rolling the scrolls closed. He gathered them together neatly, tucking them beneath his arm. "My suggestions, Decurion, will be tendered to the Praefectus, along with my audit reports," he said. He walked around his table, shouldering past Pertinax and heading for the door.

"I know who you are," Pertinax said, giving Abdes immediate, wide-eyed pause. "I know who you are, boy, and how you've come to find yourself in such a position in the cohort."

For two weeks, Abdes had been able to put his anxieties and fears behind him. If anything good had come out of the tortuous audit, it had been that for the first time, he hadn't thought a whit about Pantera. He'd been too busy, too absorbed to even suffer nightmares, at least of his attack. He had dreamed of numbers, of a never-ending supply of helmets and swords, of serial numbers and ledger scrolls, but nothing of his attack, Jobina, the Jewish girl or Pantera.

With Pertinax's words, it slammed into him again and all at once.

Oh, gods, he thought, remembering what he had forgotten—the women in Nazareth whispering together, calling him "Pantera." He had convinced himself that he was safe. Nothing had happened that he had heard tell of, and he had convinced himself that he'd been mistaken, that Maryam and Yoseph were safe. He felt his heart shudder to a standstill. He gulped softly for breath as his throat constricted tightly. He struggled to keep his alarm, his sudden anxiety show in his face, and he turned, glancing at Pertinax.

"From the Third Gallic in Syria my ass," Pertinax snapped, closing his hands into fists. Abdes struggled to breathe, feeling all of the color, the blood in his face flush downward to his toes. A sudden chill seized him, threatening

to shudder through his shoulders, and he blinked at the decurion, mute and stricken.

“You think Seneca can sneak you in here from Rome with only your father’s say in the Senate? Do you hope if Seneca gets his appointment in Judea, that you’ll get to follow him to Jerusalem? See some fancy post of your own?”

Abdes blinked at him again, and then laughed. It spurted out of him uncontrollably; he was helpless to prevent it. Pertinax thought he was a pampered noble’s son, given his appointment under some trumped up pretense, because of the Senatorial status of his kin. Abdes laughed in abject, relieved release. He laughed until his eyes smarted, until he was breathless from it, until he buckled over, staggering in the doorway, whooping for air.

Pertinax stared at him as if he’d been struck daft. His expression—his wide eyes, and agape mouth—triggered another snorting fit of laughter, and Abdes turned, stumbling away from him, gasping loudly. “Your insight is astonishing, sir,” he told Pertinax, glancing over his shoulder. “Maybe you should employ it to find out where those pieces of equipment have been for the last year.”

Abdes decided to celebrate the completion of the wretched audit by spending his evening with Salome. As he approached the tuguria, he spied her standing outside of her cell. He worried that she wouldn’t remember him, or that she would scoff at him when he presented the token she’d given him, and send him away. He also wondered if Menachem or any of the strapping, burly thugs he employed as security would prevent him from reaching Salome. It didn’t take a genius—or more than a passing glance—to accurately deduce that Abdes wasn’t Salome’s ordinary caliber of client.

He drew to a hesitant, uncertain halt and ducked among the crowd of prospective patrons haggling with the tuguria prostitutes. Mallus’ words resounded in his head:

Trust me. Keep away from her.

and he turned around to go back to the barrack. *This is madness*, he thought. *What am I thinking? She'll laugh herself sick if I walk up to her, token or not. And when she's done retching at my expense, Menachem and his pals will gladly see me on my way again—a couple of solid punches, a kick or two in the ass ought to do the trick.*

“You came back for me.”

The voice, a soft and delicate murmur that left warm breath dancing against the nape of his neck, the edge of his ear startled him. He turned to find Salome behind him, and he stumbled clumsily, all wide eyes and choked breath. She was so beautiful, he felt his wits abandon him completely at her simple proximity. When she smiled at him, torchlight from the tuguria walls gleaming against her dark eyes, he staggered again, his feet nearly spilling out from beneath him. “I...I...Salome, I...I was...” he stammered.

“I expected you sooner, Abdes,” Salome said quietly. She reached out, her hand draping against the front of his tunic, her fingers curling against the fabric. She drew him in tow, and he went with her, the world dissolving around him, the crowd disappearing from his notice.

She led him into her cell, turning him about, closing the door behind him. The fragrance of incense lingered sweetly in the chamber and her solitary lamp cast a golden glow that spilled about them. The door had not even latched in full, and then she stepped against him, her breasts pressing against his chest with wondrous warmth. He didn't even have time to draw a breath in full, to stammer out some clumsy semblance of greeting, to offer her the token; she caught her face between his hands and kissed him deeply, her tongue delving into his mouth, catching the whimper that fluttered helplessly from his throat.

Her hands were already at work, unfettering his belt and his groin was already stoked with heat and heavy, insistent pressure. She eased him backward until he sat against the cot. All the while, she kissed him, not even giving him a moment to reclaim his breath.

He felt her fingers coil in his hair, tightening, drawing his head back. Her lips left his, and he gasped softly against the

gentle strain to his scalp. "I expected you sooner," she whispered, kissing him after allowing him this sharp, quick breath. He whimpered as she caught his bottom lip lightly against her teeth, drawing away from him with deliberate, maddening friction. "I thought I had not pleased you."

She let go of his hair, and slid between his legs, dropping abruptly to let her knees touch the floor. He gasped at the sensation of her breasts, the silken fabric of her clothes sliding against him, and then she draped her hands against his knees, pushing his legs apart.

"No," he whispered. "No, no, you...you pleased me very much. You..."

Salome lowered her face, pushing aside his tunic hem, letting her lips settle against his inner thigh. His voice fumbled to a halt and he closed his eyes, leaning his head back. "What's kept you away?" Salome whispered, her mouth and tongue trailing lightly, deliberately up his thigh, leaving him breathless, his hands folded into desperate fists. "What duties could you find in the army to please you more than me?"

"None," he whimpered, and then her breath, the darting tip of her tongue brushed against his arousal, and he gasped. She paused at this taunting, fleeting proximity, and he trembled. "They...they put me in the armory," he whispered, because she was looking up at him, waiting for his answer. "They made me count equipment."

Slowly, deliberately, she curled her fingers around him, her hand moving slowly. Abdes couldn't think for the pleasure of it, the tremulous anticipation that had seized him, stripping his wits from him. "Six rooms of it," he said, closing his eyes again as the pace of her hand quickened. "I...oh, gods...I...I had to count..."

He moaned, arching his back as her mouth took the place of his hand. He might have dreamed or imagined a woman doing that to him, but he'd never hoped to live to experience it. Salome's hair spilled against his lap in glossy waves; he draped his fingers against it, the back of her head, gasping for breath.

Her lips drew away from him, leaving him shuddering. She glanced up at him and smiled. "Counting what?" she whispered, and then she lowered her head again, drawing him fully into her mouth.

"Equipment," he moaned, canting his head back, his breath hitching helplessly. He struggled to speak, tangling his fingers in her hair. "Swords," he gasped. "Swords and...and helms...spears and daggers...breastplates...the uniforms they give us..."

She paused again; he crumpled back against the wall behind him, whimpering in desperate implore. "Please..." he gasped.

"How many did you count, Abdes?" she whispered.

"Enough," he said, his voice hoarse and warbling. "Enough for...for the entire cohort to be outfitted and...and twelve hundred, seventy-two more besides."

Salome smiled at him. She moved, letting her legs unfurl slowly, crawling astride him. She took her time, draping her legs slowly on either side of his hips, letting her breasts drag against his chest. She kissed him, taking his voice, his breath and need against her tongue, and when she lowered herself against him, she smiled as he moaned. She immediately fell into a powerful, forceful rhythm that drove him deeply into her, over and over, mercilessly. Her hand closed in his hair again and she wrenched his head back, her mouth settling against his throat.

"Are you counting now?" she whispered against his ear.

"No," he gasped, shaking his head.

"Are you sure?" she teased, and he laughed softly, hoarsely.

"By my breath, my honor, my life," he said. "I'm not counting."

She laughed, turning loose of his hair, drawing him against her in something more tender than forceful; she drew her arms about him, and he clutched at her, feeling her hands

against him, the warm shelter of her as she drove him to release.

She held him when they were finished, as he pressed his cheek against her shoulder and trembled against her, exhausted and spent. She stroked his hair, running her hands gently from his head down the length of his back, her fingers brushing lightly against the definitions and contours of his spine, the muscles bridging his shoulder and neck, his torso. There was something so intimate in those quiet moments; he felt so bound to her, helpless against her that it made even their lovemaking seem pale to him. Salome held him and he could close his eyes and simply rest against her, his mind heedless and quiet, with nothing but the moment and her arms to hold him fast.

He felt her move to leave him, to slide away, her arms loosening, her hands slipping from his body. He leaned back from her, drawing the tip of his nose lightly against hers, letting his weary, winded breath flutter against her lips. "Please don't go," he whispered, making her smile.

"I can't stay," she murmured, brushing his sweat-dampened hair back from his brow with her fingertips. He lifted his chin, and she canted her face to meet him, letting him kiss her. Abdes closed her eyes, drawing his hands to her face, cradling her cheeks against his palms as if she was something delicate and precious to him. Within his heart, that was how she had become.

"Please," he breathed, feeling her draw away from him and the sudden chill as she slid her legs back, her hips from his.

She drew away from his touch and he let her go. She smiled as he hung his head, weary and sorrowful that she meant to leave. "My soldier," she said softly, taking his hand briefly and pressing another token against his palm. She left him as she had before, with only a smile to haunt him, and no words of farewell.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Three weeks passed after Abdes submitted his audit report, with no more said or asked of him about it. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” he told Maryam. “Whatever the Praefectus thought I might find, obviously I didn’t. I’m always doing something wrong. Why should that have been any different?”

Maryam had come to visit him nearly every morning without fail since his audit work had finished. They met before dawn, spending at least an hour together before he had to report for duty with Pulcher. That brief time had become the highlight of his days, something he looked forward to and enjoyed. Ham had kept busy working for Yoseph, and between the two men, they’d been able to take on some large-scale projects that consumed their time, but paid them both very well. Without Ham to turn to, Abdes had found himself relying more and more on Maryam for company and friendship.

She smiled at him. “You’re not always doing something wrong, Abdes.”

He reached out, pinching her nose lightly between the knuckles of his forefingers. “You don’t know me well, then,” he said.

She giggled—as he’d anticipated—and ducked her head, slapping lightly at his hand. “Yes, I do.”

Most times, she would bring Yeshua with her to meet Abdes on the citadel grounds, and half of their time would be spent entertaining and playing with the baby. He knew why she brought Yeshua along, just as he knew why that day, she had

not. When she was alone, she'd left the baby in her mother's care; when she wasn't, it was because she hadn't told anyone she was in Sepphoris, much less meeting him. He felt an awkward sort of shame at this. Jews and Gentiles ordinarily didn't befriend one another, or spend time together. Yoseph may or may not have minded; Abdes didn't know, and had felt too intrusive to ask Maryam. Her mother, Anne, would have minded, however. A devout Jew, she would have railed at her daughter had she realized. Already, Maryam was untruthful with her mother, as her excursions when she left Yeshua in Anne's care were under the pretense of going to the market, or bringing food to Yoseph at his work sites.

It troubled Maryam that Abdes was a Gentile more than she would ever admit. He suspected this was because up until very recently, Maryam had shared her mother's devout Jewish faith. She had trusted without question the religious beliefs and practices of her people. Something had obviously happened to make her doubt what had once felt instinctive and right to her, and she struggled to reconcile it within herself. He could see it plainly. She'd never told him what might have caused her such reservations, and he'd wondered—and worried—that it had been her association with him. The fact that their friendship had seemed to develop with such relative and mutual ease between them—that Maryam and Abdes had enough in common to bond together, to befriend one another—had likely been unexpected and puzzling to her.

Maryam leaned toward him, cocking her head to draw his gaze. "Maybe the Praefectus just trusted you to find the truth," she said. "And he's accepted what you found. That's all."

He admired this ingenuous outlook of hers and longed rather desperately sometimes to share it. He smiled for her, if only to soften the worry in her brows. "Maybe you should go to him," she said. "Talk to him about it."

Abdes laughed, shaking his head. "Gods, no," he said. "You might know me, but you don't know the Praefectus."

"Don't swear, Abdes," Maryam said, pretending to frown. "You swear all of the time. It's wrong."

"I do not," he said.

"Yes, you do," she said. "'By my this,' and 'by my that.' 'Damn this' and 'damn that' and 'gods above, below and to the right.' It's wrong."

"It's only wrong to swear by your god, according to your god."

"No, it's not," she said. "It's wrong, Abdes, no matter your god. You're a good man. Why should you swear at all? Your 'yes' should mean 'yes,' your 'no' should mean 'no' and that should be good enough."

He smiled again, charmed. Sometimes her eyes were filled with such adulation when she looked at him, it made him feel pleased and uncertain all at once. Pleased because he'd realize to her, he was something different than he really was—someone better—and uncertain because he knew it would only be a matter of time before he would fail her.

"I can tell you worry too much, Abdes," Maryam said. "You have shadows around your eyes for it. You haven't been sleeping."

He blinked at her, somewhat mortified. He hadn't been sleeping much lately, but not for the reasons Maryam suspected. Visiting Salome in the evenings had become as much of a habit as seeing Maryam in the mornings. Every time he saw Salome, she would press another token against his hand in unspoken invitation to return. Last night had been no exception; he had spent well over an hour at the tugurium with Salome astride him, leaving him breathless, sweat-soaked and exhausted with exertion.

"Where are you from?" he had whispered to her, stroking her disheveled hair back from her face when they were finished.

Salome had smiled, looking down at him. "Does it matter?"

"It matters to me," he had said, and her face had softened. He had fallen in love with her. It was foolish and futile, and Abdes knew it, but he was helpless to prevent it. Salome consumed his thoughts, his heart. He was mute to

admit it, ashamed that she would laugh or scorn him, but it remained poignant and piercing within him. He loved her.

"I'm from Gamala," Salome had told him. "My father owned a fishing boat and worked the Sea of Galilee. He had twelve employees and he sold his wares here in Sepphoris. He came into some debt to Menachem, and the matter came to selling his boat—and losing his livelihood—or handing over his daughter in remittance."

Abdes had been pained for her. He had reached for her, drawing his thumb lightly against her cheek. "Menachem," he'd whispered. "He's your pander."

She smiled again; the admittance neither shamed nor bothered her. "He's good to me," she said. "I want for nothing. Menachem sees to that. I have more freedom with him than I would have found in ten lifetimes in Gamala."

She'd seen the sorrow, stark and apparent in his eyes, and she had stroked his face gently. "Don't look so sad," she had whispered, leaning over and kissing him. "Don't ever look sad for me, Abdes."

He had grown to despise Menachem with a ferocity that bordered on murderous, on account of both Salome and Maryam. Not only had he learned the horrific truth behind Salome's indentureship to him, Maryam had confided that she had nearly shared that fate.

"My father owed Menachem money," she had told him. "He hurt his back lifting a load of stone while working on an addition at a bath house. He strained something—he couldn't walk for it, or even get out of bed. Yoseph had been helping him and I remember Yoseph had to carry him home. He couldn't work for months—nearly a year in full, and he got behind on his taxes."

She had looked sorrowful at the admittance. "He was too proud to ask for charity—not even from Yoseph, and he's a friend to my family—distant kin to me, even. So he borrowed from Menachem. He tried to go back to work, to pay the debt, but his back hurt him so much, he couldn't. I remember listening to him weep about it one night. He told my

mother he thought we should leave—not just Sepphoris, but Galilee. He wanted to go to Syria, because Menachem demanded full remittance. He had told my father either the money, or...or me.”

She had looked stricken at this, her large eyes filled with fright. “When Yoseph found out, he offered to marry me,” she had whispered. “He gave Father an enormous sum for my dowry. Enough to pay Menachem; enough to make him leave us alone.”

There was such a sweetness about Maryam, an ingenuity that Abdes had come to adore. Things were simple to her, in an innocent sort of fashion, and he found himself growing fiercely protective of her. There were still hints of this he could see in Salome; fleeting moments when something he would say or do would soften her, and he understood that this was a side of her, a capacity she kept well hidden and protected, safe from Menachem, despite her assertion that the pander was good to her. He had grown fiercely protective about this, as well; it was not something Salome shared readily, and he doubted she revealed it to anyone but him. That Menachem had tried to strip this from her, that he had meant to rob Maryam of this same, gentle innocence left him furious. More and more, Abdes longed for even five minutes alone with the pander to make him answer for his offenses.

Abdes hadn’t told Maryam about Salome. Even though she might have sympathized with Salome’s circumstances—having nearly found herself in the same—and even though Maryam was fairly liberal in her associations with Gentiles, she still harbored a decided stubbornness about the Jewish ideas of “right” and “wrong.” Prostitution was wrong in her mindset and his patronage of a brothel—not to mention the fact he had fallen in love with a harlot—would be equally as wrong. That aside, he felt somewhat ashamed of it, at least by Maryam. She would be more than disapproving if she found out. She’d be disappointed in him, and for reasons he couldn’t quite explain, he would be devastated if her innocent faith in him failed and he failed to be the caliber of person she so obviously believed him to be.

Maryam pinched his nose, startling him from his thoughts. “You’re worrying again,” she said, leaning toward him, pretending to scowl. “Gabriel told me that we shouldn’t worry over things we can’t control or prevent. We should trust them to the Almighty.”

“Your shepherd seer said that?” he asked, and she nodded. “For once, I might agree with the old rot.”

Maryam slapped his arm. “Don’t say that. He’s very wise, Abdes.”

He laughed. “Yes, he’s a veritable sage.”

That morning, as Abdes followed Pulcher into the city, the centurion spared him a glance over his shoulder. “You’ve been spending a lot of time with that Jewish girl, it seems,” he remarked.

“It’s not against regulations, sir,” Abdes replied.

“No,” Pulcher agreed. “It’s unusual, that’s all.”

Abdes frowned, not looking at him. “She’s my friend, sir,” he said tersely. Pulcher wasn’t the first to suggest—either directly or more subtly—that Abdes’ interest in Maryam was less than amiable. Already, he had to endure the good-natured ribbing of the morning sentries and had grown weary of it. “She’s like a sister to me, sir.”

“So you keep saying,” Pulcher said.

“Maybe I keep hoping it will sink into your skull,” Abdes said. He stumbled to a halt as soon as the words were out of his mouth, his eyes flown wide with shock at his own audacity. He’d grown accustomed to speaking freely in front of Maryam; he’d forgotten himself—and his company—momentarily.

Pulcher stopped and turned, and Abdes blinked at his toes. He shifted the weight of his satchel against his shoulder, his face blazing with mortified color. “I...I beg your pardon, sir,” he said quietly.

Pulcher chuckled. It marked the first time in the centurion's service that Abdes had ever heard such a sound come from him, and he blinked at the ground, startled and bewildered. "Keep in step, actarius," Pulcher said, and he pivoted, walking again. "We've a busy day ahead of us."

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, following without lifting his gaze. He didn't quite understand why Pulcher hadn't cuffed him one, or at the least, completely withered Abdes with one of his dry, scathing comments. He was so surprised and bewildered that he didn't pay attention to the ground beneath him, and he stumbled, turning his ankle in a pitted hole. Water had pooled in the slight depression. It sloshed against his leg and seeped against the sole of his sandal in a sudden, cold splash. He yelped, staggering clumsily.

"There's a hole there," Pulcher said, apparently brimming with good humor that morning.

"Yes...yes, sir," Abdes said, stumbling, grimacing at the nasty, damp silt left in the bottom of his sandal. He turned, glancing at the hole behind him, frowning. "I see that now, sir."

He caught sight of a boy following the road behind them and paused, his brows lifting. He knew the boy's face. It was Jacob, nephew of Judas ben Hezekiah.

"Yet again, someone has graced the west district's bath with paint," Pulcher said, still striding along, either not noticing Abdes' delay, or caring. "We'll stop there first so that you can remove it, and then we'll move on to the southside market booths."

Jacob blinked at Abdes, his eyes flying wide. He turned and scampered. "Hey—!" Abdes said, moving to run after him. He plopped his foot squarely into the muddy hole again, and stumbled, falling to his knees this time, crying out sharply as pain lanced through his strained ankle.

"Damn it!" Abdes yelled, looking up and realizing Jacob was gone, having darted down an alleyway and disappearing. He looked over his shoulder as he limped to his feet, his knees crusted with mud, his tunic splattered. "There

was a boy following us, sir,” he said, because Pulcher had paused long enough to look at him as if he had gone mad. “I have seen him before. He is Judas ben Hezekiah’s kin, one of the demonstrators who come to the—”

“I know who Judas ben Hezekiah is,” Pulcher said mildly. “I don’t live in a cave, actarius. And I know the boy, too—Jacob ben Lamech. He’s been following us for well over a month now. You’ve only just now noticed?”

Abdes blinked at him, stumbling as he settled his weight on his aching leg. “A month?” he asked. “But...why, sir?”

“I don’t know,” Pulcher said. He raised his brow, sparing a disapproving glance at the mud on Abdes’ uniform. “You’re the one who’s ‘just friends’ with the Jews. Maybe you should ask him.”

He turned and walked again. Abdes winced, hobbling along behind him. “You’re not concerned about it, sir?” he asked.

“Not especially,” Pulcher said. “Why would I be?”

“But he is kin to Judas ben Hezekiah, sir,” Abdes said.

“The only reason Judas ben Hezekiah might ever cause me even a fleeting moment of concern, actarius, would be if I had something to hide from him in the course of my activities,” Pulcher said. “If I did something or behaved in some fashion that might lend fuel to his overzealous fire. Which I do not. I perform my duties as is my obligation by law, and with the full authority of both the Praefectus and King Herod. Therefore, I scarcely see any need to be concerned by a child scampering about in my footsteps, no matter his kin, or purpose.”

Abdes glanced over his shoulder, unnerved. Pulcher might not have been worried, but Abdes wondered if he should be. He had grown remiss in his concerns about the women in Nazareth recognizing him. Nothing had seemingly come of it, and it had been fairly well forgotten. All at once, he wondered if word had simply been slow in reaching Judas’ ear;

if maybe Jacob wasn't following Pulcher necessarily, in as much as he was following Abdes.

I will see you answer, Pantera! he remembered Judas screaming; words that left him shivering.

He spent much of the morning scrubbing the wall of the vandalized bath house, the blood-red *LXXVII* painted against the granite. He had been meaning to ask Maryam about this, certain it held some sort of cryptic meaning among the Jews, even though Pulcher had been dubious when he suggested as much.

"I think it's just a way they've found to make anonymous nuisances of themselves," the centurion had told him.

While the vandalism might have been a nuisance to Pulcher, it was a pain in Abdes' ass. Still, puzzled by the numerals, he made a point of asking Maryam about them the next morning.

"I don't understand," he said. "Seventy-seven? What does that mean?"

"It's from an ancient Jewish text," she said after a hesitant moment. She sat beside Abdes in their customary alcove, bouncing Yeshua against her lap as he sucked on his fingers. "Verses about the Almighty's restoration of the kingdom of Israel, and the great judgment."

"Of what?" Abdes asked.

"Everyone," Maryam said as Yeshua leaned toward Abdes, his slobber-dampened fingers splayed and outstretched, pawing for Abdes' breastplate. "The dead ones will rise and the judgment of the Almighty will be on us. The verses say the Almighty will send his Messiah, one born the son of man, a descendant of King David with the power of the Almighty. The Messiah will come during the seventy-seventh generation since the beginning of creation. We believe he will deliver us from our oppressors. The rabbis say we are living in the seventy-seventh generation, by the ancient texts."

"I know what this means," Abdes said to Pulcher later that same morning, frowning slightly to discover a fresh set of numerals slapped against the very same wall he had scrubbed clean only the day before.

Pulcher glanced at him. "Would you like to tack a 'sir' on the end of that, actarius?"

Abdes blinked, startled from his thoughts. "I...I beg your pardon, sir," he said. He pointed to the numbers. "I think I know what that means, sir. Maryam told me. It's a reference to some sort of prophecy about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel."

Pulcher continued looking at him, his brow raised with interest. Abdes told him the rest of the Messianic prophecies, relaying in full what Maryam had said. When he finished, Pulcher looked at the wall again, reaching up to scratch his chin thoughtfully. "A Messiah," he said. "I thought the Jews believed in one god."

"They do, sir."

"So if they believe in one god, how do they account for a Messiah who has the power of a god?" Pulcher remarked. "Sounds rather like a pantheon in the making to me." He shook his head and glanced at Abdes. "How long did it take you to get rid this yesterday?"

"Three hours, sir," Abdes said, hoping Pulcher might have mercy on him and grant him a reprieve given they had market scales to inspect and already it was nearly midday. They had not taken a break since starting out, and Abdes was hungry, his stomach grumbling with eager insistence.

"Oh," Pulcher said, nodding once. "If you started now, we would still have plenty of daylight ahead of us." He walked away, flapping his hand. "Set to it, actarius," he said. "It's almost afternoon. I'll be about, seeing to some lunch for myself."

Abdes shoulders slouched, and he scowled. "Yes, sir," he muttered.

He scrubbed for more than two hours, until at last, exhausted and aching, he pressed his head against the wet stone and closed his eyes, letting his sore arms dangle limply toward the ground. It had started to rain beyond the portico, a steady drizzle that blew in soft bursts beneath the eaves to pelt him. He was damp, miserable, and tired.

"I need a Messiah of my own," he muttered wearily.

He turned at the sudden, sharp din of overlapping voices; children shouting from somewhere nearby. He couldn't make out their words, but he didn't miss the sharp, stinging tone of jeers. Abdes frowned, tossing aside his sopping rag, abandoning his water pail and helmet as he broke into a swift, broad stride, following the ruckus.

He thought he heard a distinctive clattering, like rocks smacking against stone walls, and as he darted into the narrow entrance of an alleyway, he skittered to a halt in the mud, his eyes widening. Seven boys had braved the rain and chased an old man, cornering him in a screaming, frenzied pack against a wall. Here, they had turned to pelting him with rocks. Abdes could see the old man huddled on his knees against the ground, his hands clasped and trembling against his head as he tried to protect himself from the blows.

"Stop it!" Abdes snapped, moving toward the boys. "What are you doing?"

The children whirled at his sharp tone and danced back in startled fright at the sight of his uniform. They bolted for the mouth of the alley, dropping their stones and crying out in breathless alarm. Abdes tried to step in their path to stop them, but they darted all around him, running madly.

"Hey—" Abdes cried, reaching out and clapping hold of one as he rushed past. The boy thrashed against him as Abdes hauled him backward.

"Let me go!" the boy cried in Aramaic. Abdes had less than a full breath to realize he'd just caught hold of Jacob ben Lamech by the scruff of his mantle, and then Jacob punted him mightily in the shin.

“Ow—!” Abdes yelped, stumbling, struggling to keep his grip on the boy’s shirt. Jacob reared his foot back and booted him again; at this bright, painful impact, Abdes turned loose of him in favor of staggering, his brows furrowed, his face twisted with pain. “Ow—damn it, you rot little—!” he yelled, hopping about, tears smarting in his eyes.

Jacob took full advantage of the opportunity and high-tailed it after his friends. “You little rot!” Abdes shouted hoarsely, limping after him. “I know who you are, Jacob ben Lamech! You’d better run from me, you rot damn...!” He settled too much weight too soon on his sore leg, and he grimaced, sucking in a sharp, hissing breath through his teeth.

He heard the old man groan quietly from behind him, and he forgot his own pain, his rage. He turned, limping toward the man. “Are you alright, sir?” he asked. “They’ve run off, but I know who they are...one of the little rots, anyway.” He genuflected, putting his arm around the old man’s scrawny shoulders, helping him sit up. “I can—”

Abdes blinked, stiffening in reflexive surprise as the old man lifted his face, looking at him. “Gabriel,” he whispered.

A stone had clipped the elderly shepherd above the brow, and a thin stream of blood spilled down the left side of his face. Despite this, and the fact that Gabriel was likely struck elsewhere, and in pain, he smiled at Abdes, blinking dazedly at the younger man. “I know your face,” he murmured, patting his palm lightly against Abdes’ cheek, as if soothing a distraught child.

“You’re bleeding, sir,” Abdes said. He reached beneath the collar of his breastplate, drawing his scarf loose. He leaned toward Gabriel, pressing the cloth gently against his wound. “Here,” he said quietly. The old man uttered a soft, warbling murmur of pain. “I’m sorry,” Abdes whispered.

“It...it is alright, lad,” Gabriel said. “A wayward stone...that’s all.” Again, he smiled at Abdes. “You’re Maryam’s friend. You tried to give me a coin once.”

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said.

Gabriel blinked, taking Abdes' uniform into account without seeming the least bit troubled. "You're a soldier."

Abdes lifted the corner of his scarf from Gabriel's brow momentarily, dabbing at the blood smeared against the old man's cheek. "Yes, sir," he said. He drew his arm about Gabriel's middle, and blinked in shock to realize how emaciated he was beneath the disguising drape of his clothing. He felt like no more than dried leaves pressed between wool panels, about a skeleton of brittle wood. "Can you rise, sir?" Abdes asked. "My centurion is across the way at the bath house. Let me—"

"I'm alright, lad," Gabriel said, as Abdes helped him stand. He leaned against Abdes for support, with no more weight to his form than a small child. Maryam had told Abdes that other people treated Gabriel cruelly and Abdes himself hadn't considered the old man more than a peculiar nuisance. Now, with evidence of his poor health and torment so apparent, Abdes felt stricken.

"They've done this to you before," Abdes whispered. "Haven't they?"

Gabriel nodded, pressing his hand lightly against Abdes' breastplate to steady himself. "They are young and poor," he said quietly. "And I'm old and even poorer. Perhaps I remind them of how they might one day be, and they're frightened by it."

He looked up at Abdes, and smiled. "You are Phoenician," he said softly. "By way of the Greeks."

Abdes blinked at him, startled. *Some people say he is a seer*, Maryam had told him. "How...how did you...?"

"Know?" Gabriel asked. "Maryam told me. She speaks of you often, lad, and quite fondly when I visit."

Abdes shook his head slightly, feeling foolish. For a moment, he'd been nearly dumbstruck; convinced, as Maryam obviously was, that Gabriel held some prophetic power. "Come with me, sir," he said gently. "Let's go to my centurion, and then we'll find the boys who did this to you. I saw their

faces and know one of them. His name is Jacob ben Lamech, and I—”

“Let them go,” Gabriel said. “They’re only children.”

“They assaulted you, sir,” Abdes said. “Children or not, what they did is a crime, and we—”

“Let them go,” Gabriel said, meeting Abdes’ gaze, drawing the young man to silence. “Whatever their crimes, it is the Almighty’s place to judge them, not mine or yours.”

He drew away from Abdes, standing unsteadily on his own. “I...I have distracted you from your duties,” he said. “I will see you in trouble, I’m sure. I thank you for your intercession, lad.”

“Wait,” Abdes said, as Gabriel limped toward the wall. His walking staff had fallen here. Abdes hurried toward it, stooping before Gabriel even attempted the feat and compromised what precious little balance he called his own at the moment. Abdes picked up the staff, offering it to Gabriel.

“Thank you, lad,” Gabriel said, curling his gnarled fingers slowly about the shaft. He turned, meaning to shuffle away again, and Abdes ducked in front of him, reaching beneath his breastplate for his money pouch.

“Wait, please,” he said, drawing Gabriel’s perplexed gaze. “If you won’t let me help you, then, please, at least...here...”

He took the four denarii from the pouch and pressed them against Gabriel’s hand. “Please,” Abdes said, as Gabriel opened his mouth to protest.

“I have nothing to offer you in return,” Gabriel said. “You have already been very kind, and this is all the more so...” He reached out, holding his palm up, returning the coins.

“Take them,” Abdes said, catching Gabriel’s hand with his own. He folded the old man’s fingers gently about the money. Maryam had told Abdes that Gabriel had no family or home. He relied on the proceeds from his small flock to feed himself, but it was obvious to Abdes from his tattered clothes,

his starved and withered figure that this was a meager living at best. Abdes was ashamed that he had thought badly of Gabriel simply because the old man was poor; he was all the more ashamed that the children had hurt him for no more than this same crime.

“Take them, sir,” Abdes said again. “You can repay me another time.”

Gabriel looked down at the coins and nodded once. He tucked the money beneath his mantle, reaching slowly for his girdle. He smiled at Abdes and patted his hand gently before leaning against his staff, limping toward the street again. “May the blessings of the Almighty be upon you, lad.”

Abdes watched him go, helpless to prevent him. “And...and to you, good sir,” he said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Jacob ben Lamech is following me,” Abdes told Ham three nights later. It was the evening of the Sabbath; with no work the following day, Ham had come to the citadel in the hopes of coaxing Abdes out for a night of wine and folly. He’d been rather disappointed to discover his brother in his small office, at work transcribing his daily records into reports.

“I’ve been keeping my eye out for him, and I’ve seen him everywhere, Ham,” Abdes said. “Ducking in and out of alleys behind us, tucked among the crowd in the markets, stealing along in the shadows each evening when Pulcher and I are walking back to the acropolis. I’ve seen him in the morning, too, creeping around the barrack.”

“Why would he follow you?” Ham asked. He sat slouched in a chair, with his legs extended, crossed at the ankles, his arms folded across his chest.

“I don’t know,” Abdes said, shaking his head. “I thought at first it was because they know who I am. But it doesn’t make sense. Judas has stood outside of this building and thrown himself headlong at the walls, his fist bared, screaming for Pantera. If he suspected me, he’d have come to me himself. He would have killed me by now. So if they don’t realize who I am, there must be some other purpose. They must be interested in me and Pulcher for some reason.”

“They?” Ham raised his brow.

Abdes looked at him for a long moment. “I think Judas ben Hezekiah is part of a conspiracy against Herod—and Rome,” he said.

Ham blinked at him. "What?"

Abdes nodded. "When I took the audit of the armory, I found two sets of equipment missing—a pair of helms, breastplates and weapons. They were accounted for two years ago and again this year, but not last—and they weren't signed out in between. I saw two men in Roman uniforms attacking that Jewish girl, Jobina. And while I was recovering here at the citadel, two men turned up murdered just outside of the city."

Ham's brows lifted sharply. "Lamech and Heth?" he asked, scooting himself upright in his chair. "You think Lamech and Heth ben Hezekiah raped and murdered the girl?"

"I saw them, Ham," Abdes said. "I remembered their faces. Two men with beards, like Jews, not Roman soldiers in those uniforms. They spoke to one another in Aramaic. I remembered—"

"No, you dreamed it, Abdes," Ham said, tapping his fingertip against his brow. "Dreams, not memories—like the Praefectus said. Lamech and Heth ben Hezekiah were honest men, peaceful artisans. Yoseph has told me that. They couldn't have done that."

"They could have if Judas put them to it," Abdes said. "He's zealous in speaking out against Herod and Rome—in using Jobina's murder to stir trouble among the Jews against us. I think he did it on purpose."

Ham stared at him for a long moment. "And how did Lamech and Heth get these uniforms?" he asked. "You said no one signed them out from the armory—and they're back again this year. Someone miscounted somewhere last year, that's all."

"It wasn't a miscount," Abdes said.

"Then what, Abdes?" Ham countered. "Someone in the armory's a part of this conspiracy? They just handed over uniforms to Lamech and Heth, and then rushed out to snatch them back once Lamech and Heth were dead?"

"I know how it sounds," Abdes said. "But I think it's true, Ham. I think Judas did it to set the urban cohort up to look incompetent, and against the Jews."

“Abdes, the cohort does that on its own,” Ham replied. “I haven’t been here more than a month, and it’s fairly apparent to me. What happened to you—and that girl—aside, the Romans still cheat the market vendors and let the aqueducts stand derelict and crumbling.”

“No, we don’t,” Abdes said, stiffening defensively. “The market vendors are the cheats—they set their scales wrong to make a higher profit.”

“And no one ever notices but Pulcher?” Ham said. “A thousand people surely file through that market every day. Don’t you think one of them might notice such a thing?”

Abdes blinked at him, caught off guard. He hadn’t thought much about that.

“And as for the aqueducts, Yoseph and I have talked about it,” Ham said. “He told me he’s heard tell Rome laid piss-rot lines through Galilee from the first. They used inexpensive, low-grade concrete, and now it’s all crumbling down. Every time they have to fix it, hundreds of people have to live off their cisterns and hope they don’t run out.”

“Judas ben Hezekiah took circumstances of ordinary tension—those circumstances you’re describing, Ham—and he made them worse by getting Lamech and Heth to attack that girl,” Abdes said. “He didn’t expect me to blunder upon them in the middle of it, or for me to live through my wounds, I’m sure. Now that rumors blame Pantera for it—and peg him alive, incarcerated in this citadel, Judas know he can’t very well be committing other rapes and murders in Sepphoris. I’m telling you he’s behind this. He needed something else—anything—to keep that tension stirred.”

“And I’m telling you you’re wrong, Abdes,” Ham said. “Jews don’t like Romans. Judas ben Hezekiah didn’t create that conflict, Abdes, and he sure as Astarte’s right breast didn’t have to exacerbate it.”

“The more accusations he can level against Rome—we let the aqueducts fall apart; we cheat the vendors at the market—the worse that that conflict is. The best way to make sure we keep issuing fines for cheating at the market, Ham, is

to warrant them—for the merchants to deliberately set the scales wrong.”

“Hundreds of merchants,” Ham said. “And you said Pulcher changed his inspection schedule—he doesn’t keep a schedule anymore. He checks them randomly. So hundreds of merchants misalign their scales at any given time, just waiting for Pulcher to come by and inspect them? And none of their customers—a thousand people at least every day—ever notice they’re paying too much to get too little?”

“And when they’re eventually inspected, their fraud revealed, it serves no purpose,” Ham added. “Pulcher fines them—heavily. They have to close their stall or shop until reinspection for compliance. That cuts into their profits—their purses. Do you really think they’d do that because Judas ben Hezekiah—a scribe who makes less in wages than I do—asked them to?”

“If not Judas, then someone else with him,” Abdes said. “Someone with the purse to make it worth the merchants’ while, Ham.” Ham raised an expectant brow. “Zadduc,” Abdes said. “The Pharisee priest.”

“The Pharisee priest who’s a member of the Sanhedrin?”

“He’s led demonstrations at the citadel,” Abdes said. “He’s a wealthy man—one of the wealthiest in the city.”

“And why would a wealthy priest of the Sanhedrin participate in a conspiracy against Herod or Rome orchestrated by his scribe?” Ham asked.

Abdes was running out of arguments rather quickly. A knotted feeling had begun to twist in his gut. He had thought he’d put some consideration and thoughts into his ideas—and they had all made perfect, incontrovertible sense within his mind until Ham had just soundly rebuked nearly all of them.

Gods above, what have I done? he thought, looking toward his desk. Part of the reason he was still working on his transcriptions at such a late hour was because the first several hours in his office that evening had been spent putting all of his suspicions onto papyrus. He had spared nothing; he had

outlined his entire conspiracy theory—including brazenly implicating Zadduc, Judas and his brothers in the affair.

His stomach turned a bit more, tightening slowly, like a damp rag being squeezed dry. *I am an idiot*, he thought.

“Then why would Jacob ben Lamech be following me?” he asked Ham, without looking at him. Ham had all of the answers, it seemed.

“Because you’re a Roman soldier who made himself accessible,” Ham said quietly, gently. “You were nice to him and his friends, Abdes. You know their language; you talked to them, let his friends approach you, play with your armor. You were nice to him. That probably defied everything the poor kid’s been brought up to think or expect from a Roman. I think he’s curious about you—and I think somewhere in his heart, the boy has taken a shine to you.”

Abdes closed his eyes, pressing his lips in a thin line. *I’m an idiot*, he thought again. Not only had he written all of his madcap ideas onto papyrus—he had sent them to the Praefectus’ office. He had been overeager, excited by the prospect of at last doing something right—beneficial, even—in Seneca’s regard. He had been too confident, and heedless of any consequences except for the one he imagined: Seneca’s praise. He had lost his wits, and he nearly cringed to imagine the Praefectus’ reaction to the scroll. He didn’t know if Seneca was still in his office to have received it already or not, but it was gone, routed through the citadel’s couriers, and Abdes had little hope of retrieving it.

Gods above, I just ruined myself, he thought, dismayed.

“I have heard Judas speak at the synagogue with Yoseph,” Ham said. “He’s not a bloodthirsty revolutionary to me. He’s a man who misses his brothers, and still grieves for them. They were all the family he had left—he loved them like I love you, Abdes.”

Abdes glanced at him, and then closed his eyes again, angry with himself.

"He's fervent about his god, and his god's promise to the Jews, sure," Ham said. "But he doesn't have anything left, Abdes. He doesn't have hope in much else."

He rose to his feet and walked around the writing table. "It was a good thought," he said. "But I think you're looking too hard for answers. I think you're trying too hard to impress the Praefectus."

Abdes opened his eyes and Ham smiled. "He's not Father," he said, and Abdes blinked at him, breathless all at once.

"This has nothing to do with Father," he whispered.

Ham nodded in gentle concession. "Alright," he said. "But you're trying to please the Praefectus, just like you always tried so hard to please Father—a man whom neither of us could please, no matter what we did, or how hard we tried. I learned that long ago, and I tried to make you understand, but you..." He touched Abdes' face, pressing his palm against his brother's cheek. "He put you to unfair tests—set standards so high, Abdes, no man on this earth could please him, but you always tried. And when it changed nothing, you blamed yourself. It was never you, Abdes. It was never your fault."

Abdes felt the sting of shamed tears in his eyes. He looked away from Ham, his brows narrowing as he struggled against them.

"Father was cruel to you, Abdes, and he was wrong to make you feel like you were to blame," Ham said. "You are a good brother. You were a good son to him—whether he realized it or not—and you are a good man. Don't worry about pleasing the Praefectus or anyone else. Please yourself, Abdes. The rest will fall into line from there."

Gods above, Ham, I wish that was true, Abdes thought, stricken. *Seneca may not be Father, but he'll come around to Moloch's way of thinking—if he hasn't already when it comes to me. I've ruined it, Ham.*

He went to Salome after Ham left. He abandoned his work unfinished and did not even go to his barrack to remove

his armor before going into the city. He felt numb with dismay, stricken with despair. He wanted her; he wanted the simple comfort of her company.

“You’re in uniform tonight,” she said, smiling as he approached her at the tugurium.

“Have you time for me?” he asked.

Her smile widened and she hooked her hand against his shoulder, drawing him in step as she backed into her cell. “We’ll leave the armor on.”

“Stay with me,” he said.

She had taken him wildly, as if the sight of his armor had inspired something eager and relentless within her. She had driven him to a massive climax; she had clasped him by the hair and wrenched his head back as it had come upon him, and he had arched his back from the stone wall behind him, crying out hoarsely, desperately in release.

She meant to leave him now; it was her habit, and it broke his heart. He had let everything go; all of his day’s frustrations and fears had waned at her touch, her kiss, and he was loathe to part with her. He reached for her, catching her by the hand as she stood. “Please,” he said. “Please don’t go.”

She must have seen it in his eyes, his sorrow and uncertainty, because she smiled, her face softening with that hidden, inner sweetness. “Alright,” she whispered.

She straddled him again, nothing provocative in the posture this time. She held him, slipping her arms around him and drawing his head against her shoulder. She kissed his hair, brushing her fingertips lightly against the back of his neck, his shoulders. “What is wrong?” she asked softly.

He closed his eyes, drawing the wondrous, soothing fragrance of her skin against his nose. He didn’t answer her; he couldn’t. He trembled, tucked against her, comforted by her.

“Did I not please you?” Salome asked, her voice fragile and quiet, a tremulous insecurity within that he’d never

heard before. He looked up and realized she was afraid; she was frightened by his silence and thought she was to blame.

“No,” he whispered, shaking his head. “Gods no, Salome. You’re one of the only things in my life that does please me.”

She smiled at this, not a prostitute affecting dutiful charms, but a nearly shy smile; that of the eighteen-year-old girl she kept hidden deep inside of her. “Then what is it?” she said. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

He looked at her for a long moment, his brows lifted. “How much is your father’s debt to Menachem?”

She blinked at him, that momentary innocence fading as fleetingly as it had come upon her. “More than a Roman soldier’s salary can afford,” she said. “Why? Would you remit in my stead if you could? Would you buy me away from my pander, Abdes?”

He closed his eyes, lowering his face, letting his hands fall away from her. “I would give him ten-thousandfold if I could,” he whispered.

She drew him against her, touching his hair. He pressed his cheek against her shoulder and trembled against her. *I’m sorry I’ve failed you, too*, he thought.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Abdes spent the Sabbath day keeping as low a profile about the citadel as he could. Pulcher was visibly surprised—and impressed—to discover him on time for their customary meeting, and Abdes tended to all of his daily drudgery without complaint. He hadn't wanted to draw any attention to himself whatsoever and had spent the day in a state of stricken, tremulous anxiety, dreading that at any moment Pulcher would open his mouth and tell him Seneca had summoned him to his office—post haste. He'd known one fleeting moment of bright, frantic alarm to see the light still aglow in the Praefectus' office window upon his return to the citadel that evening. He had darted to his own cramped office, collected his scrolls and ink, and transcribed his reports at his barrack, terrified of encountering Seneca.

He planned to spend the day following the Sabbath in exactly the same fashion—and every day thereafter, in the desperate hope that if he just kept from Seneca's sight, he would likewise keep from the Praefectus' mind, and the whole disgracing matter of his report—and all of the nonsensical hypotheses he had so foolishly set to ink—would simply fade unnoticed and unmentioned.

And so, on the morning following the Sabbath, he stood beyond the citadel steps well before dawn, pacing restlessly back and forth, waiting for Pulcher. When he caught sight of Maryam, a diminutive silhouette moving among shadows, approaching the citadel, he pressed his lips together to stifle a groan. He was always late when he met with Maryam; the last thing he wanted was to rouse Pulcher's disapproval and

risk the centurion addressing the matter of his lacking punctuality—yet another flaw, a miserable failing—with the Praefectus.

He walked toward Maryam, meaning to intercept her on the grounds, to tell her he couldn't meet with her that morning, or for some time to come. It would pain him to do so, and it would probably hurt her feelings, but he couldn't help it. He had already invited so much trouble upon himself, he couldn't afford any more.

"Maryam," he said. She quickened her pace at his beckon, clutching the drapes of her mantle against her throat. "Maryam, I cannot..."

She stopped in front of him, looking up, and he paused, his words of rebuke, gently intended in his mind, stilled in his throat. She was wide-eyed, her breath fluttering—not from any exertion, but from fright. "What is it?" he asked, startled and alarmed. "Maryam, what's wrong?"

"I have to talk to you, Abdes," she whispered, her eyes darting about anxiously. She reached for him, hooking his arm. "Please, Abdes, I...I don't know who else to talk to. Yoseph thinks I'm being ridiculous, and maybe I am, but I..."

She was more than anxious; she was nearly frantic. He'd never seen her in such a state before, and he forgot his own problems and concerns; they were obliterated from his mind with sudden, bright worry. "Maryam, what is it?" he asked, drawing her in tow, leading her toward the barrack.

"Men came yesterday," she whispered, looking around, unsettled and wary. "Men came from the east, to our house. Twelve of them...three were elders, they said."

He guided her into their usual antechamber, but when he tried to ease her into sitting against the bench, she pulled away from him, shaking her head. "They came about the baby, Abdes," she said, and he stiffened, his eyes widening.

"What?"

"They said they saw something," she whispered. "A sign in the sky and they went to Jerusalem, to see the king. They gave us things. The three elders had gifts for us, they

said...one for a king...one for a prophet, another for a healer, and they..." She stepped near to him, clasping his arm. "I've been thinking about what I told you."

"Maryam, calm down," he said softly, touching her face. "You're upset. Sit down, please. Sit with me. What about the baby? Is Yeshua alright?"

She shook her head once, a shudder traveling through her slight form. He saw tears in her eyes, and then she gasped softly, her hand darting against her mouth. "I don't know," she said.

Abdes drew her against him, and she clutched at him. "I'm scared, Abdes," she whimpered.

He didn't understand. She was rambling disjointedly, her words confusing and frightening him. "Maryam, sit with me," he said, drawing her in tow, sitting so that she had no other recourse than to follow suit. "Where is Yeshua now? Where's your son?"

"At my mother's," she whispered, sniffing, blinking against tears. "He's with my mother."

"Is he sick?" Abdes asked, and she shook her head. "Is he hurt?" She shook her head again, and he blinked, bewildered. "I don't understand, Maryam."

"I don't either," she said, shaking her head, staring down at her lap.

He leaned toward her, his proximity drawing her gaze. "Breathe for me," he whispered. "Breathe for me, Maryam, and then start from the first. Tell me what's happened."

She nodded, hiccupping for breath. She tucked her head against his shoulder, trembling, and he lowered his face, pressing his cheek against her temple. "Breathe for me," he said softly, and she nodded again. He heard her draw in a deep breath, releasing it in a shuddering sigh. She did this several times, until he felt the tension in her wane, until her sniffing faded and she seemed somewhat composed.

"When I first found out that I was pregnant, I was sent to my aunt, Elizabeth's home in Rimmon," she said

quietly. Rimmon was a small village north of Sepphoris, west of the Sea of Galilee, only slightly larger than Nazareth. “I told you that Gabriel knew. He knew it from the first.”

Abdes nodded. “You told me, yes,” he said.

“Elizabeth knew, too,” Maryam said. “I thought Gabriel must have told her. He comes to her, too, when he brings his flock to the north, and she feeds him. And when I arrived in Rimmon...when I was walking up to her house, she opened her door like she’d been expecting me. But she didn’t know I was coming. We hadn’t sent her any word. I was going to explain when I got there.

“She was pregnant herself—it was her first, too. She is older than my mother, and it...everyone had said for so long that she was barren, but my mother told me the Almighty had blessed her for her faithfulness. John was born...he is Elizabeth’s son...six months before Yeshua, so Elizabeth was far along when I arrived. And she opened her door and smiled just as if she’d known all the while I was coming—and why. She told me I was blessed. Blessed among women, she said. I...I was scared, Abdes. It was all so new to me, and I...”

Her voice faltered and she blinked down at her hands. “She knew,” Maryam whispered.

“Gabriel told her?” Abdes asked, and Maryam shook her head.

“I asked her and she told me he hadn’t,” Maryam said, looking up at him, new tears swimming in her eyes. “She told me she knew because she...because she felt her baby move inside of her as I drew near. He’d kicked her mightily, like he’d never before—that’s what she told me. And she said that was when she knew.”

Abdes shook his head slightly. “Maryam,” he said. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to...”

“Yeshua wasn’t born in Nazareth,” Maryam said. “And he wasn’t born in Bethlehem, either. When Yoseph brought me for the registration. I’d been having pains, and they came upon me terribly along the way. They were so bad, I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t walk. I...I couldn’t even sit up on

the donkey. Yoseph had to carry me..." Her lips trembled, her tears rolling slowly down her cheeks. "He drew me off the donkey in his arms and there was a little cave nearby. We were in lower Galilee, the hills...the middle of the night...and he brought me there. He told me he was going to ride ahead and find a village—a midwife. He was so scared, and I...Abdes, I was, too."

She took his hand, her fingers closing fiercely against him. "I had the baby while he was gone," she whispered. "I was all alone there...I..."

"Gods above, Maryam," Abdes gasped, stricken. He couldn't imagine the terror and pain she must have suffered, alone in some alcove in the lower hills, in the dead of night and all alone. Galilee was filled with nocturnal predators; lions, panthers, bears. His brows furrowed to think that Yoseph had left Maryam alone in the wilderness in such a state, no matter his fear or uncertainty.

"I remember when Yeshua came," she said. "I could look beyond the cave entrance...it was shallow inside, and I could see the sky. I could see the stars." She pulled back from him, and he was confused to realize she was smiling, despite her tears. "It was so beautiful. I could see it right in front of me...overhead, in the sky. It was like all of the stars had come together, gathering into one, and it was brighter than the moon. It was like a sign to me—like John kicking Elizabeth when I arrived in Rimmon."

He had yet to grasp what she was trying to tell him; why any of this—so long ago in the past—would see Maryam so distraught and disturbed. "I don't understand."

"I've been thinking about what you said," she whispered. "What you asked me, Abdes. My father...I told you about his back, how he hurt it." Abdes nodded, utterly bewildered. "That day you saw us in the market—before you brought Ham to Nazareth. Do you remember?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Of course I do, Maryam. But I—"

"We were bringing the baby to my father's house. He couldn't bear to move. He couldn't even ride by donkey to

Nazareth to see him. Two days later, he arrived at my door. He'd walked, Abdes—from Sepphoris to Nazareth, and two days before, he couldn't even sit up in his bed."

She looked at Abdes. "His back has never hurt him since. I'd worried for him, helping Yoseph like he had, but it never bothered him. Not at all. He told me he felt like a young man again."

He blinked at her, realizing the common thread in her seemingly unrelated stories. "You think your father saw Yeshua, and it healed him."

She lowered her gaze. "I know how it sounds," she said. "Yoseph told me I'm imagining things. He was angry with Gabriel and Elizabeth. He said they put these ideas in my head. And then yesterday, when the men came to visit us, Yoseph wouldn't even speak to them. He was going to send them away, but I..."

"Maryam," Abdes said softly. She seemed so fragile to him all at once in her tearful state, he felt his heart nearly cleave with the desperate need to make things right for her; to say something that would ease her fears. He was inclined to agree with Yoseph on this one, however, and was at a confounded loss as to what to say.

"It's the seventy-seventh generation," she said, trembling again, and with that, Abdes understood in full what had upset her, why she was so stricken.

"You think Yeshua is the Messiah," he said, and she nodded. "Maryam, that...that's..." *That's superstitious nonsense*, he wanted to tell her, but then he closed his mouth, his eyes widening. Ham had considered Abdes' conspiracy ideas to be no less nonsensical than Maryam's sudden horror that her son was some sort of prophesized Messiah. Maryam was as convinced in her delusions as Abdes had been of his own, and he didn't have the heart to rebuke her harshly. Ham had debunked him as gently as he'd been able, and Abdes would show Maryam no less than this tender consideration.

“Maryam, Yeshua is a baby,” he said, leaning toward her. “He’s a beautiful baby—a sweet and lovely child born to one of the sweetest, most lovely women I know.”

She blinked at him, her lashes damp with tears, her eyes glossy. The corners of her mouth fluttered upward at this, as she tried to smile at him.

“What happened to your father, with your aunt, it’s a coincidence, Maryam,” he said. “That’s all.”

“But...but I...” she whimpered. He pressed his fingertips lightly against her mouth to stay her voice.

“It’s a coincidence, Maryam,” he said. “Look at me. Trust me, Maryam. It’s a coincidence. There’s nothing mystical or magical in it. Your baby is a blessing—he’s a wonderful gift to you and Yoseph from your god, but you’re looking too hard for answers.” *We’ve both been*, he thought. “Yeshua is only a baby.”

She blinked at him, tears welling again. “Please don’t be frightened,” he whispered. “Please don’t cry. You’ll break my heart, Maryam.”

She gasped softly, closing her eyes. When he drew her near, she huddled against him, her breath fluttering against his throat. “I’m sorry,” she said, and he kissed her brow.

“It’s alright,” he whispered. “I promise you, Maryam—with all that I have, I promise you. It’s alright.”

Abdes caught sight of a figure striding across the grounds from the citadel toward his barrack as he and Maryam parted company. The sun had only just barely graced the horizon, a pale glow infusing through the overhanging clouds, and the man was little more than a silhouette to Abdes’ eyes. As he took notice of Abdes, his stride quickened noticeably, purposefully, and Abdes froze in midstep, aghast.

I’m not late! he wanted to cry at Pulcher. *It’s not even dawn in full yet!*

He steeled himself for Pulcher’s disapproval; his concept of punctuality and the centurion’s had never meshed,

and there would be no arguing. He lowered his gaze to the ground, his shoulders tensed, his posture rigid with anxiety.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said as the centurion drew near. "I didn't mean—"

"Abdes, gods above, where have you been?" Mallus said, and Abdes looked up in start as the tribune caught him by the arm. "I've been looking for you since yesterday morning. I thought something had happened!"

At Mallus' stricken expression, the shrill worry in his voice, Abdes shied back a step, bewildered. "Happened, sir...?"

"Are you alright?" Mallus whispered. He walked again, drawing Abdes in abrupt and brisk tow back toward the barrack. He looked all around them, his brows narrowed as he took into account the cohort infantrymen filing past them toward the citadel.

"I'm fine, sir," Abdes said, utterly confused. Mallus drew him into the barrack, and immediately into the antechamber Abdes had only just vacated. He spared another darting glance around the corridor and then turned to face Abdes in full. He looked angry to Abdes, his brows furrowed deeply, and Abdes stepped back uncertainly against the wall.

"You weren't at your office last night. I looked all over, but no one had seen you," Mallus said, his voice deliberately hoarse and hushed, as if he feared someone walking by would overhear. "I thought Seneca had found you, broken his word to me. I thought..."

He was obviously distressed, but Abdes' was baffled by his words: *broken his word to me*. "I...I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I... I haven't..."

Mallus stepped toward him, closing the space unexpectedly between them. "Are you alright?" his whispered. "Have you spoken with Seneca? Has he said anything to you?"

Mallus was angry with him over the report. Abdes had just ruined the one true ally he'd known among the officers of the cohort—the only man who had thought him even remotely

competent. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I don't know where my mind was, sir. It was a mistake. Please, sir, I didn't mean it."

Mallus blinked at him, puzzled. "What are you talking about? Did Seneca send for you? What did he say to you?"

"Nothing, sir," Abdes said, shaking his head. "I knew he'd be mad for it, sir, so I deliberately tried to keep away yesterday. I had hoped he might forget about it, that he didn't see me, he might..."

Mallus looked so suddenly and immensely relieved that Abdes' voice faltered and faded. "I'm sorry, sir," he said again, hesitantly.

Mallus laughed, a quiet sound that shuddered through him, as if he shrugged off some tremendous and terrible tension. "You always say that," he said. "You always think I've come to scold you somehow. Gods above, Abdes, I was worried for you—not angry, lad. You had me frightened nearly witless."

It was Abdes' turn to be puzzled. "I don't understand, sir," he said. "Isn't this about my report? The scroll I sent to the Praefectus?"

"Of course it is," Mallus said. "Why didn't you come to me first, Abdes? Talk to me about this—about what you'd found?"

"You read my report, sir?" Abdes asked.

"Yes, I read it—though it took more than three sextaria of neat wine down Seneca to slip it from his notice a moment," Mallus said. "I came upon him in his office in the dead of the Sabbath's first night—drunk and rambling, pacing and furious. He wouldn't tell me why he was so upset, and I didn't understand until he fell asleep and I took the scroll from his hand."

Abdes' eyes widened in aghast. It was worse than he thought; not only was Seneca furious with him—he had raved about it, seen himself drunk with aggravation over it. *Oh, gods*, he thought. He had feared a harsh admonishment, some assignment to some grueling, loathsome task in punishment, but if the Praefectus was that angry, it would be lashes for

him—a violent flogging on the citadel grounds until his spine was torn open, he knew it.

“What proof do you have?” Mallus asked. “Your report was lengthy—what proof have you found for any of it?”

“No proof, sir,” Abdes said quietly. “Just...it...the report was only my own suppositions, sir. My observations, and I...I only meant—”

“Why didn’t you come to me?” Mallus asked again. He turned and walked away from Abdes, sighing heavily. “It doesn’t matter. The gods were with us, I think—they must have been. I found out in time to do something, to still have some hope, I think.” He glanced at Abdes over his shoulder. “You’ve been appointed to the archery decury of my century. I convinced him to approve it.”

Abdes blinked at him, surprised and bewildered anew. “Assigned to you, sir?” he asked, and Mallus nodded.

“I told him I could channel that curious energy of yours in directions that will benefit him,” Mallus said, walking back toward him. “Don’t worry—he’s approved and Pulcher knows. I’ve been trying to find you ever since I got the writ in my hand.”

He clapped his hand against Abdes’ shoulder, his stern expression softening into a smile. “You’ve been working for me all the while,” he whispered. “You don’t realize it, and I didn’t either—not until I saw that scroll. Gods above, in one night you brought to my attention things I have missed in nearly a year’s worth of effort.”

Abdes blinked at him, stunned and nearly reeling. “You agree with me, then?” he whispered. “You think I’m right?”

“Agree with you?” Mallus arched his brow. “Abdes, I am humbled by you—I’m shamed that I’ve been so oblivious to what was so readily apparent to you. You gave me what I’ve hoped for all the while—plain before my eyes, but missed altogether because I was so overwhelmed with my investigation.”

Abdes damn near fell to the ground. “You don’t have proof,” Mallus said. “But we can get it. I know we can—tangible evidence to support your claims. We’ll have to work fast—we can discuss it along the way. Come with me to the quartermaster. We’ll have to requisition your gear to travel.”

“Travel, sir?” Abdes asked. “Where are we going?”

“Bethlehem,” Mallus told him. “Southeast of Jerusalem.”

“I don’t understand, sir,” Abdes said. “Why are you going to Bethlehem? Has something happened?”

Mallus nodded, leaning near to him, his expression drawing gravely. “Something indeed,” he whispered. “At least, we’ve heard rumor of it—and if it’s true, you and I are running out of time.” He glanced toward the threshold and then back at Abdes. “Word has reached us that last week, Herod sent his troops to Bethlehem,” he breathed. “They had implicit orders from the king, or so we’ve been told. I’m to verify those orders.”

Abdes looked at him, puzzled, and Mallus leaned closer, canting his face to speak in a hush against Abdes’ ear. “Herod ordered children killed,” he said, and Abdes stiffened, his breath caught in a sharp hiss through his teeth, his eyes flying wide. “Every child in Bethlehem under the age of two.”

“Why?” Abdes whispered.

“I don’t know,” Mallus said grimly. “But if it’s true, it will see every Jew in Judea up in arms, and it will prove to Caesar that Herod is mad enough to warrant deposing. Either way, we’ve run out of time.”

He stepped back, meeting Abdes’ gaze. “If the Jews revolt, we’ll be too late,” he said. “And if Herod is deposed, we’ll have no one to present our evidence to except for Caesar himself—and Caesar won’t prove an ally in these circumstances, I think.”

“What do you mean?” Abdes asked. “Why?” He realized almost as soon as he had spoken; Mallus had kept

speaking about Seneca as if he had some reason to be alarmed by the Praefectus.

As if he knows something about the Praefectus, Abdes thought and he drew back, stumbling against the wall, his eyes wide and aghast. “Seneca?” he whispered. “The Praefectus is a part of it?”

He had suspected someone in the urban cohort was involved in the conspiracy; in his report, though, he’d named Pertinax and his decury at the armory. The decurion had seemed wary enough during Abdes’ audit and his entire staff had treated Abdes with undisguised hostility. The only argument he’d brought against this in his own mind was the fact that Pertinax was only a decurion—a junior officer—and that Seneca had ultimate review of his inventory reports. Abdes hadn’t been able to figure out why Pertinax hadn’t done more to keep Abdes from realizing the missing equipment, and bringing it to Seneca’s attention, because the decurion could have easily altered the ledgers if he’d felt he had something to hide. He’d been angry and boorish to Abdes during the audit, but he’d done nothing obstructive. Abdes had wondered why.

And now I know, Abdes thought. *Pertinax didn’t have anything to hide, but Seneca did. I found it—and brought it right to his attention.* He shook his head in mute denial. *It can’t be true! Not the Praefectus.*

Mallus stepped against him, catching his arm, his expression equally stricken. “You don’t know how it pains me to even think that,” he gasped softly. “Gods above, Abdes, he’s my friend. There have been days in my past when I would have died for Marcus Seneca—until yesterday, I had felt in my heart I would still die for him.”

“But why?” Abdes said. “Why would he be a part of anything like this? He’s a hero, sir. He nearly died at Actium—in Germania, with you, sir, he...he took up the standard at the front lines and bore it at the charge.”

“And he sacrificed for that heroism, Abdes,” Mallus said. “More than he meant to—maybe more than he would have readily given, had the choice been his to make. His left side is nearly lame—you have seen him limp for it, lad, I’m

sure, but there's worse than that. He told me once that no matter the longing in his heart for a woman—no matter how beautiful or supple, even if she lay before him with her thighs wide and her breath bated eagerly—his form will not answer. He is ruined for it. What need does a man have for a wife, for the gentle ambitions of a family, if he cannot rise to please her? Cannot give Rome sons in his stead? No, lad. Seneca's heart is bitter and hardened now, his only desire, for power. He's not satisfied with what he's found here, or in Germania. He wants more. Last year, Caesar appointed a new legatus to Syria..."

Abdes nodded. "Varus, sir," he said. Ham had written to Varus, this new imperial legatus whom, protesting Moloch's will.

"Distant kin to Caesar, by benefit of marriage," Mallus said, arching his brow. "Caesar rewards those with whom he keeps fond acquaintance."

"You said the Praefectus is friends with Caesar," Abdes said, and Mallus nodded.

"I've watched him all of the years, how he's used it to his advantage. I've served Caesar four years longer than Seneca has—first among his Praetorian Guard and then again as his equal when he first joined the Fifth Alaudae in Germania. How do you think he's risen above me in the ranks? He presses Caesar for it."

Mallus lowered his head, his expression pained. "I have always thought it, but how do you ask your friend about such things?" he asked, anguished. "And so I've kept with him—his advances have benefited me, too; I won't lie. But now I know—I understand, Abdes. Your line of thinking in your report prompted my own, and for two nights, I haven't slept, Abdes. I have kept awake and tried to come up with any answer—anyone to blame—but Seneca."

He met Abdes' gaze. "If Caesar deposes Herod, he'll claim this region in full for Rome," he said. "Seneca knows that—he keeps in touch with Caesar; he keeps him abreast of Herod's activities. It's in his best interest to."

If Caesar takes Judea from King Herod, I'd just wager Seneca holds some hope that he'll see himself made a new legatus, too, the armory decurion, Pertinax had snapped when he'd learned of Abdes' audit.

"He thinks Caesar will name him legatus of Herod's lands—of Judea, like he appointed Varus over Syria," Abdes said. "Gods above, he is helping stir the Jews to revolt because he's setting them up. He'll get them to revolt and then he'll kill them all—he'll defeat them, and then when Caesar takes care of Herod..."

"...whose name would be freshest upon his mind?" Mallus whispered, nodding. "Marcus Vergilius Seneca—his bravest legionary legatus, who stood for Octavius during the great battle of Actium, who bore the standard of Rome and nearly gave his life for it, who turned back the Jewish revolt and saved Sepphoris for Rome."

Abdes stared at him, shocked and reeling. *Gods above, and I just handed him a report letting him know I suspect the whole thing,* he thought, dismayed. "My report...!" he gasped at Mallus.

"It's alright," Mallus said, shaking his head.

"But I put everything I suspected in there, sir. I named people—Judas ben Hezekiah and Zadduc. I named them, sir, and he knows that I know," Abdes said.

"But you didn't suspect him," Mallus said. "You're still alive because of that—do you understand, Abdes? You're still alive because you wrote that you thought someone in the cohort was involved—someone in the quartermaster's decury. If Seneca thought even for a moment you were aware of him—that we're aware of him, lad—he would kill us both."

Abdes blinked at the tribune, ashen and aghast.

"So we have to keep this quiet, trusted between us, Abdes, until we find our evidence—something incontrovertible even Caesar can't doubt," Mallus said. "Seneca doesn't think I know a thing. He doesn't know I read through the scroll. He thinks he can still trust me—he thinks assigning you to my charge will keep you under the wing of someone he can count on to prevent you from finding out about him. You're too

dangerous to remain with Pulcher now—you had access to too many things through him.”

“What will we do, sir?” Abdes asked.

Mallus pressed his hand against Abdes’ shoulder. “We’ll stop them,” he whispered. “I don’t know how, but I’ll find a way. With your help, Abdes, if you would give it to me?”

Abdes nodded. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Of course I will, sir.”

Mallus smiled at him. “Then our efforts are already blessed,” he said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mallus' entire century was set to march south across Galilee and into the province of Judea for Bethlehem. The tribune requisitioned the full regalia of an infantry archer for Abdes, and he traded in his leather breastplate and uniform tunic for the long-hemmed red tunic and mail shirt of these supplementing decury. Pertinax himself signed over the implements and recurve composite bow to Abdes for his duties, and watched from beneath pinched brows as Abdes curled his hand experimentally about the hewn wood grip, and drew slightly back against the bowstring, admiring the pull.

"You're the one who out-shot the whole damn archery outfit last year," Pertinax said, and Abdes glanced at him. He anticipated derision from the decurion; no pleasantries had ever been exchanged between them before, and he didn't expect any now. To his surprise, Pertinax uttered a little snort and what might have passed for a smile. "Didn't know you were that pup," he muttered, looking down and recording the equipment in a wax tablet with deliberate care observed solely for Abdes' benefit. "I won a pair of denarii off you that day."

"Did you, sir?" Abdes asked, as Pertinax handed him a stocked quiver. He shrugged it over his shoulder as Pertinax recorded the loan.

"I did indeed," Pertinax remarked. It was the closest he'd ever come to offering anything remotely amicable in Abdes' regard. It was probably as good as he could muster and Abdes lowered his head, smiling despite himself.

Mallus' century had gathered on the grounds of the citadel by the time Abdes left the building to join them. The soldiers stood in tight rank and file, their heavy gear strapped and bundled, hefted against their shoulders and spines with wooden posts. Ten served as Mallus' optios over the columns; these were equestrian officers astride horses, flanking the rear of the company. There was a supplementing decury of ten archers under Mallus' command, easily distinguished from their infantry fellows by their distinctive uniforms and dome-shaped helms. Abdes walked to join them, and was intercepted by Mallus, who called out in beckon, leading a horse by the reins across the yard.

"Are you ready?" Mallus said.

"Decurion Pertinax didn't have a pack for me, sir," Abdes said. "He told me my supplies had already been requisitioned."

"Yes," Mallus nodded. "And strapped to your saddle." He eased the horse forward, tugging lightly against the reins, and Abdes blinked in surprised wonder at the animal. It wasn't the typical, burly, barrel-chested variety of the Roman cavalry, as exemplified by the strapping horses the optios sat astride. It was a lean, muscular, long-legged stallion with fine hooves, standing no more than fifteen hands high. Its silky, mottled grey coat was complemented by a darker mane and tail. Its wide nostrils fluttered as it turned its dark, bright eyes toward Abdes, its ears perking as he drew near enough for his scent to reach it.

"It's a Nabataean," Mallus said, his tone apologetic. Nabataeans were indigenous to the middle east, the primary breed of choice both for labor and transport in Syria, Judea and Arabia. Riders from the western empire didn't favor them, however; a Nabataean was a sharp-witted horse, often proving intelligent enough to demonstrate a rather willful inclination toward self-preservation—and fared poorly in battle because of it. "Have you ridden before?"

"Oh, yes, sir," Abdes said, his voice soft, his eyes fixed and fascinated on the horse. He lifted his palms, smiling as the stallion snuffled against them, its velveteen lips wrinkling as it

gummed hopefully for a treat. "It has been some time, but I think I can manage."

"His name is Kohailain," Mallus said. "Arabian for 'good.' I've been told by the grooms that it's a well-suited name."

Kohailain turned the attentions of its fuzzy lips toward Abdes' face, nuzzling him lightly, curiously. Nabataeans were gentle by nature, astute enough to feel the same fond protectiveness and possessiveness towards their riders as they exhibited for themselves. Kohailain seemed to understand that Abdes would be his rider for the moment, and made his acquaintance in its own fashion.

"You mean for me to ride, sir?" Abdes asked Mallus, thinking surely the tribune was having a little light-hearted humor at his expense. "But what of the others, sir? The archery decury..."

"I'm setting you over them," Mallus said, and Abdes' eyes widened. Mallus raised his brow and the corner of his mouth in wry tandem. "Can you handle that, lad? Decurion of your own column?"

Abdes blinked over his shoulder toward the ten archers. They were all clearly seasoned veterans of other archery auxiliaries. Most boasted the deep olive complexions of native Syrians or Arabs. They were also all significantly older than Abdes—the youngest among them from Abdes' perfunctory observation was his senior by at least ten years. Mallus had just awarded Abdes an unexpected promotion to what was a coveted junior officer's position—and one for which any of these ten men was surely more qualified.

"You've out-shot them all before, Decurion," Abdes heard someone say from behind him. "And they know it well—every one of them. They've been told to expect you. They're looking forward to you teaching them a thing or two."

Abdes turned, and shied back an uncertain step to find Seneca walking toward him, his mouth unfolded in a deceptively warm smile. Abdes glanced anxiously at Mallus. "Praefectus, sir," he said hesitantly.

“Does the horse suit you?” Seneca asked, still smiling as he nodded toward Kohailain. “He’s Syrian. I bought him thinking you might be more accustomed to the breed. He’s fond to run, so rein him firmly past a canter until you get a feel for his stride. I’ve taken him out, let him stretch his legs a bit. He has a fine gait, steady with a smooth ride, even running open. I think you’ll be pleased with him.”

Abdes stared at him, bewildered. “I can keep him, sir?”

Seneca noticed his astounded expression, and chuckled, clapping his hand against Abdes’ shoulder. “You can and you will, lad,” he said, taking the reins from Mallus and offering them to Abdes. “It’s your due, and you’ve earned it. I’m not authorized to grant monetary bonuses without approval from Caesar, but I can find my own means when I feel duly inclined.”

Abdes blinked between the horse and the Praefectus. He curled his hand about the reins, taking them from Seneca. “Thank you, sir,” he said quietly.

“I’ve something else for you, too,” Seneca said. He carried a slim papyrus scroll tucked beneath his arm and held it out to Abdes. “It arrived to my attention this morning, but I believe its contents are best meant for you.”

“Sir?” Abdes asked, bewildered anew. He unfurled the scroll, his eyes flying wide as he skimmed the correspondence. He lost his breath somewhere between his sternum and his throat; the reins slipped from his hand, and he blinked up at Mallus and Seneca each in stunned turn. “I...it is from Legatus Varus,” he said, his voice hoarse with shock.

The letter was brief and to the point. Varus had received Ham’s petition to review Moloch’s will. While Varus had traveled to Jerusalem to investigate the contesting of King Herod’s amended will, he had appointed a separate investigator in Syria to address Ham’s complaint. Satisfied with whatever his investigator had discovered, Varus had overturned Moloch’s will. He’d authorized the reappropriation of Moloch’s assets among all three of his sons. Moloch’s home in Sidon, his business and associated properties remained with

Mago, while the rest—including several large vineyards, orchards and plantations outside of Sidon that Abdes had been wholly unaware of—were to be divided between Ham and Abdes. His financial proceeds from these lands were likewise to be divided between the two brothers; all total, they were each to receive money and property assets totaling four hundred and twenty-five milia sestertium—more than thirty times Abdes’ annual wages in the army.

“It will take several weeks before the funds are delivered,” Seneca told him, his voice seeming to come from a thousand leagues away to Abdes’ dazed and disbelieving mind. “That scroll is your promissory note, issued by the legatus, that you and your brother will need to present to claim them. It’s as good as silver in the meantime, lad, and you can borrow against it from the citadel treasury if either of you have any outstanding debts...?”

Abdes shook his head. “No,” he whispered. “No...no, sir, we...we don’t, sir.”

“Would you like me to see it held safe for you in the citadel vault?” Seneca asked.

Abdes managed to bob his head up and down in a clumsy semblance of a nod. “Yes, sir, thank...thank you, sir.”

He felt the strength in his knees wane, and he stumbled, feeling decidedly lightheaded and dizzy. The scroll fell from his hand, fluttering to the ground. He’d always known his father had been wealthy, of course; Moloch had been in his sixties when he died, and he’d owned his own business for more than thirty years. Moloch had always been tight-lipped when the matter came to his purse, however—especially when it involved Abdes and Ham. Abdes hadn’t understood the full breadth of his father’s cumulative wealth until that moment.

“Easy, lad,” Seneca said, draping his hand against Abdes’ shoulder to steady him. He smiled at the younger man, seeming pleased.

“I need to find my brother, sir,” Abdes whispered, blinking stupidly. He looked toward Mallus. “He...I...I should...he will need to know...”

"I'll see to that," Seneca said. He genuflected, lifting the fallen scroll in hand. "You have an appointment with Tribune Mallus to attend to, don't you?"

Abdes had completely forgotten. His shock had been so great and absolute, he could scarcely recount his own name at the moment. He blinked between Mallus and Seneca and then nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. "Thank you, Praefectus, sir, I...I would be very grateful."

Seneca nodded once, still smiling. "You're welcome, Decurion," he said.

"He didn't just receive that notice," Mallus said.

During the dry summer months, one could travel from Sepphoris to Bethlehem in as few as five days. It was winter, however, and their journey would take considerably longer. They had started off along the Via Maris highway from Sepphoris before diverting to secondary routes along the Jezreel plains. Once they had crossed through Samaria and into the province of Judea, they had entered a rough, hilly region to follow the Great Trunk highway south toward the village of Lod. From there, they were due to turn east along the Gibeon-Ayalon road, approaching the towns of Upper and Lower Beth Horon. It would mean traversing treacherous, sodden terrain; a natural expanse of marshlands that flooded during the rainy months of winter and early spring extending from the Beth Horons to the central Benjamin plateau in the southwest. It would be rough-going in those lowlands, and once past, they would divert southeast, circumventing Jerusalem—and Herod's notice—by crossing a broad valley basin. They would enter the hills south of Jerusalem to reach Bethlehem.

On the first night of their trek, they had set camp near the Gibeon-Ayalon junction. Mallus wanted his troops well-rested and hearty for the longest, most taxing portion of their journey. He and Abdes sat together by a fire. The other officers had gathered here in the warm circumference, and the tribune leaned his shoulder against Abdes', speaking softly.

"I can't prove it," he said, as Abdes blinked at him in surprise. "He's said nothing to me about it, but I'd be willing to wager. That scroll is a promissory note—Seneca could've very well meant to hold onto it himself, and use it to claim the money. He made mention of it to look good in your regard. He gave you that horse by the same token."

Abdes understood his inference and frowned. The only proof of Varus' promise was that scroll. If Seneca had never told Abdes about it, if he'd kept it for himself and taken the money, Abdes would never have been the wiser. "He doesn't want me suspicious of him at all," he murmured, and Mallus nodded. "It's like a bribe."

"I can't prove it," Mallus said again, raising his brow. He leaned back, taking a sip of wine from a cup he cradled against his palm. "But you've got him nervous, Abdes. Very nervous. Anything he can do to endear himself to you, he'll try."

"Unless he thinks I suspect him," Abdes said softly, looking at Mallus. "And then he'll see me dead."

Mallus tapped his cup against Abdes'. "Without a moment's hesitation, lad."

Abdes was unaccustomed to spending so many prolonged hours in a saddle, over such varying, rough terrain. His back, legs, hips and ass were woefully saddle-sore and strained. Though they would be underway again well before the dawn, roused by sharp horn blasts to call them into file, he doubted between his aching form and the disquiet in his mind that he'd find any sleep at all that night. Again and again, he found his thoughts turning toward his delirious recovery at the citadel; his memories of stirring to find Seneca with him, more times than he could clearly recount. It had seemed the Praefectus had kept a nearly constant vigil at his bedside, and whenever Abdes would rouse, he would be there. *It's alright, lad.*

He struggled to reconcile these memories—recollections of this man, a hero to Rome, a rumored descendant of a Spartan king deemed more a deity than a man by the benefit of ancient legends—and the realization that all

of his kindness, even that proffered most recently, had been nothing more than calculated manipulation. He'd played Abdes like a token on a game board nearly from the first.

"Why didn't he just let me die?" he whispered to Mallus, staring distantly into the fire, watching flames lap and snap against the wood. "When you found me, brought me to the citadel, why didn't he let me die from my wounds?"

"Who said he didn't want to?" Mallus asked, drawing Abdes' startled gaze. "Seneca didn't see you live, Abdes—you did that yourself. There's strength in you, lad. But if he hadn't made the effort once we knew you were a Roman citizen—if he hadn't done everything within his authority to see you tended to, he would have been questioned about it. He didn't expect you to survive. None of us did."

Abdes looked down at his wine. "Why didn't he let me take the blame when I did?" he asked. "About the girl, Jobina. If not the blame for it, why would he have told Zadduc and Judas ben Hezekiah that Pantera...that I've been incarcerated at the citadel? He could've easily told them who I was, that I was assigned to Pulcher, vulnerable on the streets. Why didn't he?"

"Because he doesn't give a damn about Zadduc and Judas ben Hezekiah," Mallus said. "He is manipulating them as surely as he has been you and me. He tells them what he wants them to know—what's in his best interest for them to know, and nothing more. Just like us. If something happened to you—if Judas ben Hezekiah attacked you on the streets and killed you, it would see the entire cohort on alert. He doesn't want that. If we're too wary, we become too aware."

Abdes considered this for a long moment. It made sense to him. If the cohort was on their guard, a Jewish revolt might be quelled before it even had the chance to develop fully, in which case, it would be nowhere near as beneficial to Seneca as an out and out rebellion crushed by force.

"I've been thinking today as we rode," he said quietly. He hadn't told Mallus that he'd shared his suspicions with Ham, but he had been diligently trying to refute those arguments Ham had proposed to his ideas. "Judas ben

Hezekiah must have known his brothers would be killed. Even if he didn't want it, either he or Zadduc ordered it once they realized I would survive their attack. They would have realized sooner or later, I'd remember their faces; that I'd recognize they weren't really Roman soldiers.

"I think his original idea was to use Lamech and Heth, the attack against Jobina, to instigate rebellion. With me as a witness—with Pantera supposedly imprisoned—and Lamech and Heth gone, he'd have to come up with something else to keep trouble stirred."

Mallus nodded. "Your ideas about the market scales and the aqueducts."

"I'd nearly talked myself out of those," Abdes said. "It didn't make sense. Pulcher doesn't keep a set schedule for his inspections anymore. If the vendors don't know when he's coming, it would mean they'd have to keep their scales misaligned for an indeterminate amount of time—hundreds of them all at once. They couldn't get away with that very long, not with all of the foot traffic and customers in the market. Someone would notice and complain."

"You said the boy, Jacob ben Lamech's been following you closely," Mallus said. "Maybe he sees which direction you're going, or hears Pulcher mention where he plans to inspect that day, and steals ahead to warn them."

"That's fairly unpredictable, though," Abdes said. "Pulcher changes his mind. He finds things to distract him—the vandalism on the walls, a rut in the street, cracked mortar in the sidewalks. And I've noticed the boy too much. It seems he's always around."

"Then why does he follow you?" Mallus asked, looking thoughtfully puzzled.

"I think he likes me," Abdes said, because of all of Ham's arguments, that seemed the only one that remained viable. "I saw him with some other boys one day in the city. I spoke to them in Aramaic, and I think it surprised them all, but Jacob most of all. I let them touch my armor, look at my

uniform, and they were all very excited by it. I don't think they'd ever been so close to a soldier before."

"I'd expect not," Mallus said, smiling slightly.

"He ran away angry that day," Abdes said. "Yelling about how a Roman soldier had killed his father, but now I think he must have been confused. He thought we were all monsters—that's what Judas has told him, I'm sure. Every Roman soldier is a butcher who would see him dead, but I..."

"You were kind to him," Mallus said, and Abdes nodded.

"I think that's why he follows me," he said. "I think he's curious about me, at the least. He doesn't know what to make of me."

He looked at Mallus. "So that's troubled me—the market district. I know that's how Judas has been keeping the Jews riled against us. Between that and the aqueducts, they're convinced Rome is negligent at best—and outright cheating them at the worst. I've been trying to think of how he could do it, though—orchestrate so much with so many involved, and no one ever giving it away. No one ever realizing."

"And...?" Mallus prodded gently after Abdes paused, uncertainly.

Abdes glanced down at his wine again. "I think it's Pulcher, sir," he said quietly. "He and I are the only people who know in advance which vendors we're going to check. There's no other way the merchants could get away with misaligning their scales without customers noticing. They couldn't do it on their own for too long—but if Pulcher told them which ones he plans to inspect, they could be ready for him without drawing any suspicious attention. Maybe he and Seneca agreed to pay their fines back to them in the end, or not collect them at all; use the citations as a show. I don't know. But it's like you said about the Praefectus. Nothing else—no one else—seems to make any sense."

"And the aqueducts?" Mallus asked.

"That I can't explain," Abdes admitted. "I'd like to say the contractor, Tarfon's doing it, but that's giving him too

much credit, I think. He talks a fair game, but the man couldn't find his ass with both hands, a map and a week to try, much less sabotage an entire aqueduct system."

Mallus laughed.

"Except he may be right in that Rome built them without regard for the quality of concrete they used," Abdes said. "There's no other accounting for it." He glanced at Mallus. "Just piss-rot luck that's played in Judas' favor."

The next morning, as they were underway again, Mallus reined his roan stallion alongside Kohailain. "How fares your ride?" he asked Abdes.

"My ride's fine, sir," Abdes said. "It's my ass I can't feel anymore."

Mallus laughed. "Do you think you could grow accustomed to it?" he asked.

"We've got at least four days until we reach Bethlehem," Abdes said, grinning. "I hope so."

Mallus shook his head. "I mean, if you'd like, when we're in Sepphoris once more, I'd be pleased to offer my recommendation for your appointment to equestrian status."

Abdes blinked at him in surprise. "You have the money for it now, with that promissory note," Mallus told him pointedly. "Augustus decreed any citizen with four hundred thousand sesterii could be named. Most men not fortunate enough to be born to the status, like me, work their lives through so that their sons might have a chance to say as much." He leaned over to clap his hand atop Abdes' shoulder. "With equestrian rank comes all sorts of other privileges—senatorial consideration among them. You could see yourself a tribune, Abdes—or higher yet than that. You're a wealthy man now, my friend. You should use it to your advantage."

The only consideration Abdes had given to his new-found fortune was using it to set Salome free from Menachem. In fact, he had already decided in his mind to borrow as much against his promissory note as he needed to barter Salome's

custody; it was the first thing he meant to do upon his return to the city. He hadn't thought of himself at all, or what privilege or pleasure he might enjoy from the funds. He realized that Mallus was right. He now possessed not only the nomenclature of a Roman citizen, but the purse of one of some prestige and potential influence.

It took eight days to reach Bethlehem. On the night before their arrival, they camped in the shelter of the hills surrounding the little village. Throughout the trip, Abdes had been delighted and pleased when Mallus had invited him to join him regularly for supper. The two men reclined together in Mallus' tent, propped against comfortable blankets, pillows and throws. Like Seneca, Mallus' status among the cohort awarded him certain privileges; he had a modestly sized but well-appointed home in Sepphoris, rather than living in a barrack. He had a bevy of slaves and a small plot of premium Galilean land, from which he supplemented his army salary with the profits from olive and fig crops. Mallus apparently had known his fill of rough-hewn encampments during his tenure in Germania and traveled now with a compliment of attending slaves and as many of his accustomed luxuries as he could strap to their spines.

"Why would Herod have ordered the children of Bethlehem murdered?" Abdes asked.

Mallus sipped from a cup of wine and chewed thoughtfully on a slice of roasted lamb. "I don't know," he said. "Herod's mad, or so I've heard. He burned a monastery at Qumran some years back and all of the Jewish priests inside roasted to death. Just months ago, he ordered two of his own sons executed, including Antipater, the one who challenged his will. We've kept an eye on him ever since—orders from Caesar."

"If Caesar thinks he's mad, why doesn't he just depose him and be done with it?" Abdes asked.

Mallus raised his brow. "Because assuming control of a province in full is a logistical nightmare," he said. "It means census deployment, public works assessments, military

appointments, tax appropriations, construction projects—and that’s not even taking into account all of the bureaucracy involved, the selection of civic officials, judicial jurisdictions, assigning budgetary allocations and establishing new funds. Keeping Judea as a vassalage means Herod—or whoever holds his throne—takes care of all of that. Rome just supplements his rule, and ensures his reign adheres to Roman standards and practices.”

He drained his cup of wine, and poured another.
 “Caesar doesn’t want to denounce Herod if he can help it.”

“But you think he will, if the rumors from Bethlehem prove true?” Abdes asked.

Mallus looked at him gravely. “I think Seneca will see to that,” he said. “If it’s true, Seneca will press Caesar hard to change his mind. And judging by his successes in the past, I’d say he’ll have good odds of succeeding.”

“But why Bethlehem?” Abdes said quietly, troubled. “It’s no place of any significance—off the Jerusalem-Hebron road, and not even on a major trade route. What is it? Two dozen families? Less than that? Mad or not, why would Herod target Bethlehem?”

Mallus shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “It’s my understanding it used to be a garrison for Jerusalem against invasion. It’s in a drought zone; the land’s barren—not fit for spit. It’s very old—older than Jerusalem. Other than that, it’s nothing more than a pin prick on a map, that I can see.”

The impoverished community of Bethlehem would have been graced to be considered a pin prick on a map, Abdes discovered. Home to grape cultivators and sheep herders mostly, its small homes were built along a crescent-shaped ridge stretching west by northwest. Mallus had been right; without a river or spring for water supply or crop irrigation, the village’s proximity to the Dead Sea kept it dry and prone to drought.

They arrived shortly after dawn had broken, having roused in the darkness and set off again before sunrise. The

citizens of Bethlehem were visibly disturbed by the arrival of a full Roman century. This served as the first indication that there was more truth than rumor to the reports of Herod's massacre, at least to Abdes' observation. While most people throughout Judea were disconcerted by the presence of Roman troops, Abdes had never witnessed such blatant and undisguised fear as he saw in the narrow streets of the village. People cried out and scurried for their homes as the mounted officers and foot soldiers approached. They snatched up their children, abandoning tools, cooking vessels, wagons and carts and darted indoors.

The soldiers proved hard-pressed to coax the residents into speaking. Few among the century besides Abdes spoke Aramaic fluently. The attempts by the others in Greek only emphasized their foreign nature among the people, making them even less inclined to be receptive or helpful, no matter the Romans' explanations for their visit.

Abdes walked door to door conducting interviews in the company of his decury's senior-most soldier, a man twenty years older than Abdes named Augustus Galenus Hiram Eonus. Despite the difference in their age and years of experience—and the fact that Abdes had likely usurped the decurion promotion from Eonus—the tall, lanky Syrian didn't seem the least bit bothered by Abdes' company. He deferred politely to Abdes, no less than he would have any other superior. Abdes warmed to him quickly by the benefit of this hospitable courtesy.

"They were Herod's soldiers," one of the men of Bethlehem told them. His name was Aharon. Abdes' ability to speak Aramaic had proven a boon to him and Eonus in their efforts; Aharon was the third family to allow them into their home, and who had agreed to answer their questions.

Both Aharon and his wife, a girl named Kadisha wore head-to-toe black. Kadisha kept to a corner while her husband met with the soldiers. She looked haggard and haunted, her large, dark eyes ringed with the shadows of grief.

Aharon's grief had subsided enough to leave him angry and bitter. He held Abdes pinioned by his gaze

throughout the interview, his brows drawn against the bridge of his nose, his sorrow and rage glittering like lamplight against his eyes. "Herod's men," he said again. "They weren't robbers or Arab marauders from Petra. It was dark, but I'm neither blind nor stupid."

"Would you tell me what happened, good sir?" Abdes asked. Even though he was wretchedly sore from horseback riding, he had squatted, folding his legs beneath him, balancing his weight against his toes. This posture kept him below Aharon's eye level, lending him the affect of being submissive in his approach, deferential to Aharon.

Aharon nodded beyond Abdes' shoulder toward the door. Abdes had noticed upon his entry that the weathered wooden door had been battered; its frame splintered, as if it had been opened with some massive amount of force. "I woke when they burst the door off its hinges," Aharon said. "I had three sons. When they arrived, they took the first. He was a baby, less than a full year. They brought him into the street, and I followed them. When I tried to take him from them, they beat me."

Aharon's bottom lip was still discolored, a deep fissure healing slowly. Abdes could see the waning shadows of more bruising on his cheeks and browline, where fists had smashed against him.

"I watched them cut my boy's throat open," Aharon told Abdes, locking eyes with him; to Abdes, the severity of his gaze was like a hand clamped firmly about his throat. "I watched them kill him and then another man made mark of it."

Abdes had been surprised when he'd first been told of this—Herod's soldiers had scribes among them. For some reason, the scribes had kept careful accounting of each and every child they killed, and the officers among the ranks had kept deferring to them, calling out to their troops, as if keeping a tally as they went.

"You could hear the babies screaming, the women wailing," Aharon said. "When they came again, they took my middle boy, who was three. Their man made their mark and I heard them speaking together. Five more, they said."

The rumors that had reached Sepphoris had reported that Herod had ordered children two years and younger killed, but it seemed like even more than these had been butchered. Herod's soldiers had been keeping very careful count, from the telling. It had been brutal, but not at all random; no act of madness, in Abdes' opinion. They had a specific quota or total in their minds when they'd come to Bethlehem; they had a specific purpose.

"Do you know why Herod would have chosen Bethlehem, sir?" Abdes asked.

Aharon frowned. "Because he's stolen the throne of David," he said. "Because he would see us know despair—he would spill blood onto the birth-ground of the rightful house of Jerusalem. This land is sacred to us. Herod would spare no sacrilege."

Abdes raised his brow. "King David," he murmured, realizing why Bethlehem had never been deserted, even long after its usefulness as a bulwark to Jerusalem had passed. He'd been curious as to why anyone would insist on maintaining such a geographically burdened settlement, and now he understood. The Jews believed their great, ancient king had been born there.

"Two days before, others came to our village," Aharon said, drawing Abdes' gaze. No one else had mentioned this so far, and his interest was immediately piqued.

"Other soldiers?" Abdes asked.

Aharon shook his head. "Elders from Arabia, they told us. Twelve star-seers. They traveled from Jerusalem, where they'd held counsel with the king."

"Magi," Eonus said, standing above Abdes. Abdes looked up at him, and Eonus squatted. "Probably Persian priests, a caste of Medes called magi. They're mystics, men who watch the star cycles and use them to predict the future, counsel on the present."

"They had gone to see if Herod had welcomed a son," Aharon said, drawing the two soldiers' gazes.

“Why would they think Herod had a new son?” Abdes asked.

“They saw the sign of a new king to the west in the spring,” Aharon said. “That’s what they told me. But there was no new king born in Jerusalem. So they came here.”

“Because David was born here,” Abdes said, and Aharon nodded. “And they thought his kin might have been newly born.”

Herod was Idumean; he’d been given the throne of Judea by Rome. The Jews had never accepted Herod as their king, even though he professed to be a Jew. They staunchly believed their true king would come from the line of David.

They also believe their Messiah will come from David, Abdes thought, frowning.

“I am very grateful for your time, good sir,” Abdes said, lowering his face in a courteous nod to Aharon as he rose to his feet. He glanced between the man and his wife. “And I offer my condolences for your terrible loss.”

“Herod’s a Jew—he’d know about the Messiah mythology,” Abdes said to Mallus. They had spent the day in Bethlehem, questioning as many people as they could find. They camped that evening in a valley beneath the terraced slopes of the Bethlehem village ridge. Mallus had invited Abdes to his tent for supper again; the two leaned together, speaking quietly as they shared a skin of wine.

“If Median magi came to him, asking about a new king, and Herod had no newborn son, he would have thought of the Messiah prophecy,” Abdes said. “He’d know this is supposed to be the seventy-seventh generation, by Jewish account. And he’d know a descendant of David could very well be born here—in Bethlelem.”

“And he’s bent on keeping control of Judea,” Mallus said. “He killed his own sons to insure no one challenged him to it—or questioned the heir he named in his stead on the throne.”

“The soldiers kept a running tally of the children they killed,” Abdes said. “Everyone I spoke with today told me they could hear them calling to each other in the streets, saying how many more they needed. I have a friend in Sepphoris, a Nazarene girl who traveled with her husband to Bethlehem for the registration—his family is from here.”

As he said this, his voice faltered. He blinked down at his wine, a sudden, sickening thought occurring to him.

“You think Herod saw the registration accounts,” Mallus said. “That he used them to identify children here in Bethlehem.”

Abdes’ throat had constricted, his stomach craning in a tight, alarmed knot. “Not the records,” he said. “Not all of them anyway. He didn’t know who precisely. He just knew how many. He must have learned of the totals somehow.”

“So when his soldiers came and killed every child they thought two or younger, and their marks came up short of the registry total, they would have killed more,” Mallus said. “From youngest to eldest until the numbers matched.”

“They didn’t realize,” Abdes breathed. “They didn’t understand that the numbers didn’t match because not every child counted in the registration lived here.”

Yeshua was born on their way to Bethlehem, he thought in absolute, stunned horror. They would have had him with them when they registered. His birth would be counted in the records.

“They kept killing until the numbers matched,” Mallus said quietly. “To eliminate David’s descendant—the one the Medes said had been born.”

Abdes jerked as if he’d been punched in the gut. *Men came yesterday, Maryam had told him. Men came from the east, to our house...twelve of them...three were elders, they said.*

“Gods above,” he whispered.

They came about the baby. They said they saw something, a sign in the sky and they went to Jerusalem, to see the king. They gave us things...one for a king...

one for a king

“Herod might be mad, but he’s not a fool,” Mallus said. “Sooner or later, he’ll realize his mistake. Just because he hasn’t found a way to access the full registry yet doesn’t mean he won’t—especially if he’s motivated by desperation to keep his throne.”

Abdes looked at him, stricken. “I have to go,” he whispered. “Mallus, I...”

one for a king

“Please,” he said, grabbing Mallus’ arm and staring at him in desperate implore. “I have to get back to Nazareth—now.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“You have to leave Galilee,” Abdes told Yoseph.

It had taken the century more than a week to return north from Bethlelehem, despite Mallus ordering his troops to a nearly harried pace. Abdes had been panicked by the time they reached Sepphoris; soldiers from Jerusalem would have had more than enough time to reach Nazareth ahead of them.

Mallus shared in his alarm, his urgency to return, although his reasons were less personal. “If word of the massacre has reached the city, it could very well be the spark set to Judas ben Hezekiah’s kindling,” he had told Abdes. “He’s been biding his time—all of them have—and this would be the catalyst they’ve been hoping for.”

To Abdes’ and Mallus’ mutual surprise, they found the city as they’d left it, bustling and busy, crowded and murmuring with discontent. There was no outright rebellion and no increased cohort presence in the streets to lend any hint of escalation in the tensions that had grown commonplace.

Abdes hadn’t remained in the city long. With Mallus’ permission, he had spurred Kohailain to a full, frenzied gallop, tearing along the eastern road leading to Nazareth. He saw no evidence of the passage of soldiers and found Maryam and Yoseph—and their baby—safe and accounted for, if not somewhat bewildered by his frantic arrival at their home.

“You have to leave,” Abdes said. “Tonight, if you can.”

“We can’t leave,” Yoseph said, uttering a harsh, scoffing sound. “I’ve got work underway in the city. I can’t just abandon it.”

He had listened to Abdes’ account of what they’d discovered in Bethlehem and the reasons he and Mallus suspected it had happened. He’d listened to Abdes’ emphatic implores and he remained unconvinced and unmoved. Yoseph looked dubious; his doubt seemed to be yielding to aggravation, to judge by the deepening furrow between his brows. Maryam, on the other hand, looked frightened. She clutched Yeshua against her, shied against the far wall, her eyes round and apprehensive.

“Yoseph, the Median seers came here,” she said. “Abdes is right. If they learned about us, where we live, the king might, too.”

“And then what?” Yoseph snapped, his voice sharp, making Maryam flinch. He spared her a glance over his shoulder. “Why would Herod send any number of men from Jerusalem to find one baby boy? Because of some ridiculous prophecy? Because Arab priests saw a star in the sky?”

Abdes was butting headlong against a stone wall with Yoseph, and didn’t have time for it. He frowned, turning to Maryam, exhibiting an offensive lack of courtesy by simply ignoring Yoseph altogether. “What did the magi tell you when they came?” he asked, stepping deliberately and conspicuously around Yoseph and walking toward her.

“They said last spring, there was a beacon in the sky,” she said.

“Maryam, go out to the courtyard,” Yoseph said, angry with Abdes now. He turned, drawing his wife’s hesitant gaze.

“Maryam,” Abdes said, his brows lifted in implore and she blinked at him. “What did they say?”

“They saw the same star I did, Abdes,” she said. “Like all of the others had come together. It was a birth sign, they said—an omen of a significant arrival, like a king, a prophet or a great healer.”

“Maryam,” Yoseph snapped, and she flinched again. At Yoseph’s sharp tone, Yeshua’s eyes grew very wide and glossy with tears. His lips puckered and he mewled softly, frightened.

“Let her speak,” Abdes said, turning to Yoseph, his brows furrowed in challenge.

Yoseph’s eyes widened with outraged incredulity. “She’s my wife and this is my house,” he said, his voice clipped as if he struggled to maintain even a semblance of cordiality.

“And I’m an officiate of Rome and the king,” Abdes shot back. “I’ll summon her by law to speak with me, if I have to. Don’t make me do that, Yoseph.”

“How dare you...” Yoseph seethed, his face flushed brightly. He stepped forward, his hands balled, and Maryam darted in front of Abdes, holding out her hand.

“Yoseph, please,” she said, as Yeshua’s mewls turned into confused, alarmed cries. “You’re scaring the baby.”

Yoseph blinked at his son, his expression softening, stricken. His hands loosened, and the infuriated color drained abruptly from his face.

“Just tell him what happened,” Maryam pleaded, her own voice warbling with tears. “You don’t believe it, that’s fine, but please...Abdes is trying to help us, not hurt us. Tell him what happened.”

Yoseph hung his head, his breath escaping him in a heavy sigh and Abdes watched the tension visibly drain from his shoulders. “Please just tell him,” Maryam said again, and then she folded her arms around Yeshua, lowering her face to whisper at him in comfort. She walked past Abdes toward the rear door, stepping out onto the courtyard.

“Do you see what they’ve put in her head?” Yoseph asked, looking up at Abdes, clearly imparting with his stern gaze: *And you’re not helping matters any.* “They have her skittish as a hen, frightened of her own shadow.”

“What did the magi tell you?” Abdes asked.

“They told us they were looking for a descendant of King David,” Yoseph said.

“And are you?”

“A thousand-fold removed and by generations half-forgotten, yes,” Yoseph said, sounding irritable again. “And it doesn’t matter. Even then, Yeshua isn’t...”

His voice faltered, and he closed his hands slowly into fists, sighing again. “I have no claim to any throne by my birthright, and neither does my son. Do you think if I did, I’d be here? Meting out some piss rot semblance of salary cutting stone and doing carpentry? It’s superstitious folly.”

“Herod didn’t think so,” Abdes said.

Yoseph stepped toward him, his brows drawn. “And you serve Herod—you’re his officiate, isn’t that what you just said? If that’s true, why should I tell you anything? Why should I trust you at all?”

“Because I’m your friend, Yoseph,” Abdes said helplessly. “I—”

“You’re Maryam’s friend,” Yoseph interrupted. “And you shouldn’t even be that. You’re a Roman soldier! She’s a Jew—it is forbidden, and it’s wrong. I know she meets with you. She talks about you all of the time. It’s ‘Abdes-this’ and ‘Abdes-that.’ And I let her say it—I let her see you because it pleases her.”

Abdes had never known how Yoseph might feel about the time he spent with his young wife. He’d never broached the subject with Maryam out of dread of just such a discovery—Yoseph was furious about it. He was outraged and envious, and he damn near hated Abdes for it, to judge by the deep cleft drawn between his brows.

“Yoseph,” he said. “I’m trying to warn you. I’m trying to keep you safe—you, Maryam and your son. I’m not—”

“That is not your place!” Yoseph shouted. “I’m her husband—I’ll keep her safe! You have no right to do anything by Maryam, or my family. How dare you come into my home and disrespect me—tell me to leave? Frighten my wife with

these ridiculous stories? Feed into the nonsense that's already swarming around in her head?"

"She's not frightened because she believes in stories," Abdes said. "She's frightened of what might happen to you—and Yeshua—if for even one moment, other people think like the magi do—like Herod does."

Yoseph glared at him, his breath huffing.

"You're right. I've disrespected you, and I'm sorry," Abdes said. "I don't believe in the Messiah prophecies, either. I agree with you—it's superstitious nonsense, but you've been to Sepphoris, Yoseph. You know other Jews believe it. I've been to Bethlehem—I can tell you that Herod believes it, too. You know what it's like in the city. You know we're standing on the brink of something, Yoseph. Something huge; something terrible. And it's all centered around that prophecy. Do you want that to come at you? At Maryam—at your son?"

Yoseph's expression shifted, not quite softening, but at last growing somewhat reasonable. "I'm begging you," Abdes said, and Yoseph blinked at him, surprised. Abdes stepped toward him, his brows lifted. "I'm begging you, Yoseph. Take Maryam and the baby away from here. Stay if you must, but send them away—someplace where Herod can't find them. It doesn't have to be forever. When Caesar finds out about Bethlehem, he'll depose Herod. You'll be rid of him once and for all, and it will be safe for you here again. Whatever you want, I'll do it. Tell me to keep away from her—to never speak to her again, and I will. By my breath, my honor, my life, Yoseph, I will. If my word doesn't mean anything to you, here..."

Abdes reached for his dagger, drawing the blade from its sheath. He closed his hand about the dagger blade, folding his fingers and pressing the sharpened edge against his palm. "Take it in blood. I'll give it, whatever you want. Just tell me you'll see them safe."

Yoseph stared at him for a long, seething moment. "Put your blade away," he growled at length. "Spare me your oaths—and your histrionics."

He turned and walked to the door, opening it wide. "I want you to leave."

"Not until you—" Abdes began, but Yoseph cut him off by shoving his forefinger emphatically at him.

"You've disrespected me beneath my own roof enough for one lifetime, boy," he said quietly, sternly. "I won't stand for more, and if you think your uniform, your being an 'officiate' of Rome and Herod will keep me from tossing you forcibly from this house, you're sorely mistaken. Let your centurions come to me. Let the Praefectus summon me for it. I'll tell them you're harassing my family."

Abdes met his gaze and stubbornly refused to move.

"You'll never come here again," Yoseph said. "You'll never see her again or speak to her. You won't give her as much as a passing glance in a crowd. You won't speak to Hamilcar about her. You won't ask after her. You'll be gone to her—to us. Do you agree?"

"Will you take her from here?" Abdes asked. He didn't want to agree to this; to do this left him nearly crippled with pain, but he had no choice. He'd seen the grief and shock in the faces of Bethlehem's parents. He couldn't bear to risk seeing that same suffering and torment in Maryam's.

"Do you agree?" Yoseph snapped, his voice sharp and loud again.

Abdes lowered his face, shamed and anguished. "Yes," he said, nodding.

"Then so do I," Yoseph said.

Abdes nodded again. He moved, walking toward the door. "Thank you, Yoseph," he said, glancing at the older man.

"I've done nothing by you, boy," Yoseph replied evenly.

Abdes led Kohailain by the reins, walking on foot as he left Nazareth. He couldn't breathe; his mind was numb and dazed with helpless shock. Maryam was gone to him. He

hadn't even been able to tell her good-bye. He'd just agreed to something that broke him more than a hundred lashes delivered by a strong and unwavering arm would have. He felt like he'd just stumbled into some terrible, heart-wrenching dream.

He had not even reached the outskirts of the village before he heard Maryam behind him, crying out his name. He turned, his eyes flown wide in bewildered surprise and saw her hurrying after him, a silhouette among shadows, clutching Yeshua in her arms.

"Abdes!" she cried, her voice choked with tears, hitching with sobs.

"Maryam," he said, stricken. "Maryam, you can't—"

She plowed against him, weeping loudly, tucking the baby between them. Yeshua was still distressed and confused. He mewled softly, and Abdes felt his little hands slap and grasp against the front of his armor.

"Please," Maryam gasped, shuddering against him, her own hand clutching desperately at his chest. "Please, Abdes...please..."

"Maryam," he whispered, drawing his arms about her, holding her, his brows lifted in anguish. "What are you doing? You have to go back."

She shook her head. "Please don't go," she begged, her face buried against his shoulder, her hand pressed against his heart. "Please don't go. Please, Abdes."

"I have to," he said, making her shaking her head all the more. "Maryam, you have to go back. Yoseph...he..."

"I don't care what he said," she said. "He made you say those things and you didn't mean them. Please don't go. Please don't say you won't see me. I...I can't, Abdes, please...I..."

"Maryam, listen to me," he said, feeling his heart cleave at her pleas. She shook her head, and he leaned back, cradling her face between her hands. "Listen to me," he whispered. "It doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is

that you're safe." He looked down and found Yeshua blinking at him, his eyes round and glossy with tears. As Abdes met his gaze, the baby's quiet mewls faded, his little mouth opened in a hesitant, happy smile, and he reached for Abdes, his little fingers outstretched. "That Yeshua is safe," Abdes said, lifting his hand, letting Yeshua coil his fingers around his forefinger.

"But I'd never see you again," Maryam said. "I can't do that...I...I can't, Abdes. Please don't say I couldn't see you..."

"Maryam, it's what is best."

"No," she hiccupped, shaking her head.

"I'm a soldier," he said. "A Roman soldier, Maryam, and just because no one has said anything before now to disapprove doesn't mean that troubles won't come. I don't want that for you. Not because of me—not on my account."

"I don't care," Maryam cried miserably, her tears spilling again. "I don't care what they think—Yoseph, or anyone else! I don't care what they say—what our laws say. You're a good man, Abdes. It doesn't matter if you're Roman—not to me. I know your heart. I...I know your heart, Abdes..."

Her voice dissolved with tears. Abdes glanced up at a hint of movement out of the corner of his eye. He saw a silhouetted form approaching them along the street. It didn't take much consideration to know who it was. "Maryam, Yoseph's waiting."

She looked over her shoulder, stiffening again to see her husband standing in the shadows, well within earshot. "I don't care. He...maybe he can force you...bind you to a promise, but he can't make me keep away from you. I won't, Abdes."

"Maryam, he's your husband," Abdes said. "He's a good man, too—and he loves you. No matter what's been said between me and him, whatever we've promised one another, that doesn't change. He loves you."

"I don't care," she said.

“Yes, you do,” he said. “And you love him, too. I know you do.”

“Maryam,” Yoseph said from behind them, his voice low and terse.

Abdes pressed his lips against her cheek, and then drew her against his shoulder in a gentle embrace. “Go to him, Maryam,” he said. “It will be alright. I promise you.”

She nodded once, pressing her lips together as she drew away from him. “I...I love you, Abdes,” she said.

She was the greatest friend he’d ever known. To watch her walk away broke his heart, leaving something hollow and aching behind, a void he knew he likely would never see fully refilled. “I love you, too, Maryam,” he whispered.

She walked slowly toward her husband. Abdes heard Yeshua’s soft, contented murmurings grow bewildered and somewhat loud as he lost sight of the baby. Maryam walked away, and Yeshua began to cry, a pained and confused sound that echoed against the ceiling of the night sky.

“How much is your father’s debt to Menachem?” Abdes whispered to Salome. He had gone to her, stopping long enough at the acropolis to return Kohailain to the cavalry stables, and then headed directly to the tuguria. She had drawn him into her cell, closing the door, but when she had moved to kiss him, to lead him toward her cot, he had stayed her, taking her face between his hands.

Salome blinked at him, the corners of her mouth unfolding. “You asked me before,” she said. “And I told you then—more than a Roman soldier’s salary could ever pay.” She tried to lean toward him, canting her face to kiss his mouth. “I’ve missed you. I’ve been waiting for you...longing for you...”

“Salome,” he said, stopping her as her lips hovered, poised within a hair’s breadth of his own. He felt her stiffen in confused hesitation; her eyes had fluttered closed, but she looked at him now. He watched the aloofness of her customary facade wither, leaving her visibly bewildered. “How much is his debt?”

"It...it's not his debt alone anymore," she said. "I have debt of my own to Menachem for my clothes...cosmetics and perfume...he feeds me, keeps me sheltered. I..."

"How much?" Abdes said again.

She looked at him, puzzled and anxious all at once. "Five thousand sesterces."

He nodded, and then drew her near, kissing her gently. "Tomorrow," he breathed. "At dawn's first light, be ready for me. I'm coming for you, to pay him for you."

Salome shied away from him, the innocent softness fading, a wary and suspicious shadow draping over her face. "What?" she asked, and then she laughed, shrugging away from him. "Don't...what are you talking about? Don't say that." She walked away from him, smiling coyly, wanting to lure him. She drew her hand beneath the shelf of his chin, letting her fingertips brush against him and then away in fleeting, delicate promise. "Come here. Forget tomorrow. You're here tonight, and I—"

"I have money," he said, and she paused, her expression faltering uncertainly. "My father died. He was very wealthy, and I have a promissory note for my share. I can borrow against it at the city treasury until the money arrives. I'm going tomorrow, and then I'm coming to take you away from here—away from him."

He stepped toward her, and she shied, shaking her head, holding up her hand to stay him. "Why are you doing this?" she said. "It's cruel, Abdes."

"I'm not lying," he said. "By the gods, Salome, I'm not lying to you. I would never lie to you."

She frowned at him, shrinking again as he tried to approach. "Why would you do that?" she whispered, her brows narrowed, her eyes filled with the caution of a nervous dog accustomed to being proffered a scrap of meat, only to have it jerked beyond reach. "Why would you spend your money on me?"

"Because I love you," he said, and she laughed again, a harsh sound that didn't unknit her brows. He looked at her, his

eyes filled with earnest implore. "I don't care about the money," he said. "My father was a heartless old man who used to hit me. He'd beat me senseless and call me stupid and tell me I wasn't his. If my brother tried to stop him, he'd only get the same."

Salome blinked at him, startled.

"All he cared about was his money," Abdes said. "I never wanted it—any of it. I still don't. He didn't sell me to a pander, but he sold me to the army. He made me join to be rid of me. He didn't want me, just like your father didn't want you."

"Stop it," Salome said.

He reached for her. "I know what it feels like," he whispered. "To feel like he didn't love you, or want you."

"Stop it," she said, shaking her head.

"That his business and his money meant more to his heart than you. To feel like no matter what you did...how hard you tried, it was never enough. There could never be enough to make him love you."

Salome's breath fluttered, her eyes filling with tears. She backed away from his proffered touch, her shoulder pressing against the wall. Her hands drew toward her mouth and hovered there. "Stop it, Abdes," she whimpered. "Stop."

"I love you, Salome," he said. "I want you. I don't want anything else—anyone else—but you. I would give all of my money to Menachem for you—all that I have or will ever have. I would give it for you."

This time, when he stepped toward her, she didn't shy. He reached for her again; she flinched as he touched her face, his fingers unfurling gently to cradle her cheek. "Everything I have is yours," he whispered, and she pressed her lips together stubbornly, defiantly, even as her tears spilled. "Whatever you would have of me, Salome."

She gasped softly, shuddering as she began to weep. He drew her against him, holding her, closing his eyes. He couldn't protect Maryam; he was helpless to do anything

except trust Yoseph to his word, but he could protect Salome—with all that he had, he could keep her safe, and he meant to. “I love you, Salome,” he whispered, kissing her hair. “I love you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Abdes didn't sleep at all that night. He lay on his pallet in the barrack, staring up at the ceiling, his mind too restless and anguished for any comfort. He rose before dawn and paced outside of the treasury office until he was able to collect his money. The treasury scribes looked at him curiously at his request for such an exorbitant amount, but said nothing in question or protest. Seneca had made them fully aware of his circumstances, and they were all familiar with the considerable promissory note housed in their vault.

Abdes took the money and went into the city while it was still dark. He was due to report to Mallus for duty at daybreak. He wanted to pay Menachem and deliver Salome to Ham's charge at his inn before returning to the acropolis.

He found the tuguria vacant at the early hour, aglow with the fluttering light of torches set in iron stands along the walls. Most of the cell doors were closed, the young women who called them home asleep within. Menachem was up and about, however, standing outside one of his buildings, surrounded by five of his burly thugs. They all glanced at Abdes as he approached, their shared laughter and conversation fading as he drew near. He ignored them at first; the pander would have his moment, but Abdes intended to have Salome in his company when he confronted the big man. He marched purposefully toward her cell, his brows narrowed, his stride brisk and unwavering, even as he glimpsed the men falling away from Menachem's company and following him, moving quickly to close the distance and stay him.

“Hoah, there, soldier,” one of them called out, his voice friendly enough.

The “occupied” placard hung from Salome’s door. This gave Abdes a moment of bewildered pause; the other cells were closed, but their signs were not in place.

“Hoah,” the man called out again, his voice growing sharper now with aggravation at Abdes’ deliberate lack of acknowledgement.

They were within five strides of him now, and walking swiftly. Abdes turned back to the cell and raised his hand to knock against the door. “Salome,” he began. “Salome, it’s—”

“No, you don’t,” said Menachem’s thug, clamping his hand heavily against Abdes’. Abdes turned, and stumbled as the man shoved him away. Two others grabbed him roughly by the arms, drawing him in staggering tow all the further from the cell. “The lady is otherwise occupied at the moment. You want to talk business, you talk to me.”

“Get your hands off me,” Abdes snapped, his brows furrowed deeply. He shrugged his shoulders mightily, dislodging the men. He danced back from them, shoving his palm against one’s strapping shoulder and pushing him in challenge. He glared at the man who’d addressed him. “Let me pass.”

The man smirked, the corner of his mouth hooking in amusement. “I don’t think so, soldier.”

“I’m here to pay for her,” Abdes said.

The man laughed. “You haven’t got enough coins to see Salome—if you lived to be a hundred, you wouldn’t have enough.”

Abdes raised his brow. “I’ve seen her before—at her invite,” he said. “And I’ll take her from here now, with or without yours.” He strode boldly forward, closing his hands into fists. Two of the men caught him again, and he thrashed between them, wrenching himself loose. “Salome!” he shouted. “Salome, come out!”

"Here, now, lad," Menachem said, walking toward Abdes. His broad mouth was unfurled in a deceptively warm smile, but his brows were pinched with wary scrutiny as he gazed down at the younger man. "No need for a fuss, and not so early in the morning. You've got a dawn sentry to pull? Come this way..." He draped his hand against Abdes' shoulder. "I've got a nice lamb for you, a girl with breasts like sun-swollen melons and a throat you could slide a full scabbard down. She'll take care of your needs and see you back to the acropolis in time, for less than a quinarius, too."

"Get your hand off me," Abdes said, ducking away from Menachem's insistent grasp. Menachem's smile faded slightly and the cleft between his brows drew more deeply. "I don't want another girl. I want Salome," Abdes said.

"I know your face," Menachem said. "You've been here before."

"Salome knows who I am," Abdes said, and he cast the last tugurium token Salome had given him to Menachem. "She knows I've come this morning and she knows why." He tossed Menachem the swollen pouch filled with coins. The pander caught it between his beefy palms, and blinked at Abdes, his brow arched.

"That's for her debt, and her father's," Abdes said, nodding toward the sack. "Remittance in full. She doesn't belong to you anymore."

Menachem blinked at Abdes again, and then glanced among his fellows. He snorted with laughter, and shook his head as his good humor spread among the men. They laughed at Abdes, but he didn't avert his gaze. He stared at Menachem evenly, coolly, his hands curled into fists. "She's coming with me."

Menachem laughed all the more, his cheeks infused with rosy, nearly purple color. "Oh, no, lad," he said, shaking his head again. "I'm afraid she's not."

"You have no legal claim to her now," Abdes said. "There's her debt to you. You can't keep her from leaving."

Menachem threw the coin purse back at Abdes, moving with startling speed for a man of such bulk. Abdes danced back in surprise, his hands darting up, catching the pouch. It slapped against his palms with enough force to sting. "Salome isn't for sale, boy," Menachem said, any hint of good cheer abruptly dissolved from his face.

At this, the men moved slowly, drawing around Abdes, flanking him in a broad circumference opened toward Menachem. Abdes glanced over his shoulders at them and then returned his gaze to the pander. "I'm remitting her debt," he said. "She doesn't belong to you without it, and here it is."

"She's not for sale," Menachem said.

"I'll pay you twice what she owes," Abdes said.

"She's not for sale," Menachem said again slowly, deliberately.

"Five times her debt," Abdes challenged, hoisting his chin defiantly. "Ten times her debt. Give me a price—twenty-fold; fifty-fold. I'll pay it in silver today—this morning."

"Are you deaf, ignorant or both?" Menachem asked, his brows lifting with incredulity. "Fifty-fold or a thousand-fold—whatever you're offering, lad, I'm not taking. Salome is my finest whore. I would as soon cut off my own damn member as lose her."

Abdes arched his brow and conspicuously draped his hand against the pommel of his sword. "I can pay that this morning, too, sir," he said coolly.

Menachem looked at him for a long moment. Either Abdes' gesture had given him hesitation or the younger man's gall simply amused him momentarily; Abdes couldn't tell from the slight lift to the corner of his mouth, the arch of his brows. "Where did a pup like you find the coins to pay for Salome's company in the first place?" he asked. He held the tugurium token up. "I didn't give you this. Where did you get it?"

"Salome gave it to me," Abdes said and Menachem scoffed.

“Gave it to you?” he asked, his brow lifting higher. “A scrawny whelp like you, who probably can’t stroke himself to release?”

The men guffawed at this, and Abdes frowned. “She’s given me plenty of them,” he said. “I’ve got them—and real coins besides. Silver and gold. I can get as many as you want. A thousandfold her debt is a pittance. I’ll give you ten times even that.”

Menachem studied him again, shaking his head slowly. “Boy, either you have the most enormous pair I’ve ever heard of,” he said. “Or you’re out of your damn fool mind. Either way, I’m not doing business with you.” He nodded past Abdes’ shoulder. “Go back to your barrack. If you come sniffing around here again, I’ll see that pretty face of yours marred.”

Menachem turned to walk away. “I’m not leaving without Salome,” Abdes said, stepping forward. He heard the scuffle of footsteps behind him as the men closed in, clapping their hands against them. Abdes struggled against them as they pulled him smartly backward, nearly jerking his feet out from beneath him. “I’m not leaving without her!” he shouted.

He rammed his elbow back, feeling it connect solidly against someone’s breast. Hands loosened against him, and he pivoted, swinging his fist, sending it flying into one of his captor’s noses. The man yowled and floundered backward; when another grabbed Abdes around the waist from behind, Abdes arched his back, kicking his feet from the ground and driving his heels into the man’s knees. The man shrieked against Abdes’ ear, buckling forward, and as soon as Abdes’ feet slapped clumsily against the ground, he reached up, locking his arm about the man’s neck. He folded forward, throwing the man over his shoulder, sending him crashing to the dirt.

“Salome!” Abdes shouted, running for her cell. The men were right behind him, their heavy footfalls shuddering the ground. Abdes shoved his shoulder forcefully against Salome’s door and it yielded, swinging in a wide, swift arc. He stumbled across the threshold, nearly floundering and falling. He looked up, hitching in a breath to cry to her in beckon, and

then he froze, his eyes flown wide, his voice abandoning him in a bewildered, breathless gasp. “Salome...?”

She lay on her back against her cot, her thighs spread to allow access to a man in the midst of heaving mightily into her. Abdes might have understood this; it pained him like a sword shoved deep into his gut, but he’d known from the first what she was to Menachem, what grim purposes she had served at his brothel. He might have understood, but he stared at her client—at the man poised atop her—and he lost the strength in his knees. The man’s hair was askew, his face flushed above the edge of his beard and greasy with a sheen of sweat born of exerted effort. Abdes recognized him in spite of this. He knew him at once.

Judas ben Hezekiah had otherwise occupied Salome’s morning.

“Abdes...!” Salome whimpered, stricken and ashen.

Abdes staggered, his legs failing him. He felt Menachem’s thugs seize him roughly; a heavy arm clamped about his throat, jerking him backward. He gagged for breath, his eyes flown wide in helpless, horrified shock.

No! he wanted to scream, but he couldn’t drag air past the throttling weight of his captor’s arm. *No, gods, no! No!*

The men dragged him out of the cell and slammed the door behind them. A fist plowed into his gut, whoofing whatever hope for breath he might have managed. When the man holding him turned loose, offering him a shove for good measure, Abdes staggered forward, gasping hoarsely, and fell to his knees, clutching at his throat. He couldn’t catch his breath and he began to retch, gagging thanks to the blow to his stomach.

“Gods...” he wheezed, shuddering as he spit up a thick mouthful of bile. “Gods...no...”

He expected Menachem’s thugs to set upon him all the more with their fists, to beat him witless, and he hunched his shoulders, tucking his head, bracing himself for the rain of brutal blows. He heard only soft footsteps approach him, and a large hand settled against his shoulder.

“Never fall in love with a whore, lad,” Menachem said, his voice nearly sympathetic.

“Get...get your hand off me...” Abdes seethed, shrugging him away. Menachem chuckled softly as Abdes staggered to his feet. Abdes didn’t look at him; he limped away from the tugurium, panting for breath, pressing his hand against his aching belly.

It’s not possible, he thought, devastated. When he had seen Judas and Salome, more than the shock of it had occurred to him—an even more crippling realization had as well. He remembered all of the times he’d come to Salome; nearly every night spent in her company, and all the while, as she’d driven him, ridden him, coaxed and pleased him, she’d asked things of him.

She’d ask about my work, he thought, stricken. *Oh, gods, she’d ask me where Pulcher meant to bring me for inspections. I told her everything...every move we made, or planned to make, I told her...!*

He had told Mallus he suspected Pulcher’s involvement in the conspiracy; he’d found no other explanation for how the merchants might have known in advance about their seemingly random inspections unless Pulcher had told them. Now, Abdes understood.

It wasn’t Pulcher telling them, he thought. *It wasn’t Pulcher—it was me.*

He had told Salome everything; what he hadn’t shared freely, she’d coaxed from him unwittingly, using her hands, mouth, breasts and hips to wile the wits from him, leave him helpless against her. He’d been so consumed with his own pleasure and enjoyment, he’d paid no attention to her coy and murmured inquiries. He would have told her anything if only to keep her with him.

I told her, and then she turned around and told it all to Judas, he thought.

If Salome was involved, then Menachem was, too; of that, Abdes harbored no doubt. Menachem had likely set him up for the whole thing. Abdes had been dumbfounded the first night that Salome had made love to him—and extended her

token in invitation to return. Menachem had seen him in Pulcher's company long before then. Undoubtedly, the pander and Judas had counted on Salome's skills and seeming charms to loosen the tongue of a hapless, naïve and stupid boy.

Which she did, he thought.

"Oh, gods," he whispered, and he stumbled to a halt, leaning heavily against the wall. He closed his eyes, clapping his hand over his face. "What have I done?" he breathed, trying to think of what all he might have told Salome—or more specifically, what had remained unsaid between them. "Hadad above, what have I done?"

He managed to stagger back to the citadel, arriving as dawn broached the skyline. He meant to cross through the building to the rear grounds, to meet his decury, and was caught off guard by Pulcher in the corridor.

"There you are," Pulcher said, looking at Abdes, who was somewhat disheveled.

Abdes blinked at him, bewildered. He was already dazed enough with shock and residual ache from the punch to his gut; the centurion's greeting, as if he'd been roaming the citadel expectantly searching for Abdes left him all the more. "Sir...?"

"Are you alright?" Pulcher asked.

"I...I'm fine, sir," Abdes said. "I haven't quite recovered from my journey, that's all. I didn't sleep well." He started to walk around Pulcher, and paused, surprised, when the centurion deliberately stepped into his path. "Excuse me, sir," he said. "I'm nearly overdue, and I need to speak with Tribune Mallus right away."

He'd already resigned himself to tell Mallus the truth about Salome. He didn't want to; every instinct in his body railed against the notion, but he had summoned resolve somehow. Mallus was his friend, his confidante. He would be angry at Abdes' admittance, but Abdes was angry with himself, and expected no less. Mallus was also incredibly level-headed; matters that left Abdes dizzy with alarm or confusion seemed

to make perfect sense to Mallus. *Mallus will know what to do*, Abdes had kept telling himself all of the way from the tugurium. *Mallus will make sense of this—he'll know what to do about it.*

Pulcher snorted somewhat, raising his brow, clearly imparting that he yet disapproved of Abdes' appointment to Mallus' charge in the first place. The bastard was probably disappointed he had a new, hapless actarius to break in Abdes' stead, Abdes realized.

"Praefectus Seneca has summoned you to his office," Pulcher said, surprising and confounding Abdes anew.

"Me, sir?" he asked. "But I..." He glanced uncertainly beyond Pulcher's shoulder, toward the rear exit of the building so tantalizingly within his view. "I'm supposed to report to Tribune Mallus from now on, on the grounds, sir."

"Yes, well," Pulcher said. "You might tell that to the Praefectus so he can offer his apologies to Tribune Mallus for usurping his authority."

There was something so distinctly disdainful in Pulcher's mention of Mallus' name that Abdes frowned. Pulcher was indeed irritable because of his reappointment. When the tall centurion turned, walking toward Seneca's office, Abdes fell in stride.

Mallus was in Seneca's office, standing near the Praefectus' desk when Abdes and Pulcher arrived. Abdes looked at him, feeling anxiety shiver through him, pawing with insistent fingertips at his already discontented gut. Mallus met his gaze as Seneca rose from his writing table and walked toward Abdes. Mallus dropped Abdes a quick smile—unseen by Seneca—as if to tell him, *it's alright, lad. Don't worry for it.*

"Tribune Mallus speaks very highly of your merits, Decurion Abdes," Seneca said. "He tells me your deductive reasoning and investigative skills proved invaluable in Bethlehem this past week."

Abdes glanced at Mallus again. "I...I am grateful for his confidence, sir," he said to Seneca.

“It seems Centurion Pulcher would take some offense to your appointment to Mallus’ charge,” Seneca remarked. “He, too, has expressed that your skills are of exemplary merit to him and his public works century detachment.”

Abdes had never heard Pulcher utter even a passing word in compliment or praise to him. He blinked at the centurion, surprised and bewildered.

“Pulcher tells me he has suffered to lose you,” Seneca said. “And yet Mallus tells me he would suffer now, by the same. Both of them have served me well, and to equal benefit. I’ve no reason to weigh one’s opinion over the other.”

He looked at Abdes, obviously awaiting some sort of acknowledgement. “Yes, sir,” Abdes said, lowering his gaze toward his sandals.

“Where would you rather be?” Seneca asked.

Abdes looked up. “Sir?”

“Where would you rather be?” Seneca asked again. “If left to you to decide, whose charge would you prefer? You’ve worked in some measure with each of them. I believe you have a sense of what expectations and duties you’d face in either circumstance. Where would you rather be?”

“With Tribune Mallus, sir,” Abdes answered without a moment’s hesitation. He met Mallus’ eyes briefly, and his friend dropped him a quick wink and a smile.

Seneca nodded once. He glanced over Abdes’ shoulder toward Pulcher. “There you go,” he said, somewhat apologetic. He turned and walked back to his table. “I will, however, concede to a compromise,” he said, and Abdes felt his breath constrict in dismay. He looked at Mallus, stricken, and realized Mallus was as surprised as he was.

“Tribune Mallus, you will assign our young decurion’s column to accompany Centurion Pulcher,” Seneca said. “A security detail for him and his actarius. He’ll still answer to you, but he’ll keep with Pulcher. There’s been tension growing in the lower district. I’ll not have harm come to my public works officers because of it.”

There was no argument Mallus could offer, even though Abdes could clearly see the aggravation in his face. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“Centurion Pulcher, you and Decurion Abdes are dismissed,” Seneca said. “Mallus, I would have you stay for a moment’s conference, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Mallus said.

“Yes, sir,” Pulcher said, turning to leave.

“Sir, if...if I may,” Abdes said, giving everyone pause. Seneca looked at Abdes, his brow raised. “I need to speak with Tribune Mallus, sir.”

“You can speak with him this evening when you tender your daily activity report to him, Decurion,” Seneca said. “That’s all—dismissed.”

“But I...” Abdes said, stepping forward. Seneca turned to him in full, folding his arms over his chest, his mouth turning downward. “Please, sir, it’s important that I speak with him this morning. I’d meant to outside, and...”

“Have I inconvenienced you, then, Decurion?” Seneca asked, his tone sharp. “Has my counsel interrupted your plans?”

Abdes blinked at him, and then down at his toes. “No, sir.”

He heard the distinctive sound of Seneca walking toward him, his long stride broken by the shuffling limp of his left leg. “One of the fundamental things that sets an officer apart from an infantry lineman, Decurion, is that a foot soldier has others to dictate his priorities,” Seneca said. “When he eats, sleeps, walks, talks, squats to relieve his bowels or plows the furrow between a woman’s thighs. An officer is assumed to have the inherent capacity to prioritize for himself, at his own good judgment.”

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said, not looking up from the floor.

“An officer’s priority is that he serves Rome first; himself as an afterthought,” Seneca said. “You’ve been trusted to such capacity, Decurion. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said, nodding.

“Then you are dismissed,” Seneca told him.

“Yes, sir,” Abdes said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A light but steady drizzle had begun to fall by the time Abdes and his decury, accompanying Pulcher and his new scribe, left the city limits of Sepphoris. They traveled into the Bet Netofa valley to find Tarfon, the city contactor and his crew, who were scheduled to be tending to aqueduct repairs. Pulcher was to inspect their progress and insure Tarfon kept to schedule.

Spring was nearly upon Galilee, the rainy months of winter almost waned, but the ground remained soggy in the meantime. That particular portion of the aqueduct system had been staved, the lines drained to allow the workers to enter and remove rubble and repair the damaged channel. As they approached Tarfon's worksite, Abdes could see a large wooden frame rigged with pulley lines erected above an access well shaft. Piles of stone and dirt were heaped around the opening as Tarfon's workers used the rigging to raise debris from down within the shaft. Six men gathered around the well, and were in the process of unloading a large load of crumbled rock.

"How many more are down there?" Pulcher asked Tarfon when they located the contractor among the crew. Pulcher had begun to frown nearly from the moment he'd caught sight of the six men tending to the rubble and it had only drawn more deeply the longer they stood at the site.

"Six in the tunnel, sir," Tarfon said. He demonstrated a complete lack of initiative in helping his crew; they'd come upon him marching smartly about and snapping orders officiously enough, although Abdes suspected that, given the number of times Tarfon had glanced at the soldiers as they

drew near, he'd offered this overbearing act solely for Pulcher's benefit.

At this statement, the corners of Pulcher's mouth tugged down toward his chin. "Only twelve men are working?" he asked. "Where are the others?"

"It's raining, sir," Tarfon said, as if this should provide satisfactory reply. He glanced at Abdes for at least the hundredth time, his gaze darting across the ten armed and armored soldiers with him. He studied Abdes again and then shook his head, uttering a little snort. Abdes knew what was coming; that Tarfon hadn't made some dry, deriding comment before that moment had left him rather astonished. "What happened to you?" Tarfon asked Abdes.

"Decurion Abdes has received a promotion," Pulcher said, answering for Abdes. He walked toward the access well, that insistent tug against the line of his mouth yielding all the more to gravity as he surveyed the debris drawn from the channel.

"Decurion?" Targon asked, arching his brow. He looked up at Abdes. "Never heard of a scribe to merit such favor."

Abdes glowered at him, but said nothing, refusing to give Tarfon the satisfaction of stoking a rise out of him. Tarfon chuckled, shaking his head again. He turned and tromped through the sodden grass, trailing behind Pulcher.

Abdes hadn't liked Tarfon from the first. The man exuded dishonesty the way a slug left a thin trail of translucent slime in its wake. Abdes had tried his damndest to figure out some method or means by which he could implicate Tarfon in Judas ben Hezekiah's conspiracy, to prove the contractor's culpability in the aqueduct damage, but he hadn't come up with anything beyond his own general disdain. At Tarfon's snide little remark, however, Abdes had bristled with new, furious resolve.

You're involved, you rot, he thought, his brows furrowing as Tarfon walked away from him. *I know it—and I'll prove it.*

“Eonus, you’re with me,” he murmured, not taking his eyes off the back of Tarfon’s bundled head scarf.

“Yes, sir,” Eonus said from his left, nodding once.

Abdes ordered the rest of the decury positioned loosely about the worksite. He and Eonus fell in step together, following Pulcher as he went about his inspection, a proximity not missed by Tarfon.

“Why all of the cadre?” he asked Pulcher, glancing at Abdes and Eonus. Abdes thought he detected a hint of shrill anxiety—fleeting but discernable—in the contractor’s friendly-enough inquiry. Tarfon offered a forced laugh. “You’re not expecting trouble, are you, Centurion?”

What are you hiding, Tarfon? Abdes thought, his brows narrowed. *Why would we make you so nervous?*

“What I was expecting was to see this channel already cleared and the flow restored,” Pulcher said. He’d been squatting by the debris, frowning at it, but stood now to turn his disapproving gaze against Tarfon. “You’ve been at this for more than a week, by my records. There are people in the city whose cisterns are damn likely dry by now.”

“It’s winter, sir,” Tarfon said. “This soil doesn’t like the rainy season. It keeps caving in where the concrete lining has broken. We’re doing our best.”

Pulcher said nothing; he brushed past the contractor and stomped away, glancing at his actarius, a young man named Flaccus, and ordering him to note the absentee workers. Tarfon scowled, hurrying after him.

“If those tunnel walls down there loosen mightily and give way, my men are standing in their tombs, not a work site,” he snapped, closing his hands into fists. “Why do you think that damn duct is choked up with rock to begin with? You’d fault me for caution?”

“I’d fault you for idleness, Tarfon,” Pulcher shot back, turning. At his withering glower alone, Tarfon’s brisk, indignant stride faltered. “You may call it whatever you’d damn well please. You’re under contract—a generous sum paid

whether you work or keep home. Maybe it's you who dislikes the rainy season, not the soil."

Pulcher whirled and marched again, his face flushed, his customary composure gone. Abdes blinked in surprise; he'd never seen Pulcher flustered before, much less angry. *He suspects something, too*, Abdes thought. *He doesn't know what, but he knows Tarfon. He suspects Tarfon's up to something.*

"My crew is not on retainer, sir," Tarfon said. He chased the centurion, his chin hoisted, defiant to the back of Pulcher's crested helm, at least. "They work for their money—I don't pay them otherwise. It's no small wonder half the lower district keeps without water on any given day—you rush me, insult me, push my crew to make shoddy repairs to piss-rot work done the first time 'round."

Abdes glanced at Eonus, and the older man raised his brows. "Fussy little thing, isn't he?" Eonus remarked.

Abdes smiled wryly. "I'll say." Rather than turn and keep pace with Pulcher and Tarfon, he moved forward, approaching the access well. He leaned over the side, ignoring the workmen nearby, who glanced at him, uncertain and anxious by his curiosity.

Abdes could see fluttering, yellow lamplight from the shaft below. He turned, slipping his leg over the stone lip of the well and settling the toe of his sandal into one of the shallow foot grooves. He looked up at Eonus. "Are you with me on this?"

Eonus had heard Tarfon's warning about cave-ins and he looked momentarily apprehensive. However, he was unaccustomed to his superior officer offering him a choice, rather than ordering him to a task, and he nodded at Abdes. "Yes, sir."

They climbed together, both of them dropping the six feet of open space between the end of the well shaft to the channel floor. Water remained pooled in depressions in the hewn stone; Abdes' feet splashed noisily as he landed, and he stumbled, his sandal soles slipping in the mud.

The workers in the tunnel blinked in startled surprise at the two soldiers. The channel was only wide enough for them to work single-file, and most stooped slightly to avoid cracking their heads on the damp stone ceiling overhead. They labored by dim lamplight, loading heaps of crumbled stone onto panels of thick fabric to drag toward the well opening, the pulley ropes. They said nothing, turning quickly back to their work, visibly disconcerted and intimidated by this unexpected company.

“How many of you are down here?” Abdes asked. He took a lamp from a notched alcove in the wall and held it level with his head, letting a slight circumference of light spill around him. At first, none of the crew acknowledged him; they kept their eyes averted, their hands busy, their mouths pressed into thin lines framed by their beards.

“I said, how many of you are down here?” Abdes called again, more loudly now.

The worker closest to him looked up, wide-eyed and uneasy. “Six, sir,” he said, glancing over his shoulder toward the other men beyond him.

“You’re under contract to have twenty-five working by minimum,” Abdes said. “Where are the rest of you?”

“Up the way, sir,” the worker said, pointing beyond Abdes’ shoulder, down the darkened length of tunnel. “Sent to survey, sir, for other damage.”

Abdes glanced behind him. He let his eyes meet Eonus’ briefly, and Eonus nodded at him, a nearly imperceptible gesture. The worker’s comment hadn’t been lost upon him, either. Tarfon had told Pulcher only twelve men were working, the others sent home. *Six are topside*, Abdes thought. *And six are here. So how could there be others surveying ahead along the line, according to Tarfon’s total?*

“Got you,” he whispered, his brows furrowing, the corner of his mouth hooking in a fleeting, wry smile.

Abdes asked nothing more of the crew, for which they seemed greatly relieved. They all returned their attentions diligently to their work. Abdes and Eonus backtracked, walking

slowly along the empty aqueduct, looking above them at the tunnel ceiling, inspecting the walls.

“Eonus, look at this,” Abdes murmured, and the soldier drew to a halt in front of him, following his gaze.

They were near a place where a portion of the tunnel had caved in, though workers had already cleared the debris from the area. Eonus reached up, brushing his fingertips against the jagged, gaping indentation in the ceiling, noticing, as Abdes had, white scrape marks etched into the stone.

“Strange to see that, sir,” Eonus said softly. He glanced at Abdes, his brow raised. “Looks like someone has been chipping at the concrete.”

“Indeed it does,” Abdes murmured. Now that he knew what to look for, he could see them everywhere; faint little hints, blanched scrapes against concrete and underlying stone around each and every one of the damaged sites.

“Probably just from them, sir,” Eonus said, nodding once toward the workers. “They’d have to hack a bit, I’d think, to loosen anything dangerous left up there, and keep it from falling on their heads.”

Rot on that, Abdes thought, studying the hatchmarks. Tarfon lied—there’s nothing wrong with the concrete used to line these tunnels. I can’t see any places where it’s crumbling or cracking—except where it’s been hacked at to make it so. Tarfon’s been telling us—and every Jew without water in the lower district—that Rome is trying to cheat them with shoddy construction. Tarfon lied—and these shafts should never have collapsed at all.

“Are you hungry, Eonus?” he asked, loud enough for the crew to overhear, but still think an idle comment.

“Starved, sir,” Eonus said, playing along with Abdes’ pretense to leave.

“Me, too,” Abdes said, and they began to walk back toward the access well. “Let’s find some lunch.”

Mallus summoned Abdes to his home in the wealthy upper district, along the crest of the acropolis that evening for

supper and to tender his daily activity report. This was not customary habit for the tribune and those decurions beneath him, and Abdes dreaded that it would be the last fond privilege Mallus extended to him once Abdes told him the truth about Salome. When he arrived, his temptation not to say anything, to avoid Mallus' disapproval was immediate and overwhelming; without a doubt, Mallus lived in the most opulent, magnificent home Abdes had ever seen.

Constructed and modeled in the style of an aristocratic dwelling in Rome, Mallus' home could have easily and comfortably accommodated half the families of Nazareth. Abdes gawked in breathless wonder at the spacious, vaulted chambers lined with marble and polished granite, floors decorated with intricate and colorful tile mosaics, walls covered from floor to high ceilings with painted vistas. He stumbled in awestruck step as Mallus' slaves escorted him to the atrium, where Mallus took his supper.

Mallus waited for him there, reclined against a blanket-draped chaise, admiring the play of lamplight against a cup of wine he nursed in his hand. Several such chaises framed a low marble table, upon which supper had been laid. The floor beneath boasted a splendid geometric mosaic of red, black and ivory tiles. The walls were painted a bold, warm shade of crimson, accentuated with gold inlaid filigree and earth-toned landscapes painted directly against the plaster. A colonnade ringed the circumference of the chamber; slender, stark columns hewn from white marble, infused and nearly luminous with lamp glow.

Mallus took one look at Abdes' wide-eyed, marveling expression and chuckled, shaking his head. "Come in," he said, sitting up. He flapped his hand, beckoning to Abdes and shooing his escorting slave with the same gesture. "My home is yours, Abdes. Don't stand there like a stranger. Come in."

Abdes walked toward him, still in awe. He accepted Mallus' proffered wrist clasp, and Mallus drew him briefly against his shoulder, clapping his back fondly. "Quintipor, some wine for my friend," Mallus said to a slave who stood unobtrusively and quietly nearby, awaiting Mallus' directive.

Mallus led Abdes to the chaise across from his own, while the slave stepped quickly forward, filling Abdes' cup.

"I'm sorry about this morning," Mallus said to Abdes, settling himself once more against his comfortable bench. He drew his legs up and around, reclining onto his hip, propping himself somewhat upright against the high slope of the lounge. "I should have known Pulcher would throw some sort of tantrum about your reassignment. The man is a pontificating ass. There's never been any love lost between us, and your assignment to me likely only irked him all the more." He drained his wine and spared the slave, Quintipor, a glance in summon to refill it.

"And I damn near thought Seneca would cross me anyway and put you back to his charge," he told Abdes. "I spent the better part of an hour this morning bartering to keep you—and then an hour after you left thanking him for his consideration." He shook his head and took a long drink. "Bastard," he muttered.

"Mallus, I've done something stupid," Abdes said, cradling his wine between his hands and staring down into the cup. He glanced up and found Mallus looking at him, his brow raised, his expression gentle and inquisitive. Abdes sighed heavily and admitted the truth, as much as it disgraced him. He couldn't look at Mallus as he spoke; the more words that flowed in reluctant but resigned procession from his mouth, the more he felt his face blaze with shame. When he was finished, a heavy silence fell upon the atrium, and Abdes hunched his shoulders, readying for Mallus' rebuke.

"You've lain with Salome?" Mallus said instead, and Abdes glanced up, bewildered to find Mallus smiling at him, his eyes wide, his brows lifted. "How many times did you say?"

"I...I don't know," Abdes said. "I lost count after that first week. Enough to tell her a lot, Mallus—everything. I'm sorry. I'm an idiot. It never even occurred to me." He uttered a cheerless huff of laughter and hung his head. "Why else would she pick me? You told me she serves only the wealthiest men for her patrons, and here, I'm awestruck and dumbfounded, convinced she's found some fancy with me. Me. I'd been laid

once in my life before that—an experience so embarrassing, I have to tell you, I’d considered abstinence from there on out. Gods above, and I thought being with me pleased Salome somehow.” He shook his head. “I’m an idiot.”

“You’re quite likely the luckiest damn rot I’ve ever met,” Mallus said, and he laughed, genuine and hearty. Abdes looked at him again, confused.

“You’re not angry with me?” he asked.

Mallus laughed again. He’d been sipping from his wine, and his hand darted to his face as he nearly spit out a mouthful. “I’m jealous of you, you bastard,” he exclaimed, grabbing a pillow from his chaise and throwing it at Abdes.

Abdes laughed uncertainly, ducking as the pillow sailed over his shoulder.

“I’ve never even merited an invitation with Salome, and I’m a rot damn Senator’s son,” Mallus said. “And you’ve lost count of how many times she straddled you?” He laughed again. “I’m not angry at you, Abdes. Gods above, lad, I’d have given that woman every secret of the citadel if she went down on my lap, too!”

Abdes blinked, his mouth poised in a hesitant, confounded smile. “I’m sorry,” he offered feebly.

Mallus shook his head, holding up his palm to Abdes. “Nothing for it, lad,” he said. He snickered, his shoulders shaking slightly. “Damn near impressive of them to set about it like that. And while I’d have liked to implicate that bastard Pulcher in on the scheme, I must admit, Abdes, your account is far sweeter in the telling.”

He raised his glass to Abdes, leaning forward so they could tap cups. “But what will we do about it?” Abdes asked.

Mallus took a long drink. “What can we do? It’s already done. There’s no taking it back or changing it. And there’s no more harm that can come of it, anyway. They used you to find out where Pulcher was to inspect in the market district, but you’ve been assigned away from Pulcher and to me. You can’t tell them anything else.”

He looked at Abdes for a long moment, his mirth fading, his expression softening. "You truly cared for her, didn't you?" he asked softly.

Abdes looked down at his wine. "I...I thought I loved her," he admitted quietly, pained and shamed. "I thought she cared for me, too."

Mallus smiled at him gently. "Never fall in love with a whore, lad," he said.

Abdes smirked. "That's what Menachem told me." He glanced up at Mallus, wanting to put Salome out of his heart and mind for the moment. "I've figured out how all of the market scales were deliberately misaligned," he said. "Even if I told Salome, and she then told Judas and Menachem, that's not a guarantee the vendors would go along. But they would if Naftali told them to. He probably owns more than half of the market district shops and stalls. If he threatened to evict vendors, or offered to absolve them of rent for a month, say...he could manipulate them easily into cooperating."

"So you tell Salome. Salome tells Judas, who in turn tells Menachem..." Mallus tacked these off on his fingers as he spoke. "Menachem and Naftali are two of the wealthiest businessmen in Sepphoris, probably long and well acquainted with one another."

Abdes nodded. "Menachem tells Naftali, and Naftali makes sure the vendors comply," he said. "I seem to remember him around a lot during Pulcher's inspections. It wouldn't take much to prove all of the cited vendors were tenants of Naftali's. All I'd have to do is requisition and review all of the citations I wrote with Pulcher."

"There would be proof," Mallus murmured, looking thoughtful. "But still not enough to implicate anyone other than Naftali. Certainly not Seneca."

"There's more," Abdes said, drawing Mallus' gaze, piquing his interest. Abdes told the tribune about the aqueducts he'd inspected that day, the lie he had caught Tarfon in, and his suspicions about the contractors.

“Tarfon lied about the construction of the ducts,” Abdes said. “Judas and the others have used these lies to make the Jews think we’re incompetent and deliberately cheating them again. Tarfon’s men have access to miles of tunnels every time they have to stop the water flow and repair a line. It’s nothing for half of them—or even a handful—to draw ahead of the others, to hack away the concrete and then loosen the rock above it.”

“When the flow’s restored, it’s only a matter of time...” Mallus began.

“...and the sabotaged places give way,” Abdes finished, nodding. “So we were right, Mallus—all of these things have been deliberate, none of it happenstance. Zadduc and Judas—all of them—they’ve been deliberately trying to stoke the Jewish sentiment against us.”

“And it’s working,” Mallus said grimly.

Abdes swung his legs to the floor and sat up, leaning toward Mallus. “But if that’s true, why haven’t they revolted yet? They’ve got their rise—and more than that. They must have heard about what happened in Bethlehem. Even if Seneca didn’t tell them, rumors at least must have reached them by now. Zadduc and Judas haven’t ever been the sort to sit on a rumor without using it to their advantage just because they can’t prove it true—and especially one so horrible, one that would make what Herod did unforgivable, mad, even.”

Mallus looked at him, his brow raised thoughtfully.

“I think they’re waiting for something,” Abdes said.

“Waiting for what?” Mallus asked.

Abdes shook his head. “I don’t know. But it must be something they know is coming—or they think is coming. Something big, some sort of sign to them that it’s time to begin. Something bigger than the slaughter in Bethlehem, even.”

“I’ll be damned,” Mallus remarked, smiling at Abdes. “You amaze and shame me yet again.”

Abdes smiled at this, pleased and flustered by his praise.

It was dark in full outside as Abdes walked back to the citadel barracks. His stomach was full of good food and fine wine served in Mallus' company and his mind and heart were blessedly dulled by the liquor. He didn't want to think about Salome. He wanted to go to sleep. For the first time in ages, he held hope that he might be able to rest, comforted by the thought that Mallus remained supportive of him.

The sound of soft, hurried footsteps startled him, and he whirled, his hand darting against the hilt of his sword. He stumbled in surprise to find a boy behind him, following conspicuously in his shadow. "Jacob!" he gasped.

He expected Jacob ben Lamech to bolt at Abdes' discovery. To his continued surprise, the boy didn't. He shied at Abdes' motion to reach for his weapon, his dark eyes widening with uncertainty and fright, but he didn't run away.

"Jacob," Abdes said again, moving his hand slowly away from his sword. He glanced about warily; he thought Jacob followed him so frequently out of a bewildered curiosity, but he'd been wrong about Salome's interest in him, and he could well be wrong now. Jacob was Judas' nephew, and Judas and Menachem had both plainly seen Abdes that morning at the tugurium. Abdes didn't put it past either of them to use the boy to lull Abdes into a false sense of security; to coax him into approaching in order for them, or their men, to spring out of the shadows and attack him. He didn't see anyone lurking in the alleys nearby, but he didn't trust his eyes, or the cover that night provided all-too well.

Jacob blinked at Abdes, trembling slightly, his expression hesitant and still fearful.

"What do you want?" Abdes asked him.

The boy said nothing. He took a hedging step backward, as if considering darting away. "I'm not going to hurt you, lad," Abdes said in Aramaic, drawing his gaze. Abdes squatted, folding his legs beneath him, assuming a non-

threatening posture. "I don't know what they've told you about me, but I give you my word," he said. "I won't hurt you."

Jacob backed away another hesitant step. "Will you come with me?" he asked softly. He looked around, still trembling, and Abdes followed his gaze, studying the shadows, wondering if someone was hiding nearby, listening.

"Where?" Abdes asked.

His question seemed to catch the boy off guard. He blinked at Abdes, looking stricken. "Come with me," he said.

"Where?" Abdes replied.

"I...I can't..." Jacob whispered. Again, his eyes darted anxiously about; again, Abdes followed his gaze. "Please," Jacob said softly, and he sniffled quietly, near to tears. "Please, you have to come with me."

Abdes unfurled his legs slowly, standing. He looked at the boy for a long moment, debating the wisdom of agreeing to this. Jacob was Judas' nephew; he believed a Roman soldier had killed his father. No matter his fascination with Abdes, there was no guarantee this endeared Abdes in the boy's regard. *It could be a trick*, he thought, scanning the surrounding buildings, his eyes straining to peer through the shadows.

The only thing that countered his fear was the fact that if Menachem and Judas had suspected him of anything more than foolish adulation for Salome, he wouldn't have walked away from the tuguria that morning. If for one moment, Menachem or Judas had harbored an inkling of Abdes' suspicions of them, his awareness of their schemes, Menachem's thugs wouldn't have stopped with only a punch to the gut, a couple of choke holds and some shoving. They would have dragged him into a cell and beat him to death. He would never have been allowed to leave their company.

And why would they bother to finish now what they had the perfect opportunity to see through this morning?

"Please," Jacob whispered.

Abdes nodded. "Alright," he said.

Jacob led him into the lower district. The streets and sidewalks were dark and vacant, the houses and buildings around them shadow-draped and quiet. Abdes recognized the direction they followed; Ham stayed in this neighborhood. His inn of residence was tucked along one of these side streets.

Abdes was surprised when Jacob delivered him to a narrow alley within a stone's throw of Ham's inn. The mouth of the alley faced the front of the inn, and as Jacob ducked into the alley, hiding in the shadows, Abdes felt his heart seize with sudden, stricken dismay. *Ham...*! he thought.

He darted after Jacob, grabbing the boy by the shoulders and pushing him back against the wall, startling the breath and voice from him in a tangled, frightened mawl. "Did they hurt my brother?" Abdes asked, leaning toward the boy, his brows furrowed. "Tell me, Jacob—did they hurt my brother?"

Jacob blinked at him, his eyes enormous and confused. He shook his head, trembling and ashen, and Abdes realized his alarm. He loosened his grip on the boy and knelt before him, his brows raised in desperate implore. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry I frightened you, Jacob. My brother lives here—that inn is his home. Has something happened to him? Is that why you've brought me here?"

Jacob shook his head again, and it was Abdes' turn to be confused. He glanced over his shoulder toward the inn across the narrow street. "Then why?"

Jacob pointed, indicating one of the inn's street-facing rooms. "There," he whispered. "That one."

It wasn't Ham's room, and Abdes frowned, puzzled. "The third one," Jacob said. "Go in there."

Abdes glanced at him, suspicious and wary again. "Why?"

Jacob shook his head. "I can't take you there," he whispered. "They might see me."

"Who might see you?" Abdes asked. "Your uncle—Judas ben Hezekiah?"

Jacob looked momentarily hesitant and then nodded. "And the others," he whispered. "The fat one doesn't sleep. He walks around all night long."

"Fat one?" Abdes said, and then he realized. "Menachem?" he asked, raising his brows. "You mean Menachem, the moneylender?"

Jacob nodded.

"Are they here?" Abdes asked. "Are they in that room? Or somewhere close by and watching?"

Jacob glanced about apprehensively. "I don't know," he whispered. "They walk everywhere. Just go. Go fast. Cross the street and go in there."

Abdes drew his hands back from Jacob's shoulders, and the boy startled him by lunging forward, shoving against him. Abdes yelped, falling onto his rump, and then Jacob darted past him, running from the alley. Abdes reached wildly for him, trying to grab the long hem of his tunic; he felt his fingertips brush fleetingly against the woven wool and then Jacob was gone, whipping tightly around the corner of the alleyway, clinging to the shadows and scampering off.

Abdes didn't call out for him. He didn't know what was happening, or who might be around to be alerted by his sharp voice. His brows furrowed as he drew his legs beneath him, and he sighed heavily as he stood. "Damn it," he muttered.

He looked across the street toward the inn, at the room Jacob had pointed out. He reached for his sword, curling his hand against the hilt and sliding the blade slowly, quietly from its scabbard. *Alright, then, he thought. If they mean to finish what they started this morning, I'll make them fight for it, at least.*

Without giving himself enough time to pause for reconsideration, Abdes moved, heeding Jacob's advice and darting swiftly across the street. He pushed the room door open and ducked inside, closing it behind him, standing in the doorway with his sword leveled before him, at the ready.

He realized his company in the room and the sword fell from his hand.

"Salome," he whispered, rushing across the tiny chamber. She lay prone against the cot, one of the room's only furnishings. Coarse wool blankets had been tucked about her, nearly to her neck, but there was no hiding the fact that she'd been brutally beaten. Her nose was broken and swollen, infused with dark, purple bruising. Her eyes had been boxed so savagely, they had swelled shut with contusions. Her poor mouth had been battered, her lips split. Someone had draped a cool, damp rag against her forehead and when Abdes collapsed to his knees beside her in shock and despair, he moved it aside to find more bruising beneath. Her hair had been wrenched hard enough to rip it loose of her scalp along her temple; blood had dried and matted above her ear.

"Salome!" Abdes gasped, his voice strangled as his eyes flooded with tears. Her arms were folded atop the blankets covering her, her hands draped against her bosom. He could see ligature marks carved into her wrists; she'd been lashed so tightly, the bindings had sheared open her skin.

Her eyelids fluttered at the sound of his voice, and she moaned softly, feebly. He stroked her hair gently, gasping as his heart broke, and she turned her face slowly toward him. "Abdes..." she croaked. She couldn't open her eyes enough for him to even discern her irises beneath her dark lashes. He uttered a hoarse, anguished cry, and leaned over her, kissing her brow.

"Who did this to you?" he asked. "Who...who did this? I'll kill them. By my breath, I...I'll kill the bastards who...who..."

"I...I'm sorry," Salome whimpered, and tears leaked slowly beneath her eyelids, trailing down her cheeks. Her breath hitched; her body shuddered, and more tears fell. "I...I'm sorry...Abdes..."

He shushed her gently. A basin of water sat on the floor by her cot, and he dipped the rag inside, dousing it. He wrung it hurriedly between his fists and then pressed it lightly, gently against her face. Her hand lifted weakly from the blankets, and she drew her fingers clumsily against his face.

"I...knew you'd come...for me..." she whispered, her voice slurred as her mind drifted toward unconsciousness again.

"Who did this?" he whispered. "Was it Menachem? Salome, did Menachem hurt you?"

She nodded once, drawing another anguished groan from him. "I...I told him..." she breathed. "I told him...you would come for me..."

She tried to open her eyes, shivering beneath her blankets. "Forgive me," she gasped. "I...I told him I...I wanted to go with you...be with you...I didn't want to...to hurt you anymore." Her hand slipped away from his face, drooping like a wilted blossom against her belly. "I...love you," she whispered.

He lowered his face and began to cry. She whimpered his name, semi-lucid and delirious. He leaned over her, bathing her face with the cloth. "I'm here," he whispered. "I'm here, Salome. It's alright. I love you and you're safe now. You're safe with me."

He gasped against his tears, shuddering with them. "By my life, Salome, no one will ever hurt you again," he said. "By my life."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sundown that evening had marked the beginning of the Sabbath. Abdes hadn't expected to find Ham at his inn room; his brother kept a habit of indulging in wine and women, and enjoying the prospect of a day without work ahead of him. When Ham opened his door in response to Abdes' quiet, hesitant knock, Abdes blinked in genuine surprise.

"Ham," he said. He reached for his brother, hooking his sleeve. "Come with me. It's important."

Ham flapped his arm, dislodging Abdes' hand and surprising him anew. Ham was well into his cups to judge by the sweet, rather pungent stink of wine on his breath, and after a moment's pause, in which his surprised expression waned, and his brows drew slightly, he frowned at Abdes. "I'm having a difficult time understanding why you seem so determined to heap trouble on yourself," he told his brother, leaning heavily against the doorframe. "Do you know what I've had to listen to all day? Let me give you a taste. 'I know he's your brother, Ham, but...' and 'You're a blessing to me, Ham, and I can't stand the thought of cutting ties with you, but...'"

"Yoseph fired you?" Abdes asked, blinking in start.

"No, he didn't fire me, but no rot damn thanks to you," Ham said, scowling. "What's the matter with you? You've got Maryam terrified half out of her head. She's leaving after the Sabbath for her aunt's house in Rimmon. Yoseph's going with her—so there's a day without work or pay for both of us—and all because of you."

“Rimmon?” Abdes said. His brows furrowed. “But that’s still Galilee. I told him to take her out of Galilee, away from—”

“And where’s he supposed to send her, Abdes?” Ham asked. “He’s got no family living, and hers is all in Galilee. She’s no place else to go but to Rimmon, with Elizabeth.”

“She can go to Sidon,” Abdes said, and Ham snorted. Abdes reached for his sleeve, wanting to draw him in tow, to bring him to Salome, but Ham shrugged loose of him again. “Ham, come with me, please,” Abdes pleaded. “It’s important. I need your help. Please.”

Ham looked at him for a long, irritable moment, and then sighed heavily. He stepped across his threshold, closing the door behind him. “Follow me,” Abdes said.

He glanced at his brother as they walked in swift file together. “Take Maryam to Sidon, Ham,” he said. “Yoseph will listen to you. He’ll trust you to see her safely there. Get him to go with you if you can—it’s not safe for them in Galilee.”

“What am I supposed to do with them in Sidon?” Ham asked.

“You’ve got Father’s lands now outside the city,” Abdes said. “Keep them there. They’ll be safe there.” *They’ll all be safe there.*

“You can’t tell anyone where you’re going,” Abdes said. “If anyone asks, have Yoseph say he’s going south for awhile—to Egypt.”

“Egypt?” Ham asked. “What is he going to tell people he’s doing in Egypt?”

“He can tell them anything,” Abdes snapped as they reached Salome’s room door. “I don’t care what he tells them, so long as it’s not the truth. It’s too dangerous, Ham—they can’t stay in Galilee.”

Ham blinked, bewildered as Abdes opened the door. “Whose room is this?”

“Get inside—quick,” Abdes said, grasping the collar of Ham’s tunic and yanking him across the threshold. He spared a

swift, cautious glance around outside to make sure no one observed them, and then shut the door.

“Gods...” he heard Ham whisper.

He turned as his brother stood frozen with shock, immobilized in the center of the room. The effects of the wine had just drained immediately and abruptly from his mind and form as he stared at Salome, his eyes enormous and stricken. He glanced at Abdes. “Who...?” he whispered.

“Her name is Salome,” Abdes said softly, brushing past his brother, genuflecting beside the bed. Salome murmured softly, disturbed by their voices, and he cradled her hand against his own, drawing it toward his mouth to kiss her fingers gently. “It’s alright,” he whispered to her.

He looked up at Ham. “I love her,” he said, his eyes filling with unexpected tears, his voice choked. He lowered his head, shaking as he struggled to not weep.

“Who did that to her?” Ham asked.

Abdes’ brows furrowed. “A bastard named Menachem.” He looked up at Ham, a tear spilling down his cheek. “On Judas ben Hezekiah’s account—this man you say misses his beloved brothers so much. Menachem forced her into his turguria, and then Judas used her to get to me—to find out information about Pulcher that he could use to sabotage the market scales.”

Ham blinked at him, shocked.

“I tried to buy her back from Menachem,” Abdes said. “I took Father’s money and tried to buy her back this morning...to free her, Ham, and this is what they did to her for it. Because of me. Because she wanted to come with me. Because she loved me.”

He lowered his face, pressing his forehead against Salome’s shoulder. “They did this because of me,” he whispered, anguished.

“Take her with you,” Abdes said to Ham, once he’d composed himself somewhat. “Take Salome and Maryam to

Sidon. Maryam and the baby will be safe from Herod, and Menachem will never find Salome there. She can't stay here. Even if Menachem took the money from me, she couldn't stay. She's in the registry as a prostitute. No matter what happens, she'll always have that with her. No one will know who she is in Sidon. She can start over. She can be happy."

Ham genuflected beside his brother. "Abdes..." he began softly, moved with tender pity at his brother's heartache.

"I...I want you to marry her," Abdes whispered, although this admittance nearly crippled his heart and brought new tears to his eyes. Ham drew back, his eyes widening with start. "Please, Ham," Abdes said, reaching for him, curling his hand against the front of his tunic. "I can't marry her, or I would. It's not allowed for soldiers. Take her to Phoenicia with you and stay there, I beg you, Ham. Make her your wife. No one will know then. No one will ever know. I...I don't know what else to do. Please, Ham, I don't know what else to do. Help me."

Ham hooked his arm around his neck, holding him fiercely. "Alright," he whispered, kissing Abdes' pate. "Alright, Abdes." When Abdes drew back, Ham touched his face to draw his gaze. "I don't know if I can convince Yoseph, though. If he thinks going to Phoenicia is your idea, he'll throw me out of his house on my ass. Not to mention if Maryam says anything about you and Salome..."

"Tell them Salome was a debt slave to Menachem," Abdes said. "They'll know the name—trust me—and they'll sympathize with her plight. Say you have known her all of this while, that you've grown fond of her and Menachem beat her, so you bought her from him with your inheritance. Maryam won't say otherwise. She doesn't know about Salome. I never told her."

He looked at Ham for a long moment. "Ham, did you go to Nazareth for supper tonight?" he whispered. "Did you see Maryam? Is...how is...?"

"She's devastated, Abdes," Ham said quietly. "Listless and quiet. Nothing we could say would coax a smile from her,

draw her into conversation.” He raised his brow. “And I’m not supposed to speak with you about her.”

“I know,” Abdes said, nodding.

“Does Salome know about this idea of yours?” Ham asked. “Me bringing her to Sidon, marrying her.”

“No,” Abdes said. “She keeps drifting in and out of sleep. I’ve given her some wine for her pain, but she...it’s bad, Ham.”

“Let me see her,” Ham said, and he leaned toward the cot. Abdes scooted out of his way, as Ham moved her hands aside so that he could draw the blankets back from her torso. Salome moaned softly, her voice fluttering, her brows lifting in distress. “It’s alright,” Ham whispered to her, staying Abdes, who had moved forward to comfort her. Ham lifted the blankets and sucked in a sharp, hissing breath. Salome was nude beneath, but any promise or temptation in her delicate form was gone; her belly, breasts and legs were discolored with dark bruises.

“How did she get here?” Ham asked Abdes.

“I think she walked,” Abdes said. He’d been able to coax enough fragments of what had happened from Salome to piece together a fair account. “Menachem beat her this morning after I left the tugurium. I saw Judas in her cell with her, and I...I thought...”

He shook his head. “She told me when Judas found out that I’d come to pay for her, when she told him that she wanted to go with me because she loved me, he was furious. He slapped her around, and then Menachem took over. He beat her witless. She said she woke up on the floor of her cell. Jacob ben Lamech helped disguise her with blankets and sneak her out into the crowd at dusk. He brought her here. She said he pickpocketed to find coins to pay for her room.”

“Why did Jacob ben Lamech help Salome?” Ham asked.

Abdes looked down at Salome, stroking his hand gently against her hair. “Because they’re kin,” he whispered. “Her eldest sister, Heba, is Jacob’s mother.”

Ham stared at him for a long, dumbstruck, stricken moment and then he shook his head. "Help me carry her," he said, drawing his legs beneath him.

"What?" Abdes asked.

"Help me carry her," Ham said again. "If Judas finds out the boy's helped her, he'll beat him lame to find out where she is. We'll take her to my room. Let me collect my things, and I'll bring her to Nazareth tonight before anyone else is the wiser. Yoseph's still there, at least until tomorrow at sunset. It's the Sabbath—he can't travel."

Abdes slipped his arms beneath Salome's shoulder and knees. He shifted his weight and then drew her gently against him, trying not to jostle her as he stood, cradling her against his chest. Ham lifted the blankets from the bed and draped them about her. She turned her head weakly, groaning softly against Abdes' throat. "I'll carry her to Nazareth," he said quietly.

"No," Ham said, and Abdes blinked at him. "You should get back to the barrack. Menachem's probably looking for her—and he's probably assuming you've got something to do with her whereabouts. He knows your face, and begging your pardon, but you stand out like a black ram in a penful of ewes in that uniform. I'll carry her. We'll wrap scarves around her head, put a heavy mantle on her and stuff pillows against her stomach. I'll say she's my wife, if I'm asked; that she's miserable enough with that, and pregnant besides."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Abdes returned to his barrack after parting company with Ham. He'd tried to offer Ham his sword or dagger, but to his surprise, Ham had reached beneath the cot in his room, pulling out a long, hooked sword; an Arabian scimitar sheathed in a leather and bronze scabbard.

"You think I trekked from Phoenicia clear to Galilee with nothing but my good lucks and wiles to keep safe from bandits?" Ham had asked, fettering the exotic sword to his girdle, hiding it beneath the overhanging drape of his mantle.

Abdes returned to the barrack, and curled onto his side against his pallet, letting his eyelids fall closed. He sighed heavily, exhausted and spent, and was asleep almost at once. When footsteps crossed the barrack quarters, he didn't hear them. When they stopped beside his pallet, he didn't stir. When someone genuflected, draping their hand firmly against his shoulder, he jerked himself awake, his eyes flown wide with bewildered, bright alarm.

"Begging your pardon, sir," Eonus said, his face cast in heavy shadows from the faint glow of a lamp he carried in hand. "But I think you'd better come with me."

"What?" Abdes asked, confused and groggy. He forked his hand through his hair and blinked dazedly at the soldier. "Is it...is it dawn yet?"

"Far from it, sir," Eonus replied. "Tribune Mallus has sent for you—right away, sir, he said."

"Mallus?" Abdes reached for his sandals, pulling them on in turn. "He summoned me to his house?"

"No, sir, the citadel," Eonus said, as Abdes drew his legs beneath him, rising to his feet.

Abdes looked at him, lucid now, but no less confused than moments earlier. "Is something wrong, Eonus?"

"I don't know to say, sir," Eonus said. "But the Tribune's roused from his bed and been summoned just like you."

"Summoned? By who?" Abdes asked.

"I don't know that to say, either, sir," Eonus replied. He raised his brow at Abdes. "But he's big, sir. And loud. And pissed off, if I may."

Menachem, Abdes thought, and he nearly groaned aloud.

He could hear Menachem yowling inside the main foyer from the opposite end of the building as he and Eonus walked inside.

"—you tell that rot damn bastard I'll see him now!" Menachem bellowed, his voice reverberating against the polished stone floor and high ceiling. "I'll wake the Praefectus himself from his rotted bed—get out of my way! I'll see him now!"

Abdes glanced at Eonus. "Like I said, sir," Eonus said. "Big, loud and pissed off."

Eonus ushered Abdes along a network of intersecting back corridors to bypass the main lobby—and Menachem—to reach Seneca's office. Mallus was waiting for him, pacing back and forth outside of the chamber door. When he saw Abdes, his eyes flew wide and he marched smartly toward the younger man.

"Are you mad?" he exclaimed, waving his hand to indicate the direction of the main entrance. "Gods above, do you hear that racket? What have you done?"

He swept Abdes into Seneca's office and closed the door with a sharp report behind them. They were alone in the

room, and Abdes blinked in confusion. "Where is the Praefectus?" he asked.

"At home, in his bed, unless Menachem's howling has roused him along with the rest of the upper district," Mallus said. "He doesn't know about this yet—and he's not alone in it. What in Hades is going on, Abdes?"

"Jacob ben Lamech followed me from your house tonight," Abdes said, giving Mallus immediate, startled pause. "He asked me to follow him."

"And did you?" Mallus asked, his brows raising in disbelief. "You followed him? Abdes...gods above, lad, do you want them to kill you?"

"If they meant to kill me, Mallus, they would've done it this morning," Abdes said. "I told you I thought Jacob ben Lamech was fascinated with me, curious about me. I took the chance that he wouldn't deliberately set me up for harm."

He stepped toward Mallus. "Menachem beat Salome," he whispered, and Mallus' eyes widened.

"What? Will she testify to that?" Mallus asked, catching Abdes' arm. "If she will stand before the Praefectus and say—"

"Mallus, she can't stay roused more than a few moments at a time, much less stand up or testify to anything," Abdes said. "They beat her nearly dead—she is covered in bruises and gashes for it. Jacob is her kin—she told me that much. Her sister's son. He helped her escape the tugurium and brought her to an inn to hide her."

"Is she there now?" Mallus asked. "We can—"

Abdes shook his head. "She's with my brother. She's safe for the moment, but we—"

The office door swung inward in a swift, broad arc, slamming into the opposite wall with enough force to crimp the plaster and make Abdes and Mallus both whirl in startled alarm.

"I know that bastard's here!" Menachem roared, charging through the door like a bear set loose at the circus.

His wide face was infused with furious color, his brows furrowed as he continued a diatribe undertaken in the corridor. Four startled guards who had obviously been trying to detain him stumbled after him.

Menachem caught sight of Abdes, and the rage in his face twisted to all new and heretofore unimagined degrees. "You!" he yelled, shoving one thick forefinger at Abdes as he plowed headlong toward the younger man. "You rot damn whelp, where is she?"

Abdes backpedaled in alarm, reaching for his sword. It was too late; Menachem charged into him, clamping his enormous hand against Abdes' throat, shoving him backward and forcing him to dance on his tiptoes. He slammed Abdes into the far wall, and Abdes grunted breathlessly, whooping for air, strangling around Menachem's palm.

"I want that bitch returned to me, pup!" Menachem shouted in Abdes' face. "I want her back now—and I want remittance for this measured in full from your hide!"

"Let him go—!" Mallus cried, leaping at Menachem. He plowed against Menachem's back, staggering him, and managed to plant his arm beneath the shelf of Menachem's broad chin, wrestling him into a rough headlock. "Get your damn hands off him, Menachem!" he yelled against Menachem's ear. "Do it now, by gods—right rot damn now!"

The four guards seized Menachem as well, and between them, they managed to somehow haul the enormous man away from Abdes. As Menachem's fingers slipped from Abdes' throat, he stumbled, nearly falling to the floor. He clutched at his neck, gasping for pained breath, watching tiny pinpoints of dazzling light sparkle before his eyes.

"I want Salome back!" Menachem roared, thrashing wildly, lumbering about in clumsy, sweeping circles. Somehow Mallus managed to keep astride his back, his arms clamped in a stranglehold about Menachem's neck. "That boy's a thief!" Menachem yowled. "He's plowed between her thighs for months now without paying for the privilege and now he's hoarded her off! I want his rot damn hide! I want him whipped for it!"

"She...she's not your property," Abdes wheezed, gripped with sudden rage. He glared up at Menachem, watching him dance about with the soldiers. His brows furrowed, and he spat against the floor, folding his fingers against his palms. "She's not your property, you fat, rotted bastard!" he shouted.

Menachem's struggles immediately waned, and he turned to Abdes, hauling his prospective captors in tow. "I didn't steal her," Abdes snapped. "I took her from you, yes, because you beat her, you coward rot. You tied her up, beat her witless and left her for dead, and you'll never get her back. Do you hear me, Menachem? I'll see you dead before I let you touch her again!"

Menachem's eyes flew wide, and he bellowed, an inarticulate, enraged sound. He charged Abdes again, and it took all five soldiers to hold him back, keep him from Abdes.

"I'll see you answer, boy!" Menachem roared. "Where is the Praefectus? Bring him here—I'll make you answer for that, you bastard whelp!"

"Get him out of here!" Mallus shouted, letting go of Menachem's neck and dancing back as the big man swung his fists blindly, wildly. "Gods above, Menachem, stop it before I order you in chains!"

"Do your worst, Menachem!" Abdes yelled in challenge to the pander, striding boldly forward. Mallus whirled to him, his eyes wide and shocked, and he darted against Abdes, forcing him back.

"Abdes, stop!" he gasped.

"I'm right here!" Abdes shouted, trying to jerk away from the tribune. "Come on, you fat bastard! Why wait for Seneca? I'm right in front of you—do your worst! Bring it out—let me see it, you rot!"

He lunged, trying to dart around Mallus and launch himself at Menachem. While the guards fought to keep Menachem from plowing forward to meet him, Mallus grabbed Abdes about the waist and jerked him back, nearly hauling him off his feet. "Abdes—!" he said, breathless and startled.

"I'll bash your damn skull in!" Abdes bellowed, thrashing against Mallus. "I'll kill you, you rot—do you hear me? I'll kill you!"

"Abdes, stop it," Mallus grunted, squeezing him roughly. "Stop it, lad, stop it. Let me handle this—gods, lad, stop." Abdes' struggles waned; Mallus' quiet voice, his reason piercing through his blind fury. "Trust me to this, Abdes," Mallus murmured against his ear, still restraining him. "Settle yourself."

"Yes...yes, sir," Abdes panted, nodding his head, glaring at Menachem.

"I'll take care of this," Mallus whispered, and Abdes nodded again. "Trust me, Abdes. He will get his—but not here, not tonight. Not like this."

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, nodding again.

"Go out in the corridor and wait for me," Mallus said. "Let me speak to Menachem. Let me keep this from reaching Seneca—if it does, we're both in for misery, lad. Trust me to this—settle yourself and let me handle it."

His arms loosened, slipping free of Abdes' midriff. He stepped away from Abdes warily, but Abdes made no more moves against Menachem. "Wait for me in the corridor," Mallus said again.

Abdes locked gazes with Menachem. The enormous man spat against the ground, aiming deliberately in Abdes' direction. "Yes, sir," Abdes said to Mallus without averting his gaze. He marched toward the officer door, his hands still poised, clenched in ready fists.

He paced the corridor outside of Seneca's office for a seeming eternity. He couldn't hear anything Mallus and Menachem might have exchanged beyond the closed door and couldn't get close enough to even try to eavesdrop; two of the cohort soldiers had followed him from the chamber and remained posted at the threshold, while the other two kept inside, in case Menachem took a mind to launch himself at Mallus and throttle him.

The guards at the door watched Abdes walk restlessly about, their eyes wary. Abdes didn't blame them. He'd lost his wits when presented face-to-face with Menachem, and in retrospect, he couldn't believe he'd physically charged the pander, openly and eagerly inviting a brawl. He'd never done anything like that before. He'd never acted aggressively, much less stand his ground in his whole life.

Worst of all, he realized he had likely just damned himself. Menachem was a part of Judas ben Hezekiah's conspiracy. So far, Abdes had proven little more to Judas than a naïve boy; someone to use for information. In one explosive moment of irrational, overwhelming anger, Abdes may have just identified himself fully as someone the conspirators needed to be cautious of—if not outright rid of. Menachem and Judas knew that Salome was aware of their purposes in seducing Abdes; if she did not know of their plans altogether. If Abdes had Salome, then it meant Salome could in turn tell him of the conspiracy—that would mark him dead, and Abdes knew it.

Gods, he thought. He forked his finger through his hair, shoving it back from his face. *All of the times I might have lost my damn temper—all of those times Father used to rail at me, hit me and I just covered there and took it—and I had to lose it now.*

The office door opened, and he whirled, his eyes flying wide. He watched the two soldiers emerge first, with Menachem walking behind them. The pander seemed remarkably at ease and good-humored for a man who earlier had been thrashing about, trying to crush the breath from Abdes' throat. Mallus strolled alongside of him, his hand draped against Menachem's shoulder in affable fashion.

"Thank you again, Tribune, for your immediate and undivided attention," Menachem said.

"Of course, Menachem," Mallus replied, nodding once in polite deference.

Menachem paused as the soldiers tried to lead him along the corridor toward the exit. His gaze settled upon Abdes and remained fixed there. He smiled pleasantly enough, but there was a wicked hint of light glittering in his small, dark

eyes. "I'll see you again soon, pup," he said, tapping his forefinger in the air toward Abdes.

Abdes lifted his chin, his brows furrowed as he met the pander's gaze evenly. "I'm looking forward to it."

As the soldiers escorted Menachem from the premises, Mallus hooked his forefinger in beckon to Abdes. Abdes followed him back into Seneca's office, and Mallus closed the door.

The tribune pressed his spine against the door and tilted his head back, huffing out a loud, deep sigh. "Gods above," he muttered. "Please don't ever do that to me again, Abdes."

"I'm sorry, sir," Abdes said quietly, immediately rebuked. Here was as close as he'd ever seen Mallus come to upset with him; there had plenty of occasions when it had been warranted, including now, but Mallus had always been sympathetic to him, supportive. Abdes realized just how closely he'd come to taxing Mallus' sympathies and patience, and was ashamed of himself.

Mallus smiled slightly and shook his head. "Don't be sorry," he said. "Just give me some forewarning next time. Come to me first. Don't ever do something like this—go up against someone with Menachem's clout in this city—without me."

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, hanging his head, abashed.

Mallus walked toward him. "No 'sir' among friends, remember, Abdes?" he asked quietly, drawing the younger man's hesitant gaze. "I'm not angry at you. I just...I want to look out for you. Menachem is a very powerful man, and he could easily ruin you, Abdes—or outright kill you, if he felt the inclination. I've got enough power to handle him. Let me from now on."

"I'm sorry," Abdes said. "Will he say anything to Seneca?"

"Not for the moment," Mallus said. "I've convinced him to keep his peace and he will—as long as he thinks I'll see to my end things." When Abdes looked at him, puzzled, he

laughed softly, shaking his head. "Never mind," he said, clapping his hand against Abdes' shoulder. "Some pretense I came up with to appease him. If anyone asks, I beat you nearly lame."

He dropped Abdes a wink, and Abdes smiled. "I told Menachem the girl's here at the citadel," Mallus said. "I told him she'd indeed been beaten badly, though he claims no knowledge of any assault. He said such things have been known to happen; a client of the tuguria roughing one of the girls..."

"He's lying," Abdes said, his brows drawing.

"I know, Abdes," Mallus said, patting his shoulder again. "But I played along with him to shut him up—get him out of here. I told him Salome was in no condition to receive company. I assured him you wouldn't be allowed near her, and that I'd send for him once she'd roused, and I was able to take her account of what happened."

His expression grew solemn, nearly stern. "Which means you have to get her out of this city once the Sabbath's over tomorrow evening," he said. "I don't know if I can delay him beyond that, or keep him from going to Seneca."

"She'll be gone then—headed out of Galilee for Phoenicia with my brother," Abdes said. "And she's out of the city now. Ham took her with him to Nazareth, to that artisan, Yoseph's house."

Mallus nodded once. "When is he to leave for Phoenicia?"

"Tomorrow evening. He is going to accompany Maryam and Yoseph north."

Mallus nodded again. He knew of Maryam and Yoseph's planned exodus; he and Abdes had discussed plans for it at some length throughout their trip back from Bethlehem, and that night over dinner as well. "I want you to take your decury and go with them to the border of Galilee," he told Abdes. "Tomorrow, when you're through with Pulcher, head for Nazareth. Dress in common garb with your mail and weapons beneath. If you need to requisition anything, you have

my authority. I'll inform the quartermaster's office." He looked at Abdes gravely. "Keep them safe. See them into Phoencia—don't worry about Seneca or Pulcher. I'll tell them I had to send you out of the city, that we received a report of bandits striking the caravan route to Arbela. We'll say you're investigating, disguised as decoys."

"What about Menachem?" Abdes asked. "What happens when he comes back to see Salome?"

"I'll deal with that," Mallus said. "Don't worry. I've been lenient in the past on some of his remiss licensures. I'll remind him of those occasions, if I have to—and the fact he owes a tidy sum in arrears to see all of his whores legally registered. If need be, I'll remind him firmly." He winked at Abdes again, and they both laughed.

"Or I'll simply call for you," Mallus added, smiling fondly at Abdes. "Six months ago, I could hardly coax a 'yes, sir' from your pipes. And look at you now, picking fights with the largest man in Galilee. I don't know whether to be proud or worried for you."

"Me, either," Abdes admitted, making Mallus chuckle.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Pulcher seemed willing to accommodate Mallus' deployment of Abdes' decury outside of the city the next evening, ending his day's activities by late afternoon to allow Abdes and his men to return to the citadel and requisition their supplies. As they left the lower district, returning to the acropolis, the centurion deliberately slowed his stride to fall abreast of Abdes.

"I appreciated your help today, Decurion," Pulcher said. It was an unexpected admittance, one that Pulcher offered begrudgingly, and almost beneath his breath, lest his actarius or any of Abdes' decury overhear.

"Yes, sir," Abdes said. "And I appreciate your willingness to see us back to the citadel before dusk." *And frankly, I'm shocked by it*, he added mentally, pressing his lips together to stave the comment.

"I suppose I haven't appropriately congratulated you yet," Pulcher remarked. "On account of this promotion of yours."

He was being remarkably—and uncharacteristically—pleasant, and Abdes glanced at him, frowning slightly. *What are you playing at, Pulcher?* he thought. The centurion might not have been part of the conspiracy, but he remained loathsome and arrogant by character nonetheless. "Thank you, sir."

"Where are you to go tonight?" Pulcher asked.

“West toward Arbela, sir,” Abdes said. “Tribune Mallus received reports of bandits hitting along the caravan route. He didn’t tell you, sir?”

“No,” Pulcher said. “Nor did the Praefectus.”

Abdes had the distinct and irritating impression that Pulcher was subtly inferring that he was lying; that he’d invented the pretense of Mallus’ orders to shirk his duties to Pulcher. “I’m sure he cleared it with the Praefectus, sir. He issued me the orders personally last night. Tribune Mallus isn’t the sort who would circumvent proper authorization, sir.”

“No, of course not,” Pulcher said, raising his brows in a manner that affected dubiousness, to Abdes’ growing annoyance. “That’s a dangerous assignment for Tribune Mallus to have offered, given your inexperience.”

Abdes bristled, his frown deepening. He refused to look at Pulcher. “My men are well-accustomed, sir,” he said.

“I’m aware of their qualifications,” Pulcher said mildly. “It’s yours that would give me pause, if I was Tribune Mallus.”

Abdes met Pulcher’s gaze evenly. “May I inquire, sir, as to your point?” he asked, forcing a tight, clipped courtesy into his voice.

Pulcher raised his brow, unaffected as always. “My point, Decurion, is that you’re young,” he said. “You’re inexperienced. It’s not an offense. It’s the truth. I question whether or not you’re ready to be thrown into such perilous assignments. You lack familiarity with battle, or with commanding even a small number of soldiers.”

“Maybe Tribune Mallus feels the only way I’ll ever gain such familiarity is through facing it headlong, sir,” Abdes said.

“Maybe he does,” Pulcher said, with a conciliatory nod. “And it would seem the Praefectus agrees with him.”

“But you don’t,” Abdes said, adding with dry emphasis: “Sir.”

Pulcher looked at him. “No, Decurion,” he said. “I don’t.”

"I suppose you think scrubbing walls and climbing down aqueduct wells would better prepare me, sir," Abdes said.

Pulcher paused. For a moment, his expression seemed to soften; he looked nearly wounded. "Do you think I treated you unfairly, Decurion?"

Abdes held his gaze leveled at Pulcher. "I don't know to say, sir," he replied. "Having only been two-weeks appointed to my own position of some authority, and being young and suffering from such inexperience, I'm sure my opinion of what's fair or not hardly compares to yours."

"Did it ever occur that I might have been trying to impart some larger lesson upon you besides scrubbing walls or climbing down aqueduct wells?" Pulcher asked.

Abdes smirked. "Yes, sir. You imparted very clearly that an officer's place is to sit in the shade, or enjoy a spot of lunch while his subordinates do the piss work. I learned that lesson very well from you, sir, and am immeasurably grateful for it."

Pulcher raised his brow. "Mallus says you have a quick mind, a keen eye for observation," he said. "Though I dare say, I've yet to see you demonstrate it."

Abdes arched his brow and walked again, moving past the centurion. "Look harder with your new actarius, sir," he said. "That I do know to say."

"It'd be easier to take them west toward Mount Carmel," Eonus said to Abdes as the decury traveled for Nazareth. "Follow the coastal highway north. The Phoenician border is closer that way."

The sun was setting, the landscape draped in pale, fading light and a descending cloak of shadows. The eleven were dressed in the long, overlapping wool tunics, girdles and mantle coats of commoners, their pates covered by wrapped scarves. They each wore a mail shirt beneath their clothes, their swords and daggers carried inconspicuously, but within ready reach, beneath their mantles.

Eonus and the soldiers had only been told that they were traveling to escort Jewish civilians outside of Judea, beyond the reach of Herod's forces in the aftermath of the Bethlehem massacre. They had all adopted appropriate caution, and though they walked in loose file, they kept together, all of them scanning their surroundings constantly, warily.

"It's too major a highway," Abdes said. "Herod could have easily sent his soldiers north from Caesarea, or even from Jerusalem along it. They wouldn't cut through eastern Galilee—not through the mountains and marshlands. We're safer keeping out of their way."

There had been no signs of any trouble or pursuit, and Abdes' initial anxiety eased the further from Sepphoris they traveled. He kept a half-attentive eye about him, trusting to the pair of soldiers he'd dispatched ahead of them along the road to alert them to anything suspicious.

"The sun's setting," Eonus remarked. "The Sabbath's nearly over. Do they know we're coming?"

Gods, no, Abdes thought. He couldn't anticipate Yoseph's reception when they arrived in Nazareth, except that it would be nothing welcoming. If Yoseph had known Abdes and his men were coming to escort them, Abdes imagined he very well might have defied the Sabbath and set off early to avoid them. He couldn't very well lose or refuse them if they arrived unannounced at his doorstep, and no matter Yoseph's protests, Abdes didn't plan on taking "no" for an answer. "If they leave at sundown, they still won't get far ahead of us," he told Eonus. "We'll double-time it if they're gone and catch up to them."

Eonus nodded. He glanced ahead of him at raised his brow. "Here comes Herenus," he said, and Abdes followed his gaze, his mind snapping from distraction immediately. Herenus was one of his scouts.

"A caravan's coming toward us, sir," Herenus told Abdes as he drew near. "Twelve donkeys, it looks like, at least a man for each." He didn't look particularly alarmed at this report, and Abdes sighed quietly, his own anxiety dissolving. They'd passed several donkey caravans so far; although Jews

couldn't travel until nightfall, Gentile merchants had no such restrictions. They traveled throughout the Sabbath, bringing loads of fish from the Sea of Galilee, or other wares to the gates of Sepphoris, to be ready when the markets opened in the morning.

"Thank you, Herenus," Abdes said, nodding at the scout. "Keep with us for now. Fall back and tell Buteo to pull ahead in your place."

"Yes, sir," Herenus said.

Abdes glanced at Eonus when Herenus had left them. "Eonus, may I ask you something?"

"Yes, sir," Eonus said, nodding politely.

"Do you think I'm young?" Abdes said, drawing Eonus' gaze. "Inexperienced?"

"Candidly, sir? Yes, I do."

Abdes looked away, averting his gaze ahead of him. He could see the approaching caravan, silhouettes draped in shadows. The sun was gone almost in full, a dim hint of light that offered no real illumination against the road. Stars had begun to emerge, coaxed from their hiding places, winking along the darker edges of the horizon.

"If I may, sir, we've all been young and inexperienced once," Eonus said. "And I've never been one to believe age is any preclusion to wisdom. Experience comes on its own, sir, unless you sit back on your haunches and keep to one spot your life through. Which you don't strike me as doing, sir."

Abdes raised his brow. "Does it bother you that I'm younger than you?" he asked. "That you're in my charge, Eonus?"

The corner of Eonus' mouth hooked slightly. "No, sir," he said. "It bothers me that you can shoot better than I can."

He met Abdes' gaze and his smile widened. Abdes laughed, shaking his head. "Centurion Pulcher said I was too young for this detail," Abdes said. "That it was too dangerous and I was too unfamiliar."

“Well, you’re not precisely leading a legion charge, sir,” Eonus said pointedly. “Ten men, all of whom can take care of themselves, if need be. That being said, sir, and still speaking candidly, I think you drew offense from the centurion when he meant none.”

Abdes raised his brow, curious, and Eonus looked ahead, studying the approaching caravan. They could hear the distant, heavy rhythm of the donkeys’ trudging steps, the soft voices of the merchants murmuring together in idle conversation.

“Centurion Pulcher appreciates you rather well, to my observation, sir,” Eonus said, still watching the traders.

“What do you mean?” Abdes asked.

Eonus glanced at him. “He drew me aside, sir, before we left for Bethlehem. He asked me to look out for you. I think he was worried, sir. He had done his best by you, he said, but he was concerned with you out from his charge, and all. He thought something might happen to you.”

Or that my youth and inexperience would see me killed—his trusty, stupid actarius, who did all of his grunt work for him, Abdes thought, frowning. Worried and appreciative, my ass.

The donkey caravan passed them and Abdes watched the laden donkeys tromp slowly by, their muzzles nodding toward the road with each plodding step. He counted more men in their company than Herenus had reported; at least seventeen by his perfunctory head check.

“Is that why you’ve been so receptive to me, Eonus?” Abdes asked, averting his attention back to the soldier.

“No, sir,” Eonus replied, smirking. “I’ve been receptive because you can outshoot me. I figure the rest will take care of itself eventually.”

Abdes heard a hissing scrape of metal, and he glanced to his left. He caught a glimpse of a blurred movement, something rushing at them, and he recoiled, his eyes flying wide. “Eonus—!” he cried.

The men of the donkey caravan charged them, falling into the decury with swords brandished and swinging. They caught the soldiers completely by surprise and off guard. Abdes stumbled backward, wrenching his sword from beneath his mantle as they crashed together in a sudden, confusing tangle of clattering blades, howling voices, thrashing limbs, jostling shoulders, yowling donkeys and tussling silhouettes.

Abdes had less than a sharp breath to see a sword swinging toward his head in a sharp arc, a tall, burly man plowing headlong toward him. "Gods above—!" he cried, dancing back, jerking his sword up reflexively. The force with which the two blades smashed together left him staggering, his knees yielding beneath him. Abdes found his footing and lunged against his opponent, rocking him back and off balance; as his sword slipped away from Abdes', Abdes rammed his blade forward, deep into his attacker's gut.

The man howled, twisting and crumpling to the ground. Abdes clasped his hilt with both hands and wrenched it loose from his stomach. He felt the ground beneath his sandals shudder; someone rushed him from behind. He whirled, again drawing his sword up toward his face, blocking a proffered downward blow. This man was stronger, heavier than the first and when Abdes' knees buckled, he let them fail him. He dropped to the ground, and the man stumbled over him in surprise. He floundered, falling, and Abdes jerked his dagger from his hip, ramming it into the man's groin.

He shoved the man away from him, sending him toppling to the ground, but before he could grasp his dagger, reclaiming it, someone else charged him. Abdes scrambled to his feet, backpedaling as the man swung his sword toward his neck; Abdes felt the whip of wind from the blade as it sliced the open air scant measures from his throat. The man's attack left his torso vulnerable and before he could recover, Abdes lunged forward, punching his sword into his chest. He felt resistance as the blade struck and he realized, his eyes widening all the more.

Chain mail—they're wearing chain mail beneath their clothes...!

Abdes whirled, seeing only a swarm of shadows grappling together, hearing only cries of pain and rage, smelling only the sudden, thick, metallic stink of blood. He wanted to scream to Eonus, but had lost sight of his friend in the melee. “Eonus!” he yelled. “Eonus—they’re wearing mail!”

A heavy silhouette rushed at him and Abdes dropped, ducking his head, feeling the breeze from the sword swing fluttering against his neck. He stumbled clumsily sideways as the man charged past him; Abdes sent his sword around in a sharp arc, driving the blade deeply into the side of his throat. More blood slapped against his face, into his eyes, and he staggered, shoving the heel of his hand against his face, momentarily and painfully blinded.

More footfalls trembled underfoot; Abdes opened his eyes, sucking in a strangled breath at the blood stinging him, and then yelped as a man tackled him, sending him crashing backward. Abdes hit the ground hard, landing on his back with the man’s massive weight atop him, crushing the breath from him, and then they rolled, tangled together, the man’s fists flying, pummeling into Abdes’ face, his neck and chest. They struggled, rolling over the shoulder of the road and down a slight incline into a shallow, rain-filled ditch. Somehow, by the time they hit bottom, Abdes had wound up topside; he reared back, his sword jarred from his hand, lost to him, and pistoned his fist forward, driving his knuckles into the man’s face.

He struggled wildly beneath Abdes, as Abdes fought to keep his thighs clamped about the man’s waist. He punched him again, and the man grasped at his face, desperately. His fingers hooked into claws, jamming against Abdes’ eyes, and Abdes yelled, shaking his head, struggling to dislodge him. The man shoved mightily, knocking Abdes sideways, splashing into the water. His attacker sprang at him like a cat, slamming heavily against him, pinning him on his belly. Abdes fought, shoving his hands beneath him, trying to buck, but the man clamped his hands against the cap of his head and shoved his face beneath the water.

In that sudden, desperate moment, Abdes fought with everything he had; he whooped in a breath to cry out, but sucked in only muddy water. He thrashed beneath the man,

managing to get his face out of the water, to drag in a choking, frantic breath and then the man shoved him down again, smashing his face against the floor of the ditch, the mud-covered witchgrass and pebbles.

He couldn't breathe; he'd raised his head long enough to spew some of the water out of his throat, but it filled his gullet, his lungs, and he fought, straining for breath, terrified. He reached behind him, clawing, scrabbling, slapping at the man's hands and arms. He dug his nails fiercely into his wrists, and the man's grip loosened at the pain. Abdes reared his head back, sucking desperately at the open air, only to flood his gut with more water as the man slammed something solid and heavy—probably the pommel of his dagger—brutally against the back of Abdes' head, rattling the wits from him, forcing him underwater again.

He couldn't think of anything but the raw, frantic need for air. He could hear the muffled sounds of fighting beyond his shoulders; he could hear the water gurgling, sloshing, whipping into a churning frenzy by his struggles. He pawed at the man, at the ground, tangling his fingers in the sodden grass, trying to get enough grip to leverage himself, to raise his head. After a long moment in which his lungs burned and he became aware of dazzling, fluttering lights against the backdrop of his eyelids, he fell still, his hands drooping limply, his fingers splayed against the muddy ditch bank. Shadows swept down upon him, engulfing him, swallowing his mind. He felt a tiny, delicate stream of bubbles slip from his opened mouth, tickling against his cheek, the line of his nose, and his eyelids fluttered open. He saw only murky water, brown and grey, silt spiraling and swirling before him.

Bright, white light suddenly infused through the water, setting it aglow around him. It was as if a burst of sunlight had speared down against the ditch, blinding and searing, and Abdes cried out in pain, his voice gurgling feebly, spewing bubbles from his lips toward his nose. He closed his eyes, struggling with the last ounce of effort he could summon and then the man behind him jerked violently. His heavy weight was abruptly gone; Abdes was dimly aware of a loud splash,

the man's hands slapping against him and then away as he crashed beside him in the ditch.

Eonus... Abdes thought. He...he saved me...

He reached forward, forcing his hands to move, hooking his fingers into the mud. He managed to crawl, kicking weakly with his feet, half-expecting Eonus or whoever had rescued him to snatch him back the scruff and haul him from the water. Abdes dragged himself against the sloping bank of the ditch. He turned his head, gagging and choking, his entire body wracked as he retched silt and water from his form.

He lay there, helpless and weak, shuddering and gasping with his cheek pressed against the mud. "Eonus..." he croaked, struggling to move again. His body had grown leaden and still, his limbs numb, his mind abandoning him.

"Eonus..." he whimpered, and then he fainted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

He dreamed of something soft and fuzzy fluttering against his face. He imagined a warm huff of breath against his cheek, and a soft, sloshing sound. Something velveteen slapped lightly against his ear, and he groaned, shrugging his shoulder, trying to flap his hand and wave whatever it was away. “Stop...” he whispered.

He heard the harried splashing of something dancing back at his voice and movement in surprise and fright. He knew he was dreaming then, his mind lost to him, because he heard a sheep mawl, a low and tremulous, warbling.

“Here he is indeed,” he dreamed of someone saying, and new splashes met Abdes’ ear as someone stepped down the ditch embankment and into the water. He dreamed of the sheep crying again, and Abdes’ eyelids fluttered open, drawing to a hesitant, dazed half-mast.

He couldn’t see much; his mind was clouded and still more asleep than awake, and his gaze was bleary, swimming in haze. He imagined a light seeping through the fog of his vision, a pale, luminous glow that seemed to enfold him. He heard the sheep call again, bleating excitedly as someone approached. He felt water spatter his face as its hooves danced in the water. He could smell it, the heavy, musky odor of its thick wool, sodden with ditch water. He couldn’t see it, though; there was nothing but the light, and his eyes drooped closed once more, his breath escaping him in a shuddering sigh.

“You’ve done well, Elazar,” he dreamed of someone saying to the sheep, a voice that he dimly recognized as familiar.

Abdes heard the rustle of clothing, the soft splash of water as someone knelt beside him. He felt a hand slip against his shoulder, turning him over and Abdes’ cheek fell against a man’s chest. He could feel the man’s warmth through the wool of his tunic; he could hear the soft measure of his heart against his ear. Abdes groaned as the man drew his other arm beneath Abdes’ legs, lifting him from the ground. “Eonus...” he whispered, thinking it was his friend who had come for him, Eonus who picked him up.

Whoever hefted him was strong. Abdes hadn’t heard him grunt or gasp to bear his limp, leaden weight in full. His heart hadn’t quickened in its measure at all, despite this sudden and uncustomary load.

“Go on, Elazar,” the man said to the sheep. “Up we go now.”

He carried Abdes from the ditch, the effort not tiring or winding him in the least, his gait surefooted and easy, as if he carried no more weight against his chest than an armful of rags.

“Eonus...” Abdes groaned again, struggling to open his eyes. “The others...where...where are they...?”

He blinked dazedly up at the face of the man who had found him, the man who carried him. *I’m dreaming*, Abdes thought his eyes rolling back into his skull, his eyelids fluttering closed. *I must be dreaming or...or I’ve gone mad...*

“It’s alright, lad,” Gabriel, the shepherd, said softly to him as he fainted again. “It’s alright now.”

He dreamed again, of Maryam this time; the sound of Maryam’s voice murmuring a soft, sweet melody to him, as she would for Yeshua when he grew fussy or weary. He imagined her hand lightly against his brow, brushing his hair back. The sound of her voice comforted him, and he turned his face toward her palm, moaning her name quietly.

"It's alright," she whispered as she stroked his hair. He imagined the delicate press of her lips as she kissed his brow. "I'm here, Abdes. I'm right here."

He was aware of a terrible, tremendous ache throughout his body. The pain seemed to originate somewhere along the back of his head, above the base of his neck, and radiate outward from there, enveloping him.

"Maryam," he imagined another woman saying.

"He's calling for me," Maryam said, her hand still against his face, her voice tremulous, as if she hovered on the verge of tears. Abdes imagined he could hear other sounds now, the overlapping, high voices of babies gurgling and squealing in a delighted, disharmonic blend. His mind stirred a bit more, puzzled by this noise.

That sounds like Yesbua.

"You're not supposed to be in here," the woman said to Maryam. "You'll see Yoseph sore with us both—mostly me, because he expected you to go anyway, and he trusted me to stop you."

"I...I know, Elizabeth," Maryam said, her voice warbling all the more. "I'm sorry, but he's calling for me. He said my name..."

He didn't know if he was dreaming or not; his mind felt murky, swimming in fog, and he was disoriented, confused. "Maryam..." he groaned. He wanted to open his eyes, but his eyelids were impossibly heavy and willfully disobedient. "Maryam, I..."

Where am I? he wanted to ask her. *What happened to me?*

Abdes felt Maryam's breath against his face, a loose strand of her hair draping against his cheek as she leaned over him, kissing his brow again. "Don't be afraid," she whispered, and something warm and wet tickled against his face; a tear. Maryam was weeping for him. "I'm here, Abdes. It's alright." Her breath and tears faded as she lifted her head, pleading. "Please, Elizabeth," she said. "Please let me stay with him. Just a little while longer. He's hurt. He needs me."

“He needs rest, child,” the woman, Elizabeth said, her voice gentle and closer now, as if she’d stepped toward Maryam. “Come on, lamb. Let him sleep.”

Abdes heard the rustle of clothing, and then Maryam’s hand lifted away from him. He heard soft footsteps, and he managed at last to open his eyes a bleary half-mast. He blinked dazedly, watching Maryam and another woman, both more muddled, misshapen forms in their long tunics and mantles than distinguishable forms, walking away from him.

His eyelids fluttered closed again. *Not a dream*, he thought dimly, struggling to rouse his mind, to force himself to wake in full. *This is real. I’m not dreaming. Where am I? What happened?*

He moved his hand slowly, reaching for his aching head. He canted his face slowly, letting his hesitant fingertips fumble against the nape of his neck, his tousled, disheveled hair. He felt the swell of an enormous knot; at this glancing touch, pain lanced through his head, spearing down his neck, and he sucked in a sharp, hissing breath, jerking his hand away.

As his blurred line of sight slowly swam into view, he found himself looking up at the exposed rafters of an unfamiliar ceiling. He could hear the sound of water splashing from somewhere nearby, as if from an adjacent room, and then a baby squealed loudly, happily.

Abdes sat up slowly and tried to gather his bearings. He was in a small room with mud-brick walls, lying on a mat pallet against the floor. A wooden table rested against the far wall and a clay oil lamp atop it offered soft, yellow glow. He could see baskets and clay jars of various sizes about the room.

Nothing prompted any recollection to him, and he closed his eyes again, struggling to remember. The last thing he clearly recalled was leaving Sepphoris; he and his decury were walking out of the city, dressed in common clothes. *We were going to Nazareth*, Abdes thought, his brows furrowing. *Mallus sent us to go with Maryam and Yoseph to the border.*

His eyes flew wide, his breath drawn abruptly short as he remembered the donkey caravan. Suddenly, all of those

memories lost to him only a breath ago restored in full, vivid, brutal clarity. *We were attacked*, he thought, breathless and stricken. *Outnumbered almost two to one, and I fell into the ditch. There was a man sitting on top of me, holding me under the water. I couldn't breathe....!*

Remembering what had happened didn't make any more sense of his circumstances, he realized. He remembered drowning, sucking down brown, silty water until his lungs had burned with desperate effort to draw breath. That was the last he recalled. He opened his eyes, looking around the room again.

Elizabeth, he thought. *The woman I heard Maryam talking to... Maryam called her 'Elizabeth.'* *She has an aunt named Elizabeth who lives in Rimmon.*

Ham had also told Abdes that Yoseph meant to send Maryam and Yeshua to Rimmon to stay with Elizabeth; this had aggravated Abdes, because he'd specifically told Yoseph to see Maryam out of Galilee. Ham had promised he would try to convince Yoseph to send Maryam further north than Rimmon—to Phoenicia. If Abdes had somehow come to be in Rimmon, and if Maryam was with him, obviously Yoseph had proven unwilling to reason, even with Ham.

"Damn it," Abdes muttered, his voice hoarse and croaking. *That rot damn stubborn man*, he thought. *He'll see them killed—Maryam and the baby both—just to spite me.*

He drew his legs beneath him and stumbled to his feet, grimacing as his sore, aching joints and muscles protested. He staggered sideways until his shoulder smacked against the wall, and he leaned heavily against it. *Where are the others?* he thought in sudden, alarmed realization. He was alone in the room; of Eonus and the other members of his decury, there was no sign. He couldn't hear their voices, only Maryam's and Elizabeth's from beyond the chamber door, along with Yeshua and another baby babbling together as water slapped and splashed.

"John, now..." he heard Elizabeth say. "You've gone and splashed her head to..."

A baby squealed happily, and Maryam laughed. "It's alright, Elizabeth. Don't scold him. He likes the water."

Where's Eonns? Abdes thought, bewildered. *Where are my men?*

"John loves the water," Elizabeth said, and she laughed. "I can't get him out of it half the time. He cries if I try. You should hear him caterwauling and carrying on..."

The decury had fought back when the men accompanying the donkey caravan had attacked. It hadn't been a random assault and Abdes knew it. He remembered his sword meeting resistance as he'd struck against the men. *They were wearing chain mail beneath their clothes, just like we were*, he thought. *They'd been sent to attack us.*

And it didn't take a clear mind or full recollection to know who had sent them.

"Seneca," Abdes whispered, his brows furrowing. Mallus had told Seneca that Abdes' decury had been deployed outside of the city. He had offered pretense as to why, but Seneca must have learned the truth. *Menachem must have gone to him anyway*, he thought. *Menachem must have told him that I knew where Salome was.*

Seneca wouldn't have given a rot damn about Maryam, Yoseph or their baby—but he would have cared whether or not Salome lived. Salome knew about the conspiracy; it was possible she knew of Seneca's involvement. Abdes hadn't been able to keep her roused enough to ask her. If Seneca had learned that Salome had gone to Abdes for help, that Abdes had hidden her, he would have gladly ordered them both killed—and Abdes' decury along with him—to keep them silent.

"Salome!" he gasped in dismay. If Maryam was in Rimmon, it might mean Ham had never reached Nazareth to convince Yoseph otherwise.

"No," Abdes whimpered, limping, staggering toward the door. His heart hammered in sudden, desperate panic. *Oh, gods, no, not Ham. Not Ham...!*

He stumbled against the chamber door frame, and caught himself before he fell. Maryam and Elizabeth turned at the heavy sound of him clutching at the wooden frame, his clumsy footsteps. The two were seated on the floor with a large, shallow clay dish between them. Yeshua and another baby of nearly the same age—John, presumably—sat in the makeshift tub, splashing and cooing together.

“Abdes!” Maryam exclaimed, her eyes flying wide, her mouth unfurling in a bright, excited smile. She scrambled to her feet.

“Where...where’s my brother?” he asked, frightened and confused. “Where is he? Where is Ham?”

“Abdes, you’re awake,” Maryam said happily, hurrying toward him. She tried to hug him, nearly toppling him, and he reeled, leaning heavily against her.

“Maryam, help him sit,” Elizabeth said, rising to her feet. “He’s still weak yet. He’ll knock you to the floor, lamb. Help him—”

“Where’s Ham?” Abdes asked Maryam, clutching at her shoulders, staring at her in desperate implore. “Where is he? He...he was supposed to go to Nazareth. Please, Maryam, where is my brother? Is he alright?”

“He’s at the market with Yoseph and my uncle,” Maryam said, leaving him shuddering with relief, and stumbling in confusion. Her expression was puzzled and frightened. “Abdes, he’s fine. He came with us here.”

“Come and sit, Abdes,” Elizabeth said, walking toward him. He shied at her approach, still wide-eyed and uncertain.

“I want my brother,” he whispered, shaking his head. “What happened to me? How did I get here? Where am I?”

“In Rimmmon,” Maryam said. “This is my aunt Elizabeth. You’re in her house—you’re safe, Abdes.”

“How did I get here?” Abdes asked. “There were men with me—ten men. Where are they?”

Maryam looked up at him, her brows lifting. “Abdes...” she began softly.

He drew away from her, stumbling backward. "Where are my men? How did I get here? Maryam, where are my men?"

"You were here when we arrived," Maryam said. "Elizabeth said Gabriel brought you in the middle of the night; that you were hurt, Abdes. We thought you'd been robbed."

"Gabriel?" Abdes asked. "The shepherd?"

Here he is indeed, he remembered Gabriel saying—a voice from a dream, as light had surrounded him and gentle hands had settled against him.

"He knocked on my door," Elizabeth said. "You were lying at his feet against the doorstep."

"But he's an old man," Abdes said. "He's half-lame and feeble. He couldn't have carried me—not two paces, much less from Nazareth. How...how did he...?"

It's alright, lad, Gabriel had told him in what had to have been a dream; Abdes could fathom no logical explanation for it otherwise. *It's alright now*.

"I don't know," Elizabeth said softly, her voice still calm and reassuring. "But you were alone with him. There were no others, and he made no mention."

"But I had ten men," Abdes whispered. "They were in my charge."

"Abdes," Maryam said, and he looked at her, stricken and confused. She touched his face gently. "It's alright. Please don't be frightened. We'll find out what happened. We'll find out where they are."

Abdes pressed the heel of his hand against his brow, struggling to make sense of what felt like madness to him. "Ham," he whispered.

"He's here," Maryam said. "He's in Rimmon, Abdes. He's only gone to the market."

"He had a woman with him," Abdes said.

"She's here, too, Abdes," Maryam said, drawing his gaze. "Salome is sleeping. She's right over there in the other

room.” She nodded to another doorway across the chamber, and he blinked at her, stupidly. “She’s sleeping.”

“She’s hurt,” Elizabeth said, her voice soft and soothing. “You’re both hurt, Abdes. You shouldn’t be on your feet yet. Please, come and sit. You must be thirsty and hungry besides.”

“No,” Abdes said, shaking his head. He drew away from Maryam, limping across the room. He wanted to see Salome; he wasn’t certain of anything at the moment, and he needed to see her, to know she was safe.

“Abdes...” Maryam began, moving to follow him. Elizabeth draped her hand against her niece’s shoulder, staying her.

Abdes stumbled into the adjacent chamber, and found Salome as they’d promised, resting comfortably, sleeping on a cot. Maryam or Elizabeth had loaned her some clothes and the draping folds of drably colored fabric helped disguise her bruises. Her wounds had been bathed and dressed and beneath the edges of her mantle around her face, he could see clean linens pressed and wrapped, bandages and compresses to soothe her. Her hands were folded loosely against the blankets covering her belly. Abdes let his knees fail him; he knelt clumsily at her bedside.

“Salome,” he whispered, touching her hand.

She murmured softly, her fingers moving slowly, feebly against his. Her eyes opened sleepily and she turned her face at the sound of his voice, her mouth fluttering in a fleeting, dazed smile. “Abdes...” she whispered. “My...my soldier...”

He smiled at her, nearly bursting into relieved tears. “I’m here,” he said. “I’m right here, Salome.”

She nodded once, her eyes falling closed. Her smile faded, softening as she slept again, and her fingers slipped limply away from his.

“Ham told us Menachem did that to her,” Maryam said softly from the doorway. He turned, looking over his

shoulder and found her shied at the threshold, wide-eyed. "He hurt her like that."

Abdes nodded, and Maryam went to him, kneeling beside him. "You...you love her, don't you?" she whispered.

He nodded, pained. "With all of my heart," he said, not turning his eyes away from Salome. "Everything I have."

Maryam was quiet for a long moment, and when she touched his hand, he closed his fingers against hers fiercely. "I've tried to keep her comfortable," she said. "She wakes now and then, and I've been trying to talk to her so she doesn't feel so frightened."

Abdes nodded again. "Thank you."

"Maybe your soldiers are alright," she said, drawing his gaze from the bed. She looked at him, her eyes round and earnest, filled with such innocent hope, he felt panged by it. "Maybe they couldn't find you and they went back to Sepphoris after the robbers attacked you."

"They weren't robbers," he said.

She looked at him for a long moment. "Were they Herod's soldiers?" she asked softly, hesitantly, her voice tremulous with mounting fear. "Were they coming for us?"

"I don't think so," he said. "They passed us coming from Nazareth, not toward." He looked at her gravely. "They were sent to kill us. To kill me."

Her eyes widened, bright with new fear. "Why?" she whispered. "Because you helped us? Me and Yoseph?"

Abdes shook his head. "No," he said. He looked down at Salome. "Because I helped her."

He closed his eyes and told her everything; his suspicions of a conspiracy and how he and Mallus had been investigating it surreptitiously. As he spoke, he felt a spear of alarm. "Mallus," he breathed, his brows furrowing. Seneca had suspected Abdes was aware of the conspiracy, if only through Salome; he would have to suspect Mallus, too. And if the Praefectus had ordered Abdes murdered to keep him silent,

Abdes didn't doubt Mallus would be in similar danger. *Gods, let him be alright*, he thought. *Please don't let Seneca have hurt Mallus.*

"The Praefectus is a part of it?" Maryam whispered, aghast.

Abdes nodded. "He doesn't give a damn about the rest, though, the Jews. He only wants to make himself look good with Caesar when he stops the revolt." He looked at her. "Judas ben Hezekiah, Zadduc, the Pharisee Sanhedrin priest, Menachem and Tarfon...they're all a part of it. They'll see their followers killed, and Seneca knows it. Even if they gather every Jew in Sepphoris to their cause, they can't overpower the cohort. They don't have the weapons, or the armor. They'll be massacred, and Seneca will look like a hero to Rome. It hasn't occurred to them. They haven't even thought of it, because they think their Messiah is coming. They're waiting for something and that has to be it. They're waiting for their Messiah to lead them. They think he'll see them win."

Maryam looked at him for a long moment, her expression troubled. "Abdes, they don't think the Messiah is coming," she said.

"Yes, they do," he said. "I told you—I've seen it on the walls, the vandalism. The number seventy-seven—the seventy-seventh generation. They believe the old prophecies—they think the Messiah will come."

Maryam shook her head. "They don't think he's coming," she said again. "Abdes, they think he's here."

Abdes' brows lifted in surprise. "No one knows what the Messiah will be," she said. "No one agrees. Some say he'll be a healer, or a priest, but others think he will be a great warrior—a descendant of King David who will lead us to victory in a violent overthrow of our oppressors. Like Joshua at Jericho when our people reclaimed the promised land from the Caananites."

She lowered her gaze toward his hand. "They think Judas ben Hezekiah is the Messiah," she whispered, and he drew in a startled breath. "He claims he's a descendant of King David. He's known Yoseph for years—long before Lamech

and Heth came from Gamala. That's why they worked for him. Yoseph thought they were kin."

"Are they?" Abdes asked, and she shook his head. "Is Yoseph related to Judas?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't think so, but Yoseph...he never cared if he wasn't. He left Bethlehem when his parents died. Everyone there knew...they knew who he was...what his kinline was, and he wanted to be rid of it. He didn't want that—the expectations people had of him. He came to Nazareth, where nobody knew him. When he met Judas, he was glad that Judas claimed the same heritage. Judas wanted to be David's heir; he wanted people to listen to him, believe in him because of it, and Yoseph...he was only happy to let him...to let everyone believe what they wanted and leave him alone. Leave me and Yeshua alone."

Of course, Abdes thought. He'd been pressed to figure out why in Hades wealthy, powerful men would associate themselves with a common scribe like Judas. He'd been puzzled as to how Judas could wield such seeming influence and authority over Menachem, Zadduc and Tarfon—and still remain credible to his common followers. He'd wondered if Judas had really been born to wealth, if it was something he disguised to seem simple in his means, but used to keep powerful allies.

But that's not it at all, he thought. *Gods above, they listen to him because they think he's the Messiah. They think he's their leader.*

"Why haven't they revolted yet?" Abdes asked. "What are they waiting for, Maryam? Is it because they didn't care about what happened in Bethlehem—or who Herod feared might be the Messiah?" *They've found their own*, he thought. *Whatever Herod thought or believed wouldn't matter to them.*

She shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I don't listen to them. I don't know any of them, and when I go to the city, I keep away. They frighten me."

"Then how do you know they think Judas is the Messiah?" Abdes asked. "Are you sure of it, Maryam? How do you...?" His voice faltered as she looked away from him,

anxious color stoked in his cheeks. “Gods above,” he whispered. “Is Yoseph part of it, Maryam?”

“Maryam, the baby is ready to nurse,” Yoseph said from behind them, his voice stern, heavy with disapproval.

Maryam whirled, her breath hiccupping in start, her hand darting away from Abdes’. Yoseph stood at the doorway, his arms folded across his chest, his brows narrowed. “Don’t you hear him crying?” he asked his wife.

“I...I’m sorry,” Maryam said softly, standing. She glanced at Abdes, stricken, and then hurried from the room.

Abdes rose to his feet, struggling not to wince, to keep his gaze even with Yoseph’s.

“You’re awake,” Yoseph said. “Good. No one has wanted to leave here for Sidon for fear you’d drop dead.”

His voice was cold, dripping with undisguised disdain. Abdes’ brows narrowed, his mouth turned in a frown. “Is that why you didn’t want to leave in the first place, Yoseph?” he asked. “Afraid you’d miss something? Your part in the great overthrow of the city?”

Yoseph glared at him, his brows furrowed deeply, his hands folding into fists. “Shut your mouth, boy,” he said. “I’m tired of your outlandish stories, your crazed lies. You think I don’t realize who that woman is? What she is?” He pointed to Salome. “You sent one of Menachem’s whores to my house—a sinner and an offense against the Laws—and you think I don’t know why? Did you think I’d buy Ham’s excuses? Do you think I’m so stupid, boy?”

“Her only crime was that her father didn’t have a friend of means to marry her—like you did Maryam—to protect her from Menachem!” Abdes snapped. “Does that make what’s happened to her right? Does that make it her due, Yoseph? Do you wish he had beaten her dead?”

Yoseph turned, stomping toward the doorway. Abdes followed him, grabbing Yoseph roughly by the arm. “You think Judas ben Hezekiah is the Messiah,” Abdes said. “You think he’s come to set your people free from Herod and Rome.

You believe in him, don't you, Yoseph? You want to be a part of it—of his revolt. You'd take up arms against the cohort."

"Get your hand off me..." Yoseph said, wrenching his arm loose of Abdes' grasp, making him stumble backward.

"Is that why you weren't the least bit worried about Herod's soldiers coming to Nazareth?" Abdes said. "Why you refused to listen to the Median magi and told Maryam she's being ridiculous? Is all of the 'Messiah' prophecy nonsense to you, Yoseph? Or is it only if someone believes it about your son?"

"You know our language, some of our customs, but you don't know anything about the prophecies of my people—or about Judas ben Hezekiah!" Yoseph shouted, his face infused with furious color.

"I know Judas ben Hezekiah and the people conspiring with him will say anything—do anything—to make you believe in him, and his cause," Abdes shouted back. "I know he's made sure that whatever tensions exist between your people and the Romans in Sepphoris gets worse in short measure. I know he set his own brothers—Lamech and Heth—to rape and murder a young Jewish girl last year, and that he planned others to follow. Those plans were ruined when a Roman soldier saw them and stopped them—a soldier named Pantera whom Judas has since blamed for the crime."

Yoseph jerked at this, stumbling back, his eyes flying wide. All of the flush abruptly drained from his face, leaving him ashen. "That's a lie," he said hoarsely.

"No, it's not," Abdes said. "Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera. That's the name they gave me when I enlisted—when I was given Roman citizenship. They called me Pantera because I out-shot the optios with my bow—because Ham used to take me hunting to learn to shoot. It means *hunter*."

"I...I know what it means," Yoseph said, breathless with shock.

"I saw their faces," Abdes said. "I saw Lamech and Heth. They stabbed me and left me to die. They murdered that poor girl and left me to be blamed for it. And when I lived—

when they found out I might be able to identify them—Judas ben Hezekiah let his brothers be killed, again to my blame. He might not have done it, but he didn't prevent it. I don't know about your Jewish laws, but by Herod's and Rome's, that makes him a murderer."

He'd exhausted himself with his outrage, his shouting. Whatever little strength he'd summoned abandoned him, and he stumbled, feeling dizzy. He pressed his palm against his brow and crumpled to his knees. Yoseph didn't move to help him; he remained motionless in the doorway, staring at Abdes.

"Do whatever you want with that," Abdes whispered, hunching his shoulders wearily. "I don't care. But I won't see Maryam—or Salome—in danger. Go back to Sepphoris. Tell them everything...anything. But I'm taking Maryam and Salome to Sidon."

"What's going on? Why are you shouting?" Ham exclaimed as he rushed in the room. He blinked between his brother and Yoseph, and then hurried toward Abdes. "Abdes!" he cried softly, anguished. He fell to his knees; Abdes groaned as Ham drew him against his shoulder, saving him by about a half a breath from collapsing face-first to the dirt floor.

"I'm alright," he murmured, slumping against Ham. "It...it will pass..."

As he said this, he swooned, his eyes fluttering closed.

Abdes awoke sometime later, although he had no idea how long he had been asleep. He found himself on the mat pallet in Elizabeth's bed chamber again, and sat up slowly, wincing as his injured head throbbed. He didn't realize what had roused him until he heard the distinctive sound of thundering hooves against the ground from beyond the house. It sounded like numerous horses galloping right outside, racing down the street. He turned his face toward the sound, bewildered and frowning.

He could hear anxious voices overlapping in sudden, uncertain fright from beyond the chamber doorway, and the babies crying to realize the alarm of the adults.

“Roman soldiers,” he heard Ham say, his voice breathless and somewhat shrill. “Twenty at least on foot—five on horseback.”

At this, Abdes stood, his heart seized with sudden, inexplicable fright. He stumbled clumsily until he reclaimed his balance and then limped toward the door. “Why so many?” Maryam asked. “What do they want?”

Abdes stepped into the main room of the house. No one noticed him. They all had their attentions turned to the front door. Yoseph had opened it a small margin and leaned his head outside. “They’ve stopped,” he said, without looking over his shoulder.

“What do they want?” Elizabeth asked, shying near to Maryam.

Abdes could hear men shouting outside and the heavy rumbling of sandal soles against the ground as the soldiers spread out, ordered into motion. “Cover every street!” he heard someone yell. “He’s here somewhere—find him! Find Pantera!”

Abdes recoiled in the doorway, nearly spilling onto his ass with shock. As he smacked clumsily against the door frame, Maryam and Ham turned to him, startled. “Abdes!” Ham said, hurrying toward his brother.

Yoseph stepped back inside and closed the door. He turned, his expression grim, his brows furrowed as he caught sight of Abdes. “They’re calling for you,” he said.

“Why?” Maryam whimpered, her eyes enormous with fright. “Why do they want Abdes?”

“Not Abdes,” Abdes said, as Ham helped steady him upright. “Pantera. They said Pantera.” He looked at Ham. “It’s Seneca,” he said. “He must have figured out that I’m alive. That his mercenaries didn’t kill me on the road to Nazareth.”

“I don’t understand,” Ham said, bewildered and helpless.

“Seneca made me drop that cognomen,” Abdes said. “He’s been telling everyone that Pantera’s incarcerated at the

citadel. So if those soldiers are looking for Pantera, Seneca must have changed his story.”

Ham blinked, aghast. “He told them you escaped?” he whispered. “They’re here to arrest you?”

Abdes nodded. “I’d be willing to wager,” he said. “Gods only know what else he has told them about me. There’s no other way he could find me now except by Pantera. He means to see me dead no matter what.”

“No!” Maryam whimpered. She darted toward Abdes, horrified. “No, Abdes, no,” she said, her eyes flooded with tears. “We’ll tell them the truth. What you’ve told us, what you’ve found out. Mallus will help you. He knows, too, and he—”

“Maryam, if Seneca’s sent soldiers out for me, I think Mallus must be dead,” Abdes said, unable to disguise his own anguish and dismay at the admittance. “He would have found some way to prevent this otherwise, to help me.”

“No!” Maryam gasped, her tears spilling. She turned to Yoseph. “We have to tell them!” she cried. “We have to tell them the truth—you have to tell them!”

A heavy knocking shuddered the door, and they all whirled at the sound, all of them breathless with bright, abrupt horror. “Abdes!” Maryam whispered, wheeling to face him, her face ashen.

The knocking fell again, more severe and pounding this time. Ham moved, his arm around Abdes’ waist, drawing him in tow. “Come on,” he said, heading for the rear door.

“Ham, no,” Abdes said, shaking his head.

“Be quiet, Abdes,” Ham said, opening the door.

“There’s nothing out there,” Elizabeth said. “It’s only the courtyard—walled on all sides.”

“Ham, stop,” Abdes said, frowning, trying to push his brother away from him. “Just let me go outside to them.”

“No,” Ham said, and Abdes caught him by the collar of his tunic, leaning toward him, angry.

"Listen to me," he said. "Ham, if they come in here, they'll find Salome. They'll find Maryam and the baby." Ham paused, and Abdes tried again to shrug loose of him. "Just let me go to them."

"No," Yoseph said, striding briskly toward them. He glanced at Elizabeth and Maryam. "Elizabeth, open the door."

"Yoseph, stop," Maryam cried. "What are you doing?"

"Elizabeth—open the door before they knock it down," Yoseph snapped. He grabbed Abdes roughly by the crook of his elbow and hauled him outside into the courtyard before the younger man—or anyone else—could offer even stammered protest. Yoseph drew the door closed behind him, and when he let Abdes go, he stumbled back, surprised and bewildered.

"What are you doing?" Abdes asked. "They'll take Salome if they find her. Seneca would have told them to. He would have bartered with Menachem for it." He tried to march past Yoseph, but the older man stepped into his path, grasping him by the shoulders. "Let me go," Abdes said, struggling to backpedal away from him. "Yoseph—"

Yoseph clapped his hand against Abdes' mouth, muffling him. "Shut up," he hissed, jerking Abdes against him so that they were nearly nose to nose.

All at once, Abdes realized. *He means to turn me in, he thought. He means to turn us all in—me, Salome and Ham. He's one of Judas' followers, and he hates me. He'd see us all dead to be rid of me...to impress Judas!*

His brows furrowed, and he fought, trying in vain to ram his knee up into Yoseph's crotch. Yoseph shoved him backward, keeping his hand planted firmly against his mouth. He pressed Abdes against the wall of the house and pinned him there, leaning toward him. "Shut up," he said again.

"You bastard!" Abdes tried to yell around Yoseph's mashing palm. "You rot damn bastard!"

"They're inside the house—would you shut up, boy?" Yoseph snapped in a hushed voice, his brows furrowed deeply. At his sharp tone, Abdes fell still and silent, blinking at him in

confusion. “Listen to me,” Yoseph whispered. “They’re going to take the arsenal.”

Abdes’ eyes widened above Yoseph’s hand, and he mewled, a muffled, “What?”

“Judas ben Hezekiah,” Yoseph said. “Zadduc and the others. They’re going to take the arsenal first. They’ll outfit the men they have and take the rest—they’re going to march against Jerusalem and try to take the city. They’ll gather more men as they go and they’ll give the rest of the weapons and armor to them.”

Abdes stared at him, stricken. He’d told Maryam that Judas and his followers stood no chance fighting the cohort soldiers. But they would if they took the citadel first, he realized. A small detachment of men could claim it—and hold it—while the others distributed the armory inventory.

The inventory I told them about, he thought, and he groaned softly, dismayed. He’d told Salome about his inventory audit, the total number of equipment he’d tallied. Such disclosure hadn’t seemed important to him—not even when he’d realized her deception.

“When?” Abdes asked as Yoseph slipped his hand away from his mouth. “When will they hit the citadel?”

“Herod is sick—he’s dying,” Yoseph said. “It’s only a matter of time—any day now, we’ve heard from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.”

“They’re waiting for him to die?” Abdes whispered, and Yoseph nodded.

“Herod’s sons will fight like pit dogs turned on one another over the throne, will or no will,” Yoseph said. “While Rome will do everything it can to do absolutely nothing at all. All of Judea will be unsettled.”

“A perfect time for a revolt,” Abdes murmured, and Yoseph nodded. Abdes frowned at him. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because it’s not too late,” Yoseph said. “Herod still lives—you still have time.”

"I'm not leaving," Abdes said, frowning. "They're in the house—they've seen Salome. They—"

"The only thing they've seen is a woman whose husband beat her," Yoseph said, frowning back at Abdes. "I told Ham when we left Nazareth to say that's what has happened—she is his wife and he beat her. That is the way of things, and none of those soldiers will question him otherwise if he says they are wed. Now get out of here—go back to Sepphoris and warn them."

"There's no one to warn," Abdes said. "The Praefectus has helped arranged the whole thing. He doesn't mean for your people to ever seize the armory. He'll slaughter Judas and his men first—the better to earn Caesar's favor."

And if the revolt doesn't happen until Herod's dead, it would benefit Seneca by the same reasons it would the rebels, he thought. Yoseph's right. Judea will be in an uproar. The perfect time for Seneca to prove the need for a strong Roman hand in the province—and to prove himself just so capable.

"I don't know who's been helping them in the cohort," Yoseph said. "If you can't trust Seneca, trust Tribune Mallus. And if not to him, then another." He glowered at Abdes. "Can you climb up onto the roof?"

"What?" Abdes asked, bewildered by this unexpected turn in conversation.

"The roof, boy—can you climb onto it?" Yoseph snapped.

"Yes," Abdes said.

"Get up there and be quiet, then," Yoseph said. "They've left their horses with only one soldier to tend them, it looked like. We'll keep them inside with us long enough to distract them—jump down from the front of the house, and go take a horse. What you do beyond that doesn't matter to me—I don't give a damn, Abdes. Make for Egypt if it suits you."

"And be out of your life, is that it again?" Abdes asked. "Away from you and Maryam?"

“Pretty much, yes,” Yoseph replied. “I’m making my amends by you with this. I could turn you in, and believe me, boy, there’s a part of me sorely tempted.”

“Then why won’t you?” Abdes said.

They heard the back door shudder; someone inside bumped deliberately against it in warning, and Yoseph drew away, his eyes widening in alarm. “You have to go.”

The top of Elizabeth’s one-storeyed house was flat; stone slabs placed across underlying wooden rafters with a layer of clay covering them. The clay absorbed rainfall, providing a seal of sorts to allow excess water to simply run off. Some houses utilized tree branches instead of the stone tiles and Abdes was grateful to discover the latter, not the former as Yoseph gave him a boost, cradling Abdes’ sandal heel against his palms to hoist him up. The stone would bear his weight better; he would have risked crashing down through a branch-lined roof.

He wriggled up onto the roof, being as quiet as possible, knowing fully well that the soldiers within would hear him if he made too much noise. He’d learned that hard lesson from childhood, from shimmying up onto his father’s roof with Ham in similar manner. Moloch had seldom caught them, but on those unfortunate occasions when he had, he had laid open the brothers’ spines with his lash.

Abdes lay on his belly, motionless and still for a long moment. He could hear voices from inside the house, muffled and quiet, but discernable. The soldiers were directly below him, he realized, and his breath drew still, his eyes wide as he waited.

“What has he done, this man, Pantera?” he heard Elizabeth ask, as calmly and innocently as if she inquired after the weather.

“He was in Roman custody awaiting arraignment on charges of assault and murder,” one of the soldiers replied. “He escaped from Sepphoris, but one of our decurions caught him along the eastward highway from the city. He managed to

escape again. We have reason to believe he's not traveling—or acting—alone.”

“And why is that?” Abdes heard Ham ask. His tone was nowhere near as calm as Elizabeth’s; it had taken on a sort of shrill, anxious quality.

“All ten members of the decury were found murdered this morning,” the soldier said, and Abdes gasped sharply, anguished.

Gods, no, he thought, closing his eyes, his brows furrowed. He’d suspected this, had known on some level that this was true, but to hear it aloud left him stricken and helpless. *No, please.*

He remembered Eonus smiling at him

No, sir. It bothers me that you can shoot better than I can.

and he clenched his jaw against the urge to utter a soft, distraught cry.

“We believe Pantera is part of a band of thieves who have been preying on merchant caravans in and out of Sepphoris,” the soldier said. “He must have known them before his imprisonment, and rejoined them upon his escape. They were likely waiting to strike their next victims when the decury came along and engaged them.”

“But you don’t know that,” Abdes heard Maryam say, and his expression softened. Even now, she stood up for him, tried to help him. *Maryam, please*, he thought. *Let them say what they want. Don’t make them suspicious of you.*

“I know he’s dangerous, good woman,” the soldier said. “And I know we’ll find him—we’ll see him answer for his offenses.”

Their voices faded as they left the room. Abdes eased his way forward, inching toward the front edge of the roof. He could lift his chin and see the street below. Yoseph had been right. The foot soldiers had all dispatched among the homes, conducting door-to-door searches. The officers had accompanied them, every one of them eager for the chance to be the one who took the notorious Pantera by force and

chains. They had left their horses in the charge of a solitary soldier, just as Yoseph had said.

He heard voices in sudden clarity from behind him as the soldiers walked out into the courtyard, and he glanced over his shoulder, wide-eyed with alarm.

“Yoseph, here you are,” Elizabeth said. “My son, sirs, Yoseph.”

Abdes heard the scraping of the soldiers’ hobnailed sandal soles as they began to walk about the courtyard, searching among the large clay jars and baskets of food stuffs, poking and prodding anywhere that might have proven a hiding spot.

“I don’t understand, sirs,” Maryam said. “If this man, Pantera is so dangerous, why hasn’t the cohort of Sepphoris punished him? Why hasn’t King Herod ordered him executed? If he’s committed all of these crimes—robbery, assault, murder—why has he gone unprosecuted?”

“Maryam...lamb, don’t bother the soldiers,” Yoseph said in a decidedly uncomfortable voice.

Abdes heard one of the soldiers chuckle. “It’s alright, good sir,” he said. “My good woman, I don’t know why Herod hasn’t ordered Pantera punished, though I do assure you, he is indeed dangerous. I also assure you his punishment will be forthcoming and swift once we’ve caught him. The matter is no longer the king’s to decide. He’s dead.”

Abdes froze against the roof, his eyes widening in aghast, his breath strangled beneath his sternum. *Dead?* he thought.

“Dead?” Yoseph asked, sounding as stunned as Abdes felt. “When...? When did this happen?”

“Last night some time, good sir,” the soldier replied. “Couriers from Jerusalem traveled the night through delivering notice. He has a pending will dividing his lands among three of his sons. Until Caesar ratifies it, however, Roman law presides in Judea. And Pantera will answer by Roman law.”

Abdes knew how criminals answered under Roman law—they were crucified. It was a torment first devised by Abdes' own native people, the Phoenicians and then implemented by the Greeks. It had developed into the most widely utilized form of capital punishment in the Roman empire.

"Astarte have mercy," he whispered. He had to move, to galvanize himself from his shock and get out of there. Once word reached Sepphoris of Herod's death, Judas would lead his followers into open revolt. He had damn near run out of time.

Abdes clenched his teeth and steeled himself for impact as he swung his legs around and dropped from the roof. His feet smacked the dirt, and he stumbled, clumsily finding his footing and scampering down the narrow street toward the horses.

He didn't give the soldier guarding them more than a moment to realize his approach. His hurried pace and hunkered posture stirred the horses with anxiety. They pawed the ground, their ears perked upright, their nostrils flaring, their teeth gnawing restlessly against their bits. The soldier turned, curious by their soft, nervous whinnies, and Abdes hooked his right fist around, delivering it squarely into the man's nose. He yelped sharply, and toppled backward, crashing to the ground.

The horses frightened at this; they stomped and danced, jerking their reins from the soldier's startled fingers as he landed on his back. They bolted, taking off in all directions, and Abdes grabbed one by the corner of its halter as it ran past him, springing into an abrupt gallop. He staggered in its jostling tow before slapping his hand against the saddle and swinging himself astride. He fought to reach the reins, which flapped and whipped beneath its neck. He hooked them in his fist and righted himself, kicking the horse's flanks with his heels to spur it to an even faster pace.

He could see some of the soldiers emerging from houses ahead of him. They noticed the thunder of frantic hoof beats right away, and whirled at the sound, their eyes flown

wide in bewildered surprise. They yelped, confused, dancing and scrambling out of Abdes' path as the roan he'd stolen charged past them. Abdes leaned over the horse's withers, keeping his heels dug tightly against its belly. "Go," he hissed at the horse. "Go, you bastard, go!"

One of the soldiers realized Abdes was not the horse's uniformed rider. "Hoah—!" he yelled, leaping at Abdes, his hands slapping against Abdes' leg and the saddle. The horse was too fast; the soldier couldn't keep his grip and fell away, tumbling and rolling, his cries cut abruptly and breathlessly short. Another sprang from Abdes' right; he caught a blur of movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned his head. The soldier caught him, managing to grab him firmly by the sleeve and hip, hauling him sideways and off balance in his saddle. There was a fleeting moment when the soldier's grasp slipped, when Abdes thought he'd simply fall away like the other, and then Abdes lost his perch altogether. He yelled in panicked fright as he pitched off the saddle, slamming into the soldier, knocking him loose from the horse. The two spilled to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs. They landed hard, knocking the wind and wits from them both, and they tumbled, rolling and bouncing against the ground as the horse raced off without them.

Abdes cracked his head brutally and grunted breathlessly as his shoulders and hips took painful turns bearing the brunt of impact as he rolled. When at last he fell still, he lay on his belly in a swirling cloud of dust. He was reeling, tiny pinpoints of dazed light sparkling behind his eyelids. He could taste blood in his mouth, feel it coursing from his nose. He hurt all over; he had likely cracked ribs from the fall, to judge by the excruciating effort he encountered simply struggling to draw breath. He groaned softly, hooking his fingertips in the dirt, trying to sit up.

He heard footsteps approach him, sandal soles crunching to a halt in front of him. He felt a hand close tightly in his hair, wrenching his head back toward the sky, and he gasped, feeling a trickle of blood from a gash in his forehead suddenly run in a slithering stream toward the corner of his

eye. He saw a man looking down at him, a Roman soldier silhouetted against the backdrop of the late afternoon glare.

“Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera,” he said. “You are under arrest.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Word of Abdes' arrest had preceded them to Sepphoris. Abdes had been terrified that they would find the city in open revolt, that the crowds would have fallen upon the soldiers immediately upon their return, dragging Abdes from their custody and either pummeling him to death with their fists, or undertaking an impromptu crucifixion of their own furious accord.

Riot was not underway, but the crowds had gathered nonetheless, as if every Jew in the city simply waited for the opportune moment to unleash themselves in all of their outrage against the citadel. Thousands of them swarmed along the grounds of the acropolis, a shrieking, writhing mass of people. It seemed to Abdes' dazed eyes that the entire cohort had been summoned to keep the Jews pressed back from the citadel walls. Nearly a full century descended from the main entrance to envelop Abdes and his captors among them, to try and give them safe passage inside.

As the mob realized who Abdes was, why he was chained and in custody among the soldiers, they launched themselves toward him with ruthless ferocity. Abdes shied, drawing his hands toward his face while the soldiers tried to protect themselves—more so than him—with their large shields from a sudden, violent rain of rocks, dung, vegetables—anything the crowd could seize in hand and hurl at them.

"Crucify him!" they screeched, baring their fists and spitting. "Hand him over! We want justice! Give us Pantera!"

Surrounded on all side and from above by overlapping shields, Abdes couldn't even see where he was going; his wrists were lashed together, his ankles shackled, and if he didn't keep in step with the hustling, jostling soldiers, if he lost his footing or stumbled, he would be plowed into roughly, knocked and shoved about, forced to keep in harried step.

Abdes felt soldiers grab him painfully by the arms, wrenching him up the steps and into the foyer. Guards surged behind them as they passed, forming a veritable wall between the mob and the interior of the citadel. Even beyond its thick, stone walls, the roar of the crowd was deafening; it shuddered in the air and trembled underfoot. Abdes lifted his head as the shield walls around him lowered. He looked frantically about among the hundreds of soldiers crammed and at the ready in the foyer.

He'd held out one last desperate hope. If Mallus was alive, then Abdes had hope. The soldiers hadn't killed Abdes upon his apprehension. They had beaten him brutally, driving sword butts, fists and feet against him, but they hadn't killed him. If he'd been spared for whatever gruesome spectacle Seneca likely had in store for his execution, maybe Mallus had been, as well. Abdes was nothing, but Mallus remained a Senator's son and a high-ranking, veteran Roman officer. Even imprisoned, no matter the trumped charges Seneca might level against him, Mallus still had some clout.

"I...I want to see Tribune Mallus," Abdes groaned to the soldiers, trying to tug against them as they forced him to move. He was in tremendous pain. The ribs he'd broken falling from the horse had been injured all the more by repeated battering. His head was reeling; someone's fist had smashed against his temple, leaving him dazed and semi-lucid for much of the trek back to Sepphoris. Another had plowed into his nose, smashing it into a bloody, swollen pulp through which he could only force snuffling, sodden, feeble breath. His left eye was so distended with bruising, he could scarcely open it beyond a bleary, slim margin. He limped in wretched tow, his clothing torn and blood-stained, his body hunched and buckled with pain.

"Keep moving, bastard rot," one of the soldiers snapped, driving his elbow and forearm against Abdes' back, shoving him forward and sending pain lancing through his shattered ribs. Abdes shrugged his shoulders, trying to wrench himself loose of his captors.

"I...I want to see Mallus," he croaked, and he planted his feet, struggling to keep from being dragged any further. When the soldiers doubled their efforts, he fought against them, flapping his chained arms and shaking his head. "Mallus!" he screamed, as they closed in on them, rearing their fists back. "Mallus!"

The fists flew; Abdes heard the dull, heavy thuds as they pounded against him. The other soldiers shoved in a close, eager circumference around them, cheering and howling in encouragement to their fellows.

"Bash his rot skull in!" someone bellowed, his voice as infused with cheer as if he watched a heated wrestling match.

"Kick him again! Harder than that!" shrieked another.

"Murderer!" screamed another. "Rot damn traitor!"

Abdes fell to his knees, helpless against them, trying to cover his head with his hands. Someone kicked him in the gut and when he twisted sideways, sprawling breathlessly to the floor, another punted him mightily in the kidneys. "Mallus!" he screamed again, his voice choked and strangled. "Mallus—gods above, help me!"

Something rammed heavily against the base of his skull, and he smacked face-first against the stone floor, sending pain ripping through his mashed nose, and leaving him swooning, a bevy of unexpected stars dazzling his gaze.

"Get him up," someone snarled, and a hand clamped against Abdes' hair, forcing his head back. Others laid hold of his arms, jerking brutally, forcing him upright. He slumped between the soldiers, his knees failing him, his mind abandoning him, and they made him move; they dragged him among them across the foyer.

He lifted his head, opening his uninjured eye. He panted for agonizing breath; someone had struck his broken

ribs, and the residual pain alone was enough to cripple him, strip his wits from him. He blinked, dazed, as he was forced past a familiar face well within an arm's reach, had he been able to grasp out in desperate implore.

"Pulcher!" he whimpered, craning his head to look back over his shoulder, to meet the centurion's gaze. Pulcher stared at him, his eyes enormous with shock, his pallor ashen; it was the closest to genuine, affected emotion Abdes had ever seen him display.

"Please..." Abdes croaked, trying to reach for him, to turn around. He couldn't; the soldiers shoved against him, forcing him forward, and Abdes lifted his face toward the ceiling, screaming with all of the breath and voice he could summon. "Pulcher!" he wailed. "Gods above—I'm innocent! You have to find Mallus! Tell Mallus it's coming—it's already begun—gods, please! He'll tell you! He'll tell you I'm—!"

The soldiers pounded him again. Abdes lost sight of Pulcher as he crashed to his knees, crumpling beneath a frenzied sea of careening fists. When he was dragged upright again, he was more unconscious than aware; he could do nothing more but moan softly as they led him away.

"They're going to crucify you, Pantera," one of the soldiers hissed. They had thrown Abdes into a cell and he'd fallen to the floor, lying on his belly, shuddering with pain. The soldier had tromped across the cell threshold and genuflected beside Abdes, seizing hold of his hair and forcing his head back so that he could lean near and let his lips and breath flap against Abdes' ear in an obscene parody of intimate disclosure.

"Murdering rot cur," someone muttered.

"They'll do more than just lash you to the cross beams and leave you to the gods' mercies," the guard purred, jerking against Abdes' hair, his grin sliding all the wider to watch Abdes' expression twist with pain. "Oh, no, boy. They're going to see you suffer for all you've done. You'll beg for death by the time it's over with. They're going to nail you to the wood—spikes through your hands, your feet, and then they're

going to take to your knees...the long bones in your arms and legs with a mallet.”

He turned loose of Abdes’ hair, letting him crumple into a trembling, whimpering heap against the floor. “That’s tender to what I’d do if it was mine to say,” he said, harking a loud, foul mouthful of phlegm and launching it at Abdes. It spattered against the side of Abdes’ neck. “Turning against your own—killing your fellows. Coward rot.”

Abdes closed his eyes, shuddering, his breath wheezing feebly from his mouth. He heard the squalling of rusted hinges as his cell gate swung closed. It slammed with a sharp report, and he jerked, frightened by the sound, whimpering again. The soldiers spared him a few more moments of taunting from beyond the cell, spitting at him and laughing together, and then they walked away. Their footsteps echoed dimly in the vacant corridor beyond his cell. The rest of the block was empty of prisoners, save for Abdes. They took their torches with them, and in their absence, a sudden, utter blackness fell.

There was nothing but the pain. Abdes could feel blood streaming from his nose, pooling in the recesses of his mouth, trickling from battered, bashed places along his scalp and face. He tried to spit, but swallowed enough instead to choke. The convulsions of coughing left his ribs screaming in molten agony. “Gods...!” he whimpered, closing his eyes, pressing his cheek against the cool ground.

He’d never really prayed before, feeling no loyalty in his heart to his own native gods, much less to any among the Roman pantheon. He swore by them a lot, but that remained the little acknowledgment he’d ever regularly offered to them. For some reason, as he lay in the darkness, he thought of Maryam’s god, the Almighty of the Jews.

The Almighty is called Yabweh, Maryam had told him once. It is an ancient name that means “He Who Is.” He is everywhere and in everything. He is the divine creator, protector, liberator and teacher. His Laws are infallible, his word binding for all time.

Abdes began to cry, his tears falling slowly, stinging his injured, aching eye. Once this tentative release had uttered,

there was no containing it and he shuddered against the ground, his voice escaping him in a hurting, breathless, childlike mewl of anguish.

“Help me,” he begged Maryam’s Almighty Yahweh; this being who saw everything and knew all. “Please...help me...”

He didn’t know if the Almighty heard his frightened plea. As he offered it, something somewhere had tender mercy on him, even if it was only his own mind. He fainted against the floor, succumbing to his pain and fear.

The sound of a door opening somewhere deep along the corridor beyond his cell roused him from unconsciousness. His eyes flew wide in the dark as he heard footsteps against the ground marking a brisk, purposeful pace, drawing near.

“No...” he whimpered, his voice cracked and damaged. They were coming for him. They either meant to give the mob what it wanted—to mangle his limbs and nail him to a cross—or they meant to beat him again. Either way, he was stricken with sudden, vivid terror, and he struggled to move. He shoved his hands beneath him, raising his head and chest from the floor, gritting his teeth as a mewl of pain escaped him. He kicked his feet weakly, scrabbling against the ground. The cell was small and he managed to scoot himself back against the far wall. He cowered there, drawing his knees toward his chest, despite the agony this speared through his ribs. He hunkered his shoulders, tucking his chin toward his breast, his hands fluttering toward his face; a protective, warding posture he’d perfected in his father’s house—an inevitably futile attempt to make himself very, very small, an unappealing target.

“No,” he whispered, trembling uncontrollably, hiccupping for pained breath. His mind was dazed with pain, delirious almost, and for a fleeting, frightening moment, he couldn’t even remember where he was. He nearly believed he was young again, no more than ten, and trying desperately to hide from Moloch’s abusive advance.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered, closing his eyes, shuddering until his teeth rattled. "I...I...please don't...I'm sorry..."

"Abdes..." he heard someone say, a voice filled with anguish.

Abdes lowered his hands from his face, blinking blearily toward the gate. Eleven soldiers had gathered there, standing shoulder to shoulder in a tight crescent facing his cell. Seneca was with them, standing immediately at the gate, his hands curled about the bars. His eyes were enormous and stricken as he stared at Abdes. He knelt slowly, clumsily, as if the sight of Abdes battered and cowering in the corner stripped the strength from his legs.

He offered proper affectations of a man appropriately horrified by the terrible fate that had befallen a young soldier tendered to his charge, but Abdes wasn't fooled. In fact, the sight of Seneca, the realization of the Praefectus' shameless, melodramatic reaction galvanized Abdes immediately and abruptly. Abdes' body went rigid with sudden, furious tension. His brows furrowed, his swollen eye drooping closed as he glared at Seneca.

"Where...where is Mallus?" Abdes croaked. He was in pain, but he would be damned if he'd give Seneca the satisfaction of seeing him yield to it. He shoved his shoulder against the wall to support himself as he staggered to his feet; he clenched his jaw so tightly to stifle even the slightest whimper of pain that he felt the strain clear down his neck and into his shoulders. He shambled toward the cell gate, closing his hands into fists. "Where is Mallus? What have you done to him, you bastard?"

Seneca drew back, his expression shifting to uncertainty at the venom in Abdes' voice. "I've done nothing to Mallus," he said quietly. His brows lifted in sympathy. "Abdes, do you know why you're here?"

"You put me here," Abdes answered, stumbling to a halt. His head was spinning. He closed his eyes and fought with all that he could muster to keep upright. "I...I'm here because of you, Seneca."

He opened his eyes again and watched a young man step forward to draw alongside the Praefectus. He knew the young man's face—it was Flaccus, Pulcher's new actarius. Abdes glanced among the soldiers and found Pulcher to his right. The centurion's aghast expression from the foyer was gone and he studied Abdes with his customary impassivity.

"Abdes, we're here to have your testimony," Seneca said quietly. "Your deposition, lad. You're in trouble. You...hoah, gods, boy..." He hung his head momentarily and forked his fingers through his dark hair. "You're in so much trouble now, and I cannot keep you from it. Do you understand that?"

Abdes laughed, a hoarse, warbling sound that seemed to catch Seneca exactly as he'd hoped—by surprise. *Do your worst, you bastard*, Abdes thought. *Do it, Seneca. Let all of these others believe you're trying to save me, think you'll be my hero—a distant kin to Spartan kings and blessed by the pantheon. I know the truth, you bastard rot.*

"Men are dead, Abdes," Seneca said, rising to his feet. Something had hardened in his face at Abdes' laughter. "Ten Roman citizens—men assigned to your charge—and seven civilians we believe were bandits—bandits you were associated with. I want to know how this came to pass."

At this, Abdes laughed all the harder, stumbling, grimacing as he pressed his hand against his wounded ribs. *Only seven?* he thought. *Myself, I counted nearly twenty, but they were upon us by surprise, so I might be mistaken.*

Seneca knew how many there had been—he had damn well dispatched them. He was trying to catch Abdes by surprise, to make him utter something to damn himself. When he laughed again, hanging his head, his shoulders jerking, Seneca frowned. "Do you think this is funny?"

Abdes' laughter died and he met Seneca's gaze. "Has it begun yet?" he asked. "Are things in motion now that Herod's dead? Will you give me to them now, or will you wait until they've claimed the armory?"

Seneca blinked at him, feigning bewilderment. "Why were you with those men?"

"I wasn't with them," Abdes said. "I was with my decury. Mallus sent us to Nazareth." "Tribune Mallus said he sent your decury to pursue you," Seneca said. "He said you left the city alone and without instruction. He said you've been reported as leaving your barrack every night without approval, returning hours later and he suspected you've been a part of a band of robbers in the area outlying the city. He dispatched your decury to investigate."

Abdes smirked. Now Seneca would make him doubt Mallus; the better to break him, to make him feel utterly isolated and vulnerable. If Seneca had imprisoned Mallus, if Mallus still lived, Abdes knew he wouldn't give Seneca the satisfaction of admission. He'd hold his tongue if only to protect Abdes. "You're lying," he said. "Mallus wouldn't say that. He knows why I left my barrack every night. I went to the lower district, to the tuguria to see Salome."

"Salome Gamalene?" Seneca asked. "The young woman Mallus tells me you've been accused of abducting? The prostitute Menachem was in this building only nights ago raising the roof over—you took her, and now Mallus says you might have beaten her to death?"

"Salome isn't dead and I didn't abduct her," Abdes said. "I didn't beat her, either. Menachem did. She came to me and I helped her."

"Was she with you the night your decury was attacked?" Seneca asked. "Can she testify to your company, Abdes? Where is she now?"

Abdes spat at him. "Someplace where you'll never find her, Seneca," he said. "Or Menachem, either. Do what you want to me. You'll never find her."

The cleft between Seneca's brows deepened. "Why were you with those men, Abdes?" he asked, tightening his grip on the cell bars, his knuckles blanching pale. "What happened on the highway?"

"I wasn't with them," Abdes said. "I was with my decury and they attacked us."

Seneca stared at him for a long moment. "Abdes," he whispered at last, adopting his stricken mask again. "The people want me to execute you. Don't you...gods above, don't you understand that? You're accused of more than crimes against the Jews now—you're charged with of conspiring to commit robbery and the murder of Roman citizens. They're saying you've gone mad. That you murdered your own men when they tried to stop you. I've just spent the last hour in conference with Zadduc and other Sanhedrin representatives—they want me to crucify you, lad. They...they want me to..." His voice broke, such a deceptively anguished act Abdes nearly raised his hands and applauded.

"Drive nails through my hands? Shatter my knee caps with a mallet? I've heard," Abdes said. *Do your worst, Seneca*, he thought. *You're not going to break me.*

Seneca frowned again, Abdes' sharp, disdainful tone not lost on him. "Tell me something otherwise, Abdes," he said. "Tell me the truth. Let me help you."

"You've helped me enough!" Abdes cried. The effort it took to yell left him reeling and he dropped to his knees, hanging his head. "You've helped me enough, you bastard," he whispered, gasping for pained breath.

"Let me open the gate, sir," said one of the soldiers. Abdes knew his face, too; this was the one who had followed him into his cell, who had drawn his head back by the hair and hissed in grim intimation against his ear. The soldier smiled at Abdes, closing his hands into fists. "I'll see him answer you, sir."

"No," Seneca said, glancing over his shoulder, holding up his hand.

"Let him," Abdes said, and Seneca swung to him, his eyes wide and aghast. "Let him beat me," Abdes said. "I...I'll even get my feet under me again to make it look right, so you can say I attacked him first."

He looked at Seneca, gasping for breath. "You're made of lies," he whispered. "Why stop now?"

Seneca looked at him, his face caught between anguish and outrage. "If you won't offer me testimony to your defense, Abdes," he said. "If you won't tell me why you were on that highway—why you were with those bandits—then you leave me no choice. You'll stand against the charges, and you'll be found guilty of them. You'll be executed for them. If you won't give me the truth, there's nothing more I can do by you."

"You know the truth!" Abdes cried hoarsely, making Seneca recoil in start. "You killed my men, you bastard! They...they were good soldiers who would have died for you—they believed in you! I believed in you!"

He gasped softly, feeling tears well in his eyes, stinging him. He hooked his fingers in the dirt and trembled, uttering a soft, broken whimper. "I believed in you," he whispered. "I thought you were great...a...a hero to Rome. I wanted to make you proud of me. I...I wanted..."

He lowered his head, pressing his forehead against the dirt. He shuddered as his tears fell, as he began to weep helplessly. "I...I believed in you..." he gasped, tangling his fingers in his hair.

He didn't look up for a long moment, and there was nothing but silence, the weight of Seneca's gaze as he watched Abdes break, his desperately summoned resolve crumbling, his fragile but defiant will shattering with his tears. Finally, Abdes heard their footsteps as they walked away. He glanced up as they took their torches with them, meaning to imprison him in blackness again.

He found Pulcher looking at him, pausing while the others walked away. "Please," Abdes whispered to him. He crawled toward the gate, gasping at every agonizing movement. "You...you're an honest man, Pulcher?"

He said this as a helpless plea, and Pulcher stepped toward Abdes' cell. "They're going to take the armory," Abdes said, struggling to sit up. "Please, ask Mallus. He...he knows."

He'll tell you. The Jews will revolt and he...Seneca is a part of it."

Pulcher looked at him, his expression unreadable.

"Seneca...he...he's helping them," Abdes said. "Zadduc the Pharisee, Judas ben Hezekiah...Menachem the pander, Tarfon, Naftali...please, they're all a part of it. They think Judas is the Messiah, and he...Seneca will let them because when he kills them all it...it will make him look good for Rome."

Abdes grabbed the iron bars and struggled to pull himself up, to lean toward Pulcher. "Please," he whimpered. "They've been waiting for Herod to die, and they mean to take the armory first. It's in my report—all of it except for this last. I've learned more since then—ask Mallus. He's seen it. He...he knows. Seneca has seen it, too, but he's one of them." He reached for Pulcher, hooking his fingers desperately against the centurion's cloak. "Please, you have to believe me."

Pulcher blinked at him. "My gods," he murmured, drawing his cloak from Abdes' grasp. He stepped back beyond Abdes' frantic reach, and shook his head, regarding Abdes as he might have something unpleasant smeared against his sandal sole. He turned and walked away, taking the last torch with him. "You really have gone mad."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A deep, resounding boom shuddered through the belly of the citadel, thrumming in the floors and walls, shivering down the iron bars marking the threshold of Abdes' cell. Abdes' eyes flew wide in the darkness at the sound, the tremulous vibration resonating through the ground against his cheek and brow.

What in Hades...?

His mind was clouded with pain, murky with disorientation and his entire body felt as if every ligament and muscle had been drawn and restrained by rusted iron cuffs. When he tried to move, to sit up, his form screamed in protest. The pain that lanced through his ribcage was excruciating enough to wrench the breath from him, to see him crumple against the floor again.

He could hear voices. He had no idea how long he'd been incarcerated. No one had come for him, and with no windows to mark the waxing and waning of sunlight outside, with nothing but that cold, complete darkness surrounding him, and his own lapsing in and out of consciousness, he couldn't determine the passage of time.

His isolation had been complete until that moment; his sensory deprivation utter and absolute. There had been no sounds seeping through the thick walls, no light, no company. But he could hear voices now, muffled through the thick stone, but loud enough to penetrate, to shiver through the walls. Lots of voices overlapping, their words indecipherable, but their tone apparent—murderous rage.

Another boom shuddered through the citadel, and Abdes sat up, grimacing and sucking in a hissing breath through his teeth. As the echoing thrum began to dissipate, he could discern shrill screams and cries above the angry, roaring din.

It's started, he realized in horror. The revolt had begun. Judas ben Hezekiah and his followers had charged upon the citadel to claim the armory.

That's not all they'll claim here, Abdes thought. He crawled toward his cell gate, curled his hands around the bars and struggled to rise to his feet. *They'll find me, too—Seneca will make sure of that. And when they do...*

Abdes closed his eyes, standing unsteadily now. He pressed his face between the bars and uttered a low, frightened moan. Horrifying images of the mob that had greeted his return to Sepphoris flashed through his mind

Crucify him! Hand him over! Give us Pantera!

along with Judas ben Hezekiah's face, his mouth twisted with rage.

I will see you answer, Pantera!

"Gods above," Abdes whispered, opening his eyes. He tugged against the iron bars, tentatively at first as the motion sent pain through him, and then more fervently, despite the pain, because he could feel the sickening, twisting, icy sensation of alarm in his gut; a desperate, terrifying panic. "Gods!" he grunted, shaking the gate with all he could muster, listening to it rattle noisily against its hinges. Even if he'd been fully well and at his best, he couldn't have budged the iron. He shook all the more furiously, and then collapsed against it, his face between the bars again. "Gods!" he cried, hoarsely.

His knees failed him and he slumped to the floor. There would be no escape. The gate was immobile and there were no windows in his cell to even give him fleeting hope of passage. His cell was empty; no furnishings, not even a clay water bowl he might shatter, to have at least a makeshift weapon to defend himself. He had nothing, no recourse but to simply cower there, shuddering and panting until Judas and his

followers came for him, until they dragged him from his cell and to his brutal, bloody death.

He heard the distinctive groan of the cell block door opening from his right, and he jerked at the sound. He scrambled back from the gate in sudden, wild panic, pedaling madly with feet. *They've found me*, his mind screamed. *They're coming!*

"N-no...!" he whimpered, shaking his head as a dim glow appeared along the corridor beyond his cell—torchlight flapping and dancing against the stone. He heard heavy footsteps rushing down the block, approaching him fast.

"No, please, no!" he gasped, and then a man carrying a torch darted past his cell.

"Abdes!" the man screamed, his voice hoarse with despair and alarm. Abdes froze, his eyes flying wide as he saw firelight flash off of armor—a Roman uniform.

"Mallus?" he said, and at the sound of his voice, the man scrambled to a clumsy halt, whirling. He staggered back into Abdes' full view. "Mallus!" Abdes cried, nearly bursting into tears with relief. He floundered to his feet and rushed to the gate, just as Mallus threw himself against it, his eyes enormous with fright, his free hand shoved between the bars to reach for him.

"Abdes!" he cried, and Abdes fell against him, trying to press himself between the bars as Mallus clutched at him, his hand pawing against Abdes' shoulders. "Oh, gods above, you're here," Mallus said, his voice throaty, choked with tears.

"Help me," Abdes pleaded, hooking his fingers against Mallus' cloak through the bars. "Help me, Mallus, please, help me...they...they're coming...they..."

"I'm here," Mallus said. "I'm here, lad. Don't be frightened. I'll get you out."

He drew back from Abdes at let his torch fall to the floor. Abdes saw the light wink against metal; a keyring in his hand. "Help me," Abdes whimpered, shaking and stumbling. His panic was now full and overwhelming. "Please, Mallus, it's started, hasn't it? They've come."

“Yes,” Mallus whispered, nodding, his mouth hooked in a grim frown. He was looking down at the lock to Abdes’ gate as he began to try each of the numerous iron keys in turn. “It’s started. There’s no stopping it now. All we can hope for is to get out of here with our lives.”

He glanced up at Abdes, taking into account the younger man’s battered appearance for the first time. He stumbled, his breath snapping sharp and still, the keys tumbling from his hands to the floor. “Gods above,” he whispered, aghast. He stepped against the gate, reaching through to press his palm gently against Abdes’ cheek. His eyes flooded with tears. “What have they done to you?”

“They’re going to kill me,” Abdes said, his eyes enormous with terror. “Mallus, they...they’re going to find me...they...they’ll...”

“No, they won’t,” Mallus said, his brows furrowing with determination. He drew his hand back, and stooped, snatching up the keys. He worked again at the lock, the pace of his efforts doubled, nearly frantic. “By my breath, Abdes—all that I have—I am going to get you out of here.”

“Seneca took you, too?” Abdes asked, helping Mallus shove and jostle against the gate with each vain attempt to unlock it.

Mallus nodded. “The afternoon you left for Nazareth,” he said. He paused long enough to meet Abdes’ gaze, his brows lifted in anguish. “I had no time,” he whispered. “I couldn’t warn you. The bastard took me and locked me up. I thought for sure it meant he’d kill you.”

“I thought he’d killed you, too,” Abdes said. “He told me things, but I knew you hadn’t said them...I knew...”

Mallus gasped, his eyes flying wide as at last one of the keys worked. The lock clacked; Mallus jerked the gate open wide, and Abdes stumbled against him. Mallus held him fiercely as Abdes shuddered, nearly collapsing with exhaustion and relief. “I’ve got you,” Mallus whispered against his ear. “Oh, lad, it’s alright now.”

He leaned back. "Can you walk?" he asked. When Abdes nodded, Mallus smiled. "Good. Let's get out of here."

He drew his arm about Abdes, letting the younger man lean against him. He stooped long enough to retrieve his torch, and then they moved together, hurrying as well as Abdes' hurting, stumbling gait would allow. When they reached the threshold of the cell block, Mallus tossed the torch behind them, abandoning it. He poked his head out the door, scanning the corridor beyond. As he opened the heavy door, the sounds of brutal battle underway were apparent and thunderous; Abdes could hear the clatter of sword against shield and blade, the thud of heavy footfalls, the shrieks of pain and bellows of battle cries.

Mallus stepped back, turning to look at Abdes. "They're still busy at the armory," he whispered. "We can make it through the back corridors to the rear entrance if we hurry."

Abdes nodded, letting Mallus lead him beyond the threshold and into the hall. Mallus reached for his sword, drawing the blade from his hip and carrying it leveled and at the ready in his fist. "We can do this, Abdes," he whispered.

"The cistern," Abdes said, drawing Mallus' puzzled gaze. "On the north side of the acropolis, there's an access well to the main cistern. I remember because Pulcher made me check it before. The cistern's empty; all of those aqueducts staved for repairs, the cistern drained. If we can get to the access well, we can climb down into the cistern. We can follow the aqueducts out of the city."

Mallus smiled at him and nodded. "Thank you, lad," he said.

They moved, Mallus drawing Abdes in lumbering tow as they followed the corridor toward the north end of the citadel. "What about Seneca?" Abdes asked.

Mallus shook his head, his brows furrowed. "It's too late," he said. "Forget him, Abdes."

"But he..." Abdes began.

Mallus shook his head again. "Let him have it," he said. "Let him have it all—we can't stop him now, not here. We'll get out of the city and I'll try to get word to Rome, to my father somehow. I can't count on Caesar to trust me over Seneca, but my father will—and he can convince the Senate, too. We may not have Caesar on our side, but by the gods, we'll have allies of our own, Abdes."

Mallus' attention snapped toward the sound of rushing, heavy footfalls. He jerked sideways, dragging Abdes in painful tow into a shadow-draped alcove. He pressed the younger man forcibly against the wall, and when Abdes uttered a reflexive, hurting whimper, Mallus clapped his hand firmly over his mouth to stifle him. They both watched in wide-eyed alarm as at least a dozen men—followers of Judas and Zadduc to judge by their clothing—charged past, swords in hands, their faces twisted and flushed with fury.

"Gods," Mallus whispered, shakily, lowering his hand from Abdes' face. He glanced at him, stricken. "I'm sorry. Are you alright?"

Abdes nodded; a lie. He was hurting so badly, he could scarcely do more than hiccup for breath. He kept feeling his mind sideslip and reel; his senses wanting to yield to shadows. "If...if I fall, Mallus, leave me," he whispered.

"No," Mallus said. When Abdes opened his mouth to protest, Mallus frowned. "I didn't just risk my life—and more than once—to find you, only to dump you like a broken sandal in the corridor. If you fall, I'll carry you."

He poked his head out of the alcove, and when satisfied that the rebels had passed, he led Abdes out once more. They hurried together again, side by side, both of them breathless and wide-eyed with fright. "How did you escape your cell?" Abdes asked.

"I begged my guard," Mallus said. "I knew Seneca would turn you over to Judas or Zadduc—if he hadn't already. I knew the riot was underway—there was no stopping it, but I could still have hope to save you. So I begged—I told my guard that I wanted to fight with my soldiers, defending the citadel. I begged him to let me fall with honor for Rome."

He glanced at Abdes and then smirked slightly, wearily. "Then I clubbed him in the rot damn skull when he unlocked my gate. Took his keys, his sword and dagger, and followed the back corridors to find you."

They heard more footsteps, the resounding crash of swords slamming together, and they scrambled into antechamber off the corridor. They froze together in the shadows, trembling, holding their breaths as a tangle of rebels and soldiers jostled and danced past them, fighting ferociously.

"Seneca told me things," Abdes whispered once they had passed. "Terrible things, Mallus. He...he told me you'd said I was mad. That I left the city alone and without orders, and I was part of some robbery band. That I killed my men."

Mallus blinked at him, his face framed in darkness from the chamber, and dim light from the torch-lit corridor beyond. He looked aghast.

"I didn't believe him," Abdes said quickly, shaking his head. "I knew he was lying. He wanted me to despair, to think you'd betrayed me."

Mallus lowered his face, his brows twisting unhappily. "He did the same by me, lad," he said. "Though I didn't believe his rot lies, either." He spat against the floor. "He told me that you'd betrayed me—that you'd told him it was all on my account. He was trying to turn us against one another."

He peeped out into the hallway. "Come on," he whispered. "We follow this corridor only a bit more, and then we can take a back hall to the right. It'll dump us nearly upon the threshold."

They moved again. Abdes leaned heavily against Mallus as he struggled to keep up with his friend's pace. "Seneca tried to blame the murders on me," Mallus whispered. "He told me you'd said that it was my idea—that I'd set your decury out to rob merchant caravans."

"He told me you said that you'd sent the decury after me," Abdes said. "That I was a part of it, and they were going to catch me."

“Bastard,” Mallus muttered, spitting again. “As if either of us would be so rot damn senseless as to send ten men against an armed pack of twenty.”

He led Abdes down a narrow hallway to their right, drawing deeper within the heart of the citadel building. Abdes was disoriented, having been led through several unfamiliar twisting, turning corridors. He staggered, his knees weakening, and Mallus paused, letting Abdes rest a moment, gulping for breath.

“We have to keep moving, Abdes,” Mallus whispered, leaning with him as Abdes buckled over. “I’m sorry, lad, but we have to. Can you make it?”

Abdes nodded, closing his eyes. “Just...just let me...rest a moment,” he whispered. Something had begun to gnaw at him, something indistinct and more than just his confusion about their location and direction. Something like an insistent, urgent fingertip poking against his mind to distract his attention from his pain, his laborious, agonizing effort to breathe.

“Alright,” Mallus whispered, looking anxiously around them.

Abdes opened his eyes, staring down at the floor. “Mallus,” he whispered.

“What, lad?” Mallus said, still shooting wary, fearful glances ahead and behind them.

“How...how did you know there were twenty of them?” Abdes asked, looking up.

Mallus looked at him, momentarily puzzled. “What?”

Abdes straightened, shying back a stumbling step. “You said neither of us would send a decury against twenty armed men. How did you know? I...I never told anyone. Seneca said seven were found besides my men, and I didn’t tell him otherwise.”

Mallus blinked at him, his expression growing wounded. “Abdes, why would you...?” he whispered, his brows lifting in implore. When he stepped toward Abdes, and

the younger man shied again, his pain only grew more apparent. "Abdes, you must have told me. How else would I know? What are you saying?"

They're still busy at the armory, Mallus had told him of Judas' rebels. Mallus had said he'd followed the back corridors to reach Abdes' cell block. The prison blocks were arranged around the circumference of the citadel; the route Mallus said he'd taken would have kept him purposely away from the center of the building—where the armory was located.

An unsettling realization began to take hold in Abdes' mind, and he stumbled against the corridor wall, his eyes widening. Mallus had told him that Seneca had arrested him on the same afternoon that Abdes had gone to Nazareth.

I had no time. I couldn't warn you. The bastard took me and locked me up.

Abdes, too, had no time; he hadn't been able to tell Mallus yet about Yoseph's revelations and with the riot underway, he'd nearly forgotten about them. Yoseph had been the one to tell Abdes that Judas meant to take the armory. Abdes hadn't even suspected it before then; he and Mallus had never even broached the possibility.

"How did you know they were taking the armory?" Abdes whispered to Mallus.

Mallus stared at him in desperate implore. "It doesn't take a sage, lad," he said. "Why else would the revolt start here, at the citadel?" He stepped forward. "Abdes, what are you saying? What ideas has Seneca put in your mind? It's me, lad."

Abdes blinked at him, shied and uncertain. "Please don't," he whispered, flinching when Mallus moved to touch him.

"Abdes, I'm your friend," Mallus said. "I'm with you on this—remember? I've been with you on this from the first. I've done everything I could on your side—your account. Whatever you're thinking—whatever Seneca's told you to put those thoughts in your head—he lied, Abdes. He's done nothing but try to hurt you—undermine you. Even now, he'll try to undermine your trust in me."

Abdes remembered Seneca sitting at his bedside during his recovery. Every time he'd stirred from unconsciousness, Seneca had been with him, murmuring to him, comforting him.

It's alright, lad.

He remembered the confusion and hurt in Seneca's face outside of his cell, when Abdes had asked what he had done to Mallus.

I've done nothing to Mallus.

You...boah, gods, boy...you're in so much trouble now, and I cannot keep you from it.

"Abdes," Mallus said softly, drawing his gaze. "You have to trust me. I would never hurt you. Never lie to you, or betray your trust. Gods above, you...you're like my son—as dear to my heart as any I'd call my own. Tell me you believe that. I'm begging you."

How did you know there were twenty men? Abdes thought. *I didn't tell anyone—how could you have known, Mallus?*

"I'm begging you, Abdes," Mallus whispered. He hooked his hand against the back of Abdes' neck and drew him gently against his shoulder. Abdes closed his eyes and tucked his forehead against Mallus' neck.

Mallus is my friend, his mind whimpered, desperately. *Gods above, he has been like a father to me—better than my own father ever was. He has to be right—Seneca did this on purpose. He wanted me to doubt Mallus.*

"Forgive me," he whispered, trembling. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, lad," Mallus breathed, stroking Abdes' hair gently, turning his cheek to speak softly, his breath warm against Abdes' ear. "I am, too."

Abdes jerked, his eyes flying wide as he felt a sudden, searing pain in his back. He convulsed against Mallus, staggering backward clumsily, and as his head jerked away from Mallus' shoulder, Mallus shoved his hand tightly over Abdes' mouth, muffling his hoarse, startled cry.

"Hush, hush..." Mallus whispered, wrenching his right arm, the hand that reached around Abdes' torso toward his spine. At the motion, Abdes felt another shuddering spear of agony, and he screamed, his voice stifled to a shrill, anguished mewl against Mallus' palm.

Mallus pressed him against the wall, and leaned near enough to brush his nose against Abdes'. "Don't scream," he whispered. "You'll only make it worse."

Abdes tried to shove him away, his hands fumbling, pawing weakly against Mallus', groping desperately for his back. As he tried, Mallus deliberately wrenched his arm again; again, Abdes cried out, shadows swooping into his line of sight, his knees buckling as he nearly swooned from the pain.

"You don't want to do that," Mallus whispered, pushing Abdes' head back to make the younger man look at him. Again he leaned forward; Abdes mewled softly, struggling for agonizing breath as Mallus canted his head, drawing his lips against Abdes' ear. "You have four inches of dagger buried in your back, lad," he said. "And two more remaining until the hilt. That brief margin of blade is all that is keeping your lung together at the moment—if you pull it out, or move it even a bit, you'll see it flood your lung—you'll drown on blood, lad."

Abdes stared at him, stricken. "Why?" he tried to cry around Mallus' hand, a shrill, muffled garble of sounds.

Mallus turned at the noise of footsteps. He jerked Abdes away from the wall, whirling him about and drawing him backward against his chest. He kept his hand pressed firmly atop Abdes' mouth; with the other, he curled his fingers around the dagger hilt protruding from Abdes' back, just beneath his left shoulder blade. Abdes nearly crumpled at the pain. As his legs failed him, Mallus forced him upright, craning Abdes' head back against his shoulder so that he could whisper against the younger man's ear.

"If you make a sound, they'll find us," he hissed. "You think you're hurting now, then you wait and see what comes if the Jews get their hands on you. They won't harm me—I guess you know that by now—but I'll tell them who you are. Don't think I won't."

Abdes struggled to control his voice. It fluttered helplessly and without his consent, and he mewled with pain. "I won't give you to them yet," Mallus whispered. He began to move again, walking backward. The sound of footsteps had faded; whoever had approached had apparently followed the main corridor, rather than turning down their narrow, secondary path. Mallus moved hurriedly, dragging Abdes in tow, making Abdes whimper, his mind reeling with every jostling, clumsy, excruciating step.

"I won't give you to them—unless you give me no other choice," Mallus breathed against his ear, sparing a swift, darting glance over his shoulder. "It's up to you, lad—come with me, live a bit longer in pain and then die with something like mercy, or go with them and live longer than you will ever wish possible, given your suffering."

Abdes' eyelids fluttered and he moaned softly, swooning. Mallus dragged him, limp and unresisting in tow. "Don't die on me, Abdes," he grunted, struggling with Abdes' weight. "Not yet. Fight the good fight, lad—you've got strength in you. I know that."

His hand slipped from Abdes mouth, and Abdes turned his head, gasping desperately for breath. He could feel blood rising up his throat, taste it in his mouth, peppering from his lips. *That brief margin of blade is all that is keeping your lung together at the moment...you'll drown on blood*, Mallus had told him, and he moaned again, realizing this grim fate was already slowly upon him.

"It...it was you," he panted. "All along...helping the conspiracy...all of your talk about Seneca's ambitions...how he...he wanted to be legatus of Judea, it wasn't him. They were your ambitions..."

"And why shouldn't they be?" Mallus hissed sharply, seizing hold of Abdes' jaw, forcing his head back against his shoulder. "Yes, they were mine—they were mine by right. I've wasted my life through—thirty years—in service to Rome to see that man—that rot damn Greek—take Caesar's favor over and over."

Abdes started to crumple, and Mallus wrested him upright, pushing the blade savagely into Abdes' torso. When he opened his mouth, sucking in a desperate breath to cry out, Mallus shoved his palm over his mouth to muffle him.

"I have been as loyal to Caesar as Seneca ever was—and more besides," he snapped. "I have served Rome for four years longer than him—four years in the Praetorian to see this...this boy—this son of a freedman and no better than a slave—given the same honor I had fought to prove myself worthy of. And then in Germania, posted before him—four years before his arrival, I stood my ground in defense of Rome. I suffered wounds of my own. I knew my own triumphs and losses on the fronts, and again, to Caesar's regard, Seneca's meant more."

Mallus paused, drawing abruptly still, his eyes wide as more footsteps clattered in the distance. When they were gone, he moved again, dragging Abdes with him.

"Every moment of his supposed glory was not his alone—we all suffered, no more or less than him," he seethed. "But to Caesar, it was only ever Seneca. Here's a *prima ordine* appointment for Seneca—the first cohort, while I was left to the sixth—no better than rancid meat scraps tossed to Caesar's dog! Here's the *primipilus* promotion one year later, and then I'm given his leftovers—the first cohort whose loyalties didn't lie with me, but with him. This great and magnanimous man—this mighty hero and son to Spartan kings."

Mallus spat, uttering a strangled, furious sound. "I was a rot damn tribune—his senior among the legion by four years and Caesar named him *legatus*. When he fell for the standard—when the spear ran him through, gods above, I prayed—I begged the gods to take him, rid me of him. He lived through that—half a man, crippled and impotent, worthless to Rome, and still Caesar made him a hero for it! He gives him *Sepphoris*, and then insults me—he makes me keep beneath, trampled by his rot damn sandals in this piss rot back corner of the empire."

He jerked against Abdes, and Abdes mewled breathlessly, feebly against Mallus' hand. "Everything Seneca

calls his own should have been mine,” he said. “I’m a Senator’s son—my father is one of the wealthiest men in Rome. He has stood by Caesar, and this is how Caesar repays him? Repeated offenses—he’s ignored my every effort, and rewarded that nasty, Greek, gimp-legged bastard.”

He paused long enough to press his mouth against Abdes’ ear. “And you would have been next,” he hissed. Abdes whimpered in protest, and Mallus deliberately shoved against the blade to make him cry out. “No better than a slave yourself—another rot damn Greek in my way,” Mallus said. “He admired you, boy, can you believe it?” He laughed, a sharp, hoarse bark. “He thinks your witlessness makes you brave—how absolutely admirable that the boy would stand unarmed against two to spare some rot damn Jew girl from being forcibly plowed between her thighs. And then you lived—why didn’t you just die, Abdes? What is it within you damn wretched Greeks that makes you cling to this life with such tenacity so as to wrench apart the plans and goals of anyone else around you?”

Abdes whimpered in dismay at the hatred in Mallus’ voice. His eyes flooded with tears and he shook his head. *Please stop*, he thought. *Gods, please...!*

“Why didn’t you die?” Mallus hissed in his ear. “It would’ve all been so easy. Zadduc and his Messiah could have had their rot damn revolution. They could have blundered across the breadth of Judea stirring their whole damn lot to madness. Rome will crush them—she will come into this forsaken land like a surging wave and plow them under. Who cares what they think otherwise? Let them. They would have had their revolt—and I would have Judea. It would have been so easy—but you wouldn’t let it lie, would you?”

He jerked against the dagger again, and Abdes’ eyelids fluttered, his legs buckling clumsily at the pain. “Nothing would keep you still,” Mallus said. “Nothing—I tell Seneca to give you drudgery, to put you with Pulcher, and let you learn the discipline of being a soldier, and even then, a rot damn scribe, you keep asking questions, that little mind of yours just whirling and pondering, whispering and wondering.

"If you'd just let it all alone, Abdes, I would have let you live," Mallus said. "I wouldn't have hurt you, lad—I don't give a rot damn about you. You served your purpose to me in the end, letting that whore pick and prod Pulcher's secrets from you—and you have one purpose left to me. I would have let you live, otherwise, but you...you're too stupid to know when to be still and silent."

He let go of Abdes' mouth as Abdes slumped forward, swooning, struggling not to faint. "You...you're going to kill Seneca," he whispered. He watched dazedly as blood dribbled from a thin stream away from his lips, spattering against his feet, the floor; he choked moistly, feebly, straining to drag air past it. "You're going to say I did it."

"How else could I make sure that Caesar's favor isn't yet again stolen from me when I most deserve it?" Mallus asked, chuckling softly, drawing Abdes upright and against him as they moved again. "Your insight in the retrospect is astonishing, lad. It's a shame you're so foolishly naive in the moment. You've always reminded me of a toddler fascinated by sunlight against shiny objects, all wide-eyed and dumbstruck."

"But you...you were my friend," Abdes whimpered. *I wished you were my father*, he thought helplessly, anguished. *I trusted you...loved you, Mallus...!*

Mallus chuckled again. He held up his hand, pinching his fingers together in front of Abdes' face and pretending to waggle something. "Sunlight against a shiny object, lad," he said. "May the gods adore you for your witless innocence."

Mallus dragged Abdes to the northern foyer. Abdes had slumped in the tribune's grasp, as much to make his limp, unresisting weight cumbersome as to succumb to his pain. He had closed his eyes and pretended to be in a dead swoon. His mind had not abandoned him, however; it was still cognizant enough to and desperately devise some escape.

Mallus paused in the vaulted foyer. He grunted as he shifted Abdes' lifeless form against his chest, and he shuffled

in a circle, muttering to himself. "Should be here," he whispered. "Somewhere and soon. He'll be here."

He expects to meet Seneca here, Abdes thought dazedly. When Mallus lowered him to the floor, propping him against a wall, he moaned as the dagger shifted within him.

"Are you still with me, lad?" Mallus asked, his voice dripping with insincere tenderness. He genuflected between Abdes' sprawled, outstretched legs and pressed his hand against Abdes' cheek. "Wake now, Abdes," he murmured. "Wake for me. Don't let it take you yet. I've still need for you."

Abdes opened his eyes slowly, blinking blearily. He could hear the moist, gurgling sound of his labored breath; he choked weakly against blood. He looked around, feigning delirium. He could see the doorway beyond Mallus' shoulder to his immediate left, within five broad strides of where the tribune had positioned him. The citadel doors were closed and barred. Abdes couldn't tell by the sound alone how many rioters might be outside. It was impossible to distinguish the sounds of struggle from within the building with any that might lie beyond its doors, but Abdes imagined the rioters had yet to reach this back entrance in any significant numbers or effort. By now, the bulk of the rebels would have advanced throughout the acropolis, laying siege to the exclusive, wealthy homes of city officials and posh public buildings while those within the citadel focused their ferocity toward claiming the arsenal on the south side of the building.

Abdes moaned, letting his chin droop toward his chest, his eyelids flutter closed. "Oh, no," Mallus said softly, touching Abdes' face again. "No, no, lad. I need you awake, Abdes. Look at me. Look at me."

Abdes groaned, but kept his eyes closed. He squirmed, drawing his left leg up beside Mallus' hip. "Cold..." he whimpered, not a dramatic affectation. He had been seized with chill and shuddered with it. "I...please...I...I'm cold..."

"I know," Mallus murmured, leaning forward and tilting his face, whispering against Abdes' ear. "Seneca should be on his way. I told him I would meet him here. It will be over soon." He chuckled slightly, his breath fluttering in Abdes'

hair. "You've been very brave, lad. Seneca would be proud of—"

His voice and breath whoofed from him as Abdes sprang at him, screaming as pain wrenched through his broken ribs. He tackled Mallus, sending the tribune sprawling backward, landing heavily on his back with Abdes atop him. Abdes' body was seized with sudden adrenaline, countering his pain, galvanizing him with surging resolve, and he reared up, drawing his fist back and punching Mallus in the mouth.

Mallus yelled hoarsely, thrashing and bucking beneath him. Abdes jerked, screaming again as Mallus rammed his fist into his broken ribs. Mallus' free hand shoved against Abdes' face, his palm mashing squarely against Abdes' shattered nose, his fingers hooked painfully against his eyes. Abdes shook his head wildly, trying to dislodge him, swinging his fists in blind desperation, striking Mallus again and again. He felt Mallus heave mightily with his hips, knocking Abdes sideways; as Mallus' weight shifted and Abdes lost his balance, the tribune planted his sandal sole against Abdes' gut and punted, kicking the breath from him, and sending him crashing in a shuddering, panting heap against the floor.

"Rot...damn bastard..." Mallus said, scooting away from Abdes' crumpled form. He drove his heel forward again, booting Abdes mightily in the side of the head. Abdes grunted, jerking feebly, his fingers scrabbling for purchase against the polished stone floor. He tried to crawl, to get away as Mallus stumbled to his feet, turning his face and spitting blood out of his mouth.

"You bastard whelp," Mallus said, kicking Abdes in the ribs, making him convulse, writhing in agony. Mallus reached down, seizing Abdes roughly by the hair. "Get up, you rot."

Abdes staggered, forced to rise, and he wailed in new pain as Mallus forced him back against him, and deliberately caught hold of the dagger hilt protruding from under his shoulder, twisting the blade.

"I was going to kill you quickly," Mallus seethed, spittle spraying from his lips and against Abdes' cheek as he

wrenched the younger man's head back by the hair. "I was going to show you mercy, but now? Oh, you little bastard—now I'm going to give you over to Judas ben Hezekiah. I'm going to let him take his time with you—stretch out your suffering for days, boy, weeks even. You'll beg me—scream for my mercy until your throat is raw, your voice ruined, you little bastard."

"Mallus!" someone shouted, with a sudden clamor of heavy footsteps along a corridor. Abdes saw Seneca running toward them. The Praefectus was in full armor, with his sword in hand—the length of the blade blood-smeared from fighting. He limped clumsily, his hobbled gait hampered by exertion from fighting.

"Seneca..." Abdes gasped, his eyes widening in alarm. He rammed his elbow back with all of the strength he could muster, plowing into Mallus' breast. The tribune grunted breathlessly at the impact; Abdes felt his hands slacken against Abdes' hair and the dagger, and he jerked away. He staggered forward, trying to run. "Seneca!" he cried.

The effort to scream again flooded his throat with blood, and he floundered, doubling over, choking helplessly against it. The blow to his head, the painful effort of struggling for breath had left him dazed and reeling, near to fainting. He heard Mallus behind him, moving to follow him, and he lifted his head, looking up at Seneca as he rushed toward him. He held out his hands in desperate implore. "Help...help me...!" he begged.

"Don't touch him, sir!" Mallus shouted, even as Seneca dropped his sword and caught Abdes in his arms. Abdes crumpled against him, his legs failing him and Seneca genuflected, supporting his weight. "Seneca, he's gone mad!" Mallus cried. "He just attacked me! Don't—"

"Keep back, Mallus," Seneca snapped, his brows furrowed, his face infused with furious color. Mallus staggered to an uncertain, wide-eyed halt.

"Seneca, he...he's dangerous..." Mallus said, breathlessly, pressing his palm in exaggerated fashion against the point in his sternum where Abdes' elbow had caught him.

"Please," Abdes gasped, feeling blood rise in his throat. He choked again, and it gurgled from his lips in a thin froth.

"He attacked me," Mallus said. "I told you he was mad. He tried to kill me—you saw him attack me, Seneca."

Seneca looked down at Abdes, his brows lifted in anguish. "Abdes," he whispered.

"I...I'm sorry," Abdes said as Seneca touched his face gently, the calloused pads of his palm pressing against his cheek. "I'm sorry...please...I..."

"I'll get you out of here," Seneca said. "By my breath—my life, Abdes, I will get you out of here."

"It...it's Mallus, sir," Abdes whimpered, hooking his hand against Seneca's cloak. "He betrayed you. Please, he's going to kill you..."

He saw a blur of movement rushing toward Seneca from over the Praefectus' shoulder; Mallus had used Seneca's momentary distraction to circle behind him, draw his sword and attack. "Behind you—!" Abdes cried, shoving against Seneca, knocking the Praefectus sideways. As he rolled forward, sprawling atop Seneca, he reached beside them, pawing desperately for Seneca's sword.

Mallus' forward momentum, his overeager haste to kill Seneca with such seeming good opportunity worked against him; he yelped as he stumbled, floundering over Seneca. Abdes jerked sideways as Mallus' sword swung downward, plowing through the open air where Seneca's head had only just been. Abdes closed his hand around Seneca's sword hilt and unfurled his legs, launching himself at Mallus. He plowed heavily against the tribune's torso, driving the sword between them, hearing the sharp, hoarse grunt of Mallus' breath as the blade punched through his belly.

Mallus stiffened, his eyes flown wide. Abdes heard a metallic clang as Mallus' sword dropped from his fingers and against the floor. He and Mallus stood nearly nose to nose, stumbling together in a clumsy parody of dance. "Don't scream," Abdes hissed at him, taking the hilt with both hands

and wrenching mightily, twisting the blade in Mallus' gut. Mallus uttered a gurgling little sound, staggering against Abdes. "Hush, hush," Abdes whispered against his ear. "You'll only make it worse."

"You...rotted bastard," Mallus seethed, his brows furrowing. Abdes felt his hand grope against his back, and then Abdes screamed, falling away from Mallus and pulling Seneca's sword loose from his gut. The blade clattered to the floor and Abdes pitched gracelessly to the ground as Mallus jerked the dagger out of his back.

Abdes smacked against the unyielding stone, taking the brunt of the impact with the side of his head, his shoulder and hip. Mallus had told him the dagger was the only thing keeping his lung from flooding; with it gone, it was like a cracked levy that yielded in full to high water. Abdes couldn't breathe. He sucked in a desperate gasp to cry out, and there was nothing but blood, rising in a sudden, bitter surge in his throat. He convulsed against the floor as it spewed from his mouth and nose. He gagged, uttering wheezing, desperate cawing sounds as he clawed at his throat.

"No—!" Seneca shouted, hurtling at Mallus. He crashed into the tribune, knocking him backward. Abdes could hear them grappling together, their heavy footfalls shuddering against the floor, their overlapping, furious grunts and gasps. "What are you doing?" Seneca cried hoarsely.

"What I should have done in Germania, you rot bastard," Mallus snapped. Abdes opened his eyes and saw the two men in front of them. Mallus had managed to snatch his sword in hand once more, discarding the dagger, and he and Seneca had squared off. They moved slowly, facing one another, their swords leveled and poised to attack.

"You've gone mad," Seneca said. "Stop this, Mallus. The boy is hurt..." He glanced over his shoulder at Abdes, meeting the younger man's frightened, agonized gaze. "He's dying. Stop this. Let me—"

"Let him die," Mallus shouted, charging him, swinging his sword around again and again. Seneca parried each of his

attacks, but Mallus managed to drive him back, to send him dancing clumsily across the foyer.

“You killed him in self defense,” Mallus said. They’d moved beyond Abdes’ line of sight—and Abdes’ line of sight was severely diminishing as shadows seemed to close in upon him—but he could still hear them, the resounding clatter of blade against blade, their breathless cries, their floundering steps.

“He attacked me,” Mallus grunted. “Mad as a feral dog, he attacked me, and you tried to prevent him. You killed him to save us both.”

They darted back into Abdes’ bleary view. He saw a flash of torchlight against Seneca’s sword as he whipped it forward to batter aside Mallus’ swing for his throat.

“Unfortunately, not before Abdes meted out his own damage to your form—and saw you to Hades’ gate just behind him,” Mallus hissed, and they stumbled back again, shoving their blades together, tussling and staggering. “I would see you die a hero, Seneca, at least in the telling.”

Blood pooled against the floor beneath Abdes in a broadening circumference. His breath had dissolved into a low, sodden croak; he hiccupped weakly, spitting blood from his mouth. His eyelids fluttered and then his gaze was distracted by another wink of firelight—Mallus’ dagger had been kicked across the floor during the fight. It now lay within Abdes’ reach. He tried to move, his hand fumbling slowly, feebly. His blood-smeared fingertips brushed against the hilt, and he curled his hand about it, drawing the dagger toward him.

“Why are you doing this?” Seneca cried to Mallus as their swords battered together. “There is a rot damn riot underway, Mallus—have you gone mad?”

“I know there is a rot damn riot—I helped arrange it!” Mallus screamed and the sword crashes grew faster, more furious. “Thirty years—for thirty years, you’ve reaped Caesar’s favor while I’ve known nothing! Nothing! Everything you have should have been mine—it should be mine, you bastard! Without you, Caesar’s eye will finally—and rightly—turn to the

one who has always deserved his regard the most! I've served him faithfully and well my life through!"

"You've betrayed Caesar—not served him well!"

Seneca roared. Abdes heard the distinctive clatter of Seneca's blade smashing against Mallus' and of Mallus' sword falling from his hand. It clanged against the floor, skittering against the stone, sliding near Abdes.

Mallus' footsteps shivered through the ground beneath Abdes' face, and then Mallus fell beside him, grunting breathlessly in a frantic, hurried genuflect. "Still alive, lad?" he gasped, hoarse and winded, grinning down at Abdes. His nose and mouth were bloody, his forehead gashed. Blood smeared his teeth and lips and stained the front of his chest armor from the wound to his gut. "Good, then."

He reached down, closing his hand in Abdes' hair, grabbing his sword in the other. He stood, wrenching Abdes violently to his feet and against him. He whirled as Seneca charged him from behind, forcing Abdes in stumbling tow between them, using him as a shield.

Seneca limped to a halt, his eyes enormous. "Let him go," he said, holding out his hand. He met Abdes' gaze, his brows lifting his anguish. "Let him go, Mallus."

Mallus wrenched Abdes' head back by the hair, forcing a strangled, choked cry from him as he shoved the edge of his sword against Abdes' throat. "You might have a hope to save him, if you're careful and clever, Seneca," Mallus said. "The boy's already survived two sword strikes and a gripping fever. Maybe he's endowed with the favor of those same Greek gods they say grace you. Shall I open his throat and find out for sure?"

"No," Seneca said, shaking his head. He opened his hand, letting his sword fall to the floor. "Don't hurt him anymore. I'm right here, Mallus. Do what you want with me, but let him go."

"Kick it away," Mallus said, nodding toward the sword. Seneca did, sending the sword clattering across the foyer. Mallus laughed, blood peppering from his mouth and

spraying Abdes' cheek. "He reminds you of yourself, doesn't he, Seneca?" he said, pressing the edge of his blade more firmly beneath the shelf of Abdes' chin. "A brave, witless boy who throws himself into harm's way at every foolish, reckless turn to save others. A Greek boy, no less, even if only by the way of Ionia and Syria. I bet you saw some measure of greatness in him—some potential you thought you could foster and bring to bear."

Abdes' breath fluttered weakly and he struggled to meet Seneca's gaze, to hold his eyes locked with the Praefectus'. He trembled against Mallus, forced nearly onto his tip toes by the tribune's grasp against his hair. He kept his arm tucked behind his hip, between his body and Mallus', still holding Mallus' dagger clenched in his fist.

Mallus nuzzled Abdes' hair, his ear, chuckling. "I bet you fancied him as a sort of son, didn't you, Seneca?" he asked. "Aren't you both a perfect pair—the poor little whelp whose father used to beat him senseless, and the half-crippled hero who can't get a rise to sire any pups of his own? What a lovely little prize he'd have made to present to Caesar—the very son you can't have, in every measure but blood."

"Let him go," Seneca said.

"Did you know that, Abdes?" Mallus hissed against Abdes' ear. "Did you, boy? All of this while, you've tried so hard to please him—convinced you've failed—and all the time, he's admired you the more for your pathetic attempts. All of those sweet tokens you thought came from me came from him—he's as stupid as you are to trust me to relay them. How highly he's spoken of you; how such a light comes into his eyes when he speaks of what you've done. If his member wasn't flaccid and ruined, I might have thought he wanted to bend you over and—"

"Leave him, Mallus!" Seneca shouted, shrilly, hoarsely, balling his hands into fists. "He's dying, you bastard—let him go!"

Abdes shoved his elbow back, driving it into Mallus' torn and injured gut. Mallus screamed, breathless and sharp against his ear, and as the sword wavered, slipping away; as

Mallus' hand opened reflexively, freeing Abdes' hair, he staggered, whirling to face the tribune. He shifted the dagger in his grip and then shoved it forward, aiming higher this time; clasp ing both hands over the pommel and putting his full weight against the blade as he drove it into Mallus' chest. He felt the blade hit resistance—Mallus' heavy armor, his underlying mail, the thick bone of his sternum, and then Mallus fell backward. Abdes tumbled with him, landing atop the tribune, his sudden, collapsing weight sending the dagger deep, punching through to Mallus' heart.

Mallus pawed at him for a feeble moment, his hands slapping against Abdes', the hilt of the knife. His breath gurgled; he turned his head back and forth, his heels kicking weakly, futilely against the floor and then he fell still. His hands drooped away from Abdes, and his breath drew silent. A thin stream of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, trailing toward the floor. His eyes remained open, his mouth agape, his face frozen in a shocked, startled expression of utter disbelief.

Abdes collapsed sideways, spilling off Mallus' body. He caught himself with his hand, and gagged, watching blood spill from his mouth as he whooped vainly for even a hint of breath. He clutched at his throat and slumped forward; before he crumpled face-down against the floor, he felt Seneca's arm wrap around him, holding him.

"Abdes—!" he gasped.

Abdes had no strength left. Whatever adrenaline-infused resolve had kept him alive until that moment faded swiftly. His eyes closed, and he panted, a horrifying, sodden, strangled sound.

"I...I'm sorry..." he whispered to Seneca. Shadows collapsed upon him, devouring him, swallowing him whole and there was nothing but darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Abdes opened his eyes, but the world before his gaze was draped in darting, jerking light and shadows. He could hear footsteps all around him as men ran at a frantic, frenzied pace, their sandal soles slapping and sloshing in shallow puddles of water. He looked down at the ground, at a pair of legs moving beneath him. His head bounced and nodded against the small of a man's back, the scarlet folds of a red cloak beneath which he could feel the angles and lines of a leather breastplate overlaid with armor. He was dimly aware of a hand pressed heavily against the back of his thighs, holding him over the man's shoulder as he ran.

"Where, Pulcher?" Abdes heard someone call out.

Seneca, he thought dimly, his eyes closing, his consciousness waning.

"Straight ahead and left," the man carrying Abdes said, his voice breathless with exertion from hauling Abdes' dead weight.

Pulcher? Abdes thought, his eyes fluttering open dazedly. Pulcher was carrying him, and he realized they were in the aqueducts. Pulcher was leading them from the city, probably through the same route Abdes had proposed to Mallus—through the acropolis cistern and into the outlying tunnels.

Pulcher must have had the same idea, he thought, as his chin bobbed against Pulcher's back. *He...he must have...*

He had the strangest dream. He imagined he could hear Yeshua, the baby's quiet, gurgling voice. The sound seemed to chase the darkness that had enfolded Abdes away, leaving him bathed in golden light, like a spill of midsummer sunshine. He dreamed that he felt Yeshua's fingers prod gently, curiously against his mouth, as if trying to coax a smile from his lips. At this light but insistent touch, Abdes arched his back, lifting his chin. His mouth opened and he drew in a deep, gulping gasp of air. He felt it fill his lungs, spilling into him, filling him, and he drew it in greedily, desperately.

He dreamed that all at once, his pain was gone; his poor body had been wracked with it, crippled and immobilized with broken bones and agonizing injuries, but Yeshua touched him and it disappeared. He heard the shrill, sweet peal of the baby's laughter, and he laughed with the child, opening his eyes, staring up into nothing but a dazzling blaze of wondrous illumination.

"It...it's so beautiful..." he whispered.

For the third time in the span of almost a year, Abdes awoke to find himself looking dazedly up at an unfamiliar ceiling. It had happened often enough that when he found himself yet again in these circumstances, his mind groggy and heavy with fading sleep, his gaze bleary and somewhat murky, he was not immediately alarmed. He closed his eyes and forced the uncertain tension that had locked his shoulders, tightened through his neck and spine to relax. He breathed deeply, drawing in through his nose and letting the wind shudder in a loud, visceral sigh from his chest.

There was no pain at this effort, a fact that dimly surprised and bewildered him. If his hazy memories served, he'd suffered broken ribs before falling unconscious, not to mention a mashed nose, battered skull—and a significant puncture wound where Mallus had shoved a dagger through his back.

Mallus... he thought, his heart seizing with sudden, profound sorrow. That hadn't been a dream; he hadn't lain deliriously in his cell at the citadel and imagined the tribune's

betrayal. He might not have known where he was, or what had come to pass to bring him into this unfamiliar environment, but what had happened to him remained vivid in the recollection.

It had been Mallus all the while, he thought. He meant to kill Seneca. He meant to kill me.

If that's true, a quiet portion of his mind whispered. Then why aren't you dead?

Abdes opened his eyes. The ceiling wasn't so unfamiliar to him after all; it was the stretched hide panels and wooden beams of a Roman army field tent. He realized he could hear a dim voices from beyond the tent walls, a cacophony of sounds coming from all around him—men talking, things banging and clattering and clunking. He could smell wood smoke and warm lamp oil.

An army camp? He frowned, drawing his hand toward his face. Blankets had been tucked about him and he felt the warm folds of wool fall away from his bare arm as he lifted it. *That's what it sounds like—the training camp I was stationed at before my attack in Sepphoris.*

Outside of the training camp northwest of Sepphoris, however, the closest Roman army encampments or garrisons were north in Syria, or southwest at the fortified city of Megiddo.

His fingertips brushed hesitantly against his nose. Although he could breathe freely and without pain, he had clear memory of having it smashed with fists, feet and the floor into a wretched, swollen pulp. To his complete bewilderment, his nose felt perfectly fine. No pain at even the most deliberate, prodding touch and no swelling or misshape to it.

His curious fingertips slipped across his entire face. His lips were no longer puffy, bruised and split; his eye no longer distended with contusion until nearly forced shut. There were no gashes in his temples or cheeks, no sore spots or wounds whatsoever he could feel.

What in Hades...? he thought. It had taken him seven months to heal from the injuries Lamech and Heth ben

Hezekiah had delivered, and then, his recuperation had been marked by repeated memories of delirious consciousness, when Abdes had come to his senses somewhat, ablaze with fever, consumed by his pain. He didn't remember anything like that now. He had vague memory of Pulcher carrying him through the aqueducts and an odd but distinctly recalled dream of Yeshua's laughter, of bright, warm light, but no more than this.

Abdes sat up slowly, steeling himself for pain. His head swam slightly at this sudden change from prone to upright, but there was no discomfort, no shooting pain through his ribs, nothing. The blankets drooped about his hips, and cool air pressed against his chest and back. He looked down and found himself dressed in only a loose loin cloth. He could see the grim line of scarring that marked the place on his stomach where Lamech's or Heth's knife had pierced him, but of the bruising and swelling caused by the beatings from the cohort soldiers, there was no sign; not even a residual ache at the touch.

"What in Hades...?" he whispered, confused.

He sat on a cot, a reed mat and blankets drawn across a rope-and-wood frame. He looked around, surveying the interior of the tent and realized it was no ordinary decury accommodation. It looked like a field officer's tent, belonging to someone of significant enough merit to warrant not only private lodging, but an expansive environment, as well. The tent was twice as large as the one Abdes had shared with his decury mates at the training camp. The ground had been draped in animal skins and brightly colored rugs. Several large tables framed the inner circumference; these were littered with scrolls, small pottery bowls, jugs and cups. Oil lamps cradled in iron casings hung from the main vertical posts supporting the tent frame. Beyond the taut hide of the tent flaps, he could discern dim, pale illumination—sunlight outside.

Abdes pushed the covers aside and swung his feet around to the floor. He rose and stumbled in place for a moment, until his equilibrium returned to him. *What happened?* he thought, forking his fingers through his hair. When he'd awoke first at the citadel, and then at Elizabeth's house in

Rimmon, he'd roused to pain and stiffness, to a stifling grogginess that came from fitful, pain-induced unconsciousness. Now, he felt exactly as if he'd woken from a deep and restful sleep; his mind felt bright and refreshed, his body unfurling with a sort of exquisite release, rather than stiffness from lying still.

Abdes looked down at himself, at his unmarred and uninjured body. He was absolutely dumbfounded. He patted his hands against his chest, prodding and poking, trying to decide if he'd gone mad. *I didn't imagine everything*, he thought. *I know I didn't...did I?*

He walked toward the threshold of the tent. He drew aside one of the broad flap panels and leaned out. His eyes widened, and he gasped, shying reflexively to realize in full his surroundings. This wasn't the training camp near Mount Carmel; this was something immense and sprawling—a full legionary encampment. There were men and tents everywhere. There was no mistaking the dazzle of sunlight off of helmets and shields, the clanking of armor plates as soldiers marched briskly, purposefully about, bearing spears in hand. Wagons rolled past his tent and officers on horseback jogged their steeds by, shouting out to one another above the bustling, bewildering din of conscientious activity.

Movement out of the corner of his eye startled him, and he danced back into the tent, yelping softly in alarm. A Roman infantry soldier in full regalia had stepped directly in front of him; he'd been standing to the right of the threshold as if keeping sentry. Abdes glanced to his left beyond the tent flap and saw another soldier stepping forward from his posted place. Both young men stared at him, their eyes wide, their expressions caught between wonder and aghast.

“You...you're awake,” said one of them. He glanced uncertainly at his fellow, and then turned, hurrying away. The other soldier stepped immediately into the threshold, taking his friend's place, and Abdes shied uncertainly from him, frightened all at once.

He'd been under arrest in Sepphoris, charged not only with the murders of the Jewish girl, Jobina and Lamech and

Heth, but the soldiers of his decury, as well. He'd been considered guilty as charged—and worse, a traitor to the Romans—and treated accordingly.

“Where am I?” Abdes whispered to the guard, backing toward the center of the tent. He looked around for anything he might use as a weapon, but found nothing more useful than some spoons and styluses left on a nearby tabletop.

“You’re to remain inside the tent,” the soldier said. He made no move to step beyond the threshold and continued to stare at Abdes, as if somewhat awed by him, and yet frightened at the same time. Abdes had no accounting for this peculiar regard, and it made his anxiety swell.

“Where am I?” he asked again.

“The encampment of the Sixth Ferrata and Tenth Fretensis legions under the dispatch of Procurator Caius Rutilius Crispus,” the soldier replied.

At this, Abdes blinked, confounded. *What?* he thought. The Sixth Ferrata and Tenth Fretensis were Syrian-based legions. “How did I get here?”

“You were delivered here,” the soldier said, not enlightening Abdes in the least. He turned, meaning to duck outside and resume his post. “Please remain in the tent.”

“Wait—” Abdes said, stepping forward. The soldier paused, glancing over his shoulder. “I...I don’t remember how I came to be here,” Abdes told him, helplessly. “Am I under arrest?”

The soldier looked at him for a long moment. “Remain in the tent, please,” he said again, and then he turned, stepping beyond the tent flap.

When he was gone, Abdes stumbled back until he felt his legs smack the cot frame. He sat heavily, shaking. *What in the name of the gods is going on?* His heart was hammering beneath his breast. A clammy sweat had broken out along his hairline, the base of his neck and his palms felt sticky with it as he pressed them together, struggling to stave his trembling.

He couldn't think. His reason had abandoned him to this uncontrollable, relentless alarm. He closed his eyes, shoving his fingers through his hair, struggling to compose himself. *It's alright*, he thought. *It has to be alright. If I was under arrest...if they meant harm to me, I wouldn't be here, in an officer's tent. I'd be in chains, shackled and cuffed, and they wouldn't have asked me to keep in the tent. They would have beaten me senseless to make me stay.*

Despite that rationale, when he heard sudden footsteps, voices drawing near his tent, he jerked violently, his head whipping toward the sound, his eyes flown wide, his breath tangled. The sentry drew the tent back to allow someone in Roman uniform, sans helmet, to duck his head and enter, and Abdes scrambled to his feet, backpedaling in reflexive, helpless panic.

"Don't..." he gasped, holding out his hand, even though he didn't know what he was pleading to prevent. The fear and anxiety that had stricken him was exactly the sort he'd suffered during the first weeks in Pulcher's service in Sepphoris; whenever he'd ventured beyond the acropolis, memories of his attacks had been so vivid and disturbing, it had seemed everywhere he had turned in the city had called them to his mind, leaving him panicked.

The soldier raised his face, looking at Abdes. At the fear in Abdes' face, the wild and frantic light in his eyes, the man's brows lifted gently, and he stepped toward Abdes. "It's alright, lad," he said softly.

"Seneca..." Abdes whispered, shuddering again—not with alarm this time, but with relief. "Hoah, gods, I...I thought..."

Seneca crossed the tent and drew Abdes against him in a brief but fierce embrace. "You're with us again," he whispered, pressing his hand against the back of Abdes' head. He leaned back, holding Abdes' gaze. "How do you feel?"

Abdes blinked at him, stiffening slightly as a new uneasy settled upon him. He wasn't sure anymore if what he remembered was truth—and if it was some madness that had come upon him, then he couldn't be certain that Seneca's part in it was true, either. If Abdes had imagined the revolt; if he'd

hallucinated Mallus' betrayal, his own injuries, then it meant Seneca could still well be worthy of suspicion and mistrust. "I'm confused, sir," Abdes said, making Seneca smile. "What happened?"

"Varus, the Syrian governor, sent his legions south to stop the revolt," he said, his smile faltering into a grim line. "They've managed to reclaim the city, but there are still pockets of violent rebellion in the lower district to be subdued. The legions have burned the acropolis buildings, and began their sweeps through the south end this morning. They have orders to take whatever prisoners they can—kill any bearing arms, and raze the city to the foundations."

"What?" Abdes whispered, his eyes widening. "Then there was a revolt? I thought I'd only dreamed it." He pressed the heel of his hand against his brow, closing his eyes. "How long have I been here?"

"Three days," Seneca said, and Abdes blinked up at him, shocked. "Judas ben Hezekiah led his followers against the citadel three days ago—the Syrian legions arrived the next morning. Centurion Pulcher had summoned them, sending Varus word. He told me you had warned him about it. That you had told him at the prison that rioters would try to take the armory."

Abdes stumbled back a step. "Three days?" he whispered.

Seneca raised his brow. "He also told me last night that you said I was a part of it, some conspiracy, you'd told him. That's why he went to Varus himself, instead of through me. It seems you convinced him not to trust me."

Abdes stumbled again, remembering Pulcher's reaction to his desperate pleas at the citadel. *My gods, you really have gone mad*, Pulcher had said. "He believed me?" Abdes asked. His head was reeling with absolute, shocked bewilderment.

Three days? his mind screamed. *That's impossible! If I didn't dream the revolt—if all of it was real, then I should be dead! I*

should be beaten bloody, battered and broken—not up and about and on my feet like I’ve just roused from a nap!

“Not at first,” Pulcher said, stepping into the tent. Abdes whirled, startled by his voice, and shied back, his eyes round and confused. Pulcher walked slowly toward him, his face settled with its customary, stoic composure. “But you kept talking about Mallus, telling me to ask Mallus. You spoke like Mallus was a friend to you. I thought it was odd, given how often—and harshly—he’d spoken about you to me and the Praefectus.”

Abdes blinked, surprised anew.

“You kept babbling about a report,” Pulcher said, in a tone of voice suggesting that because Abdes generally babbled in his opinion, and about nothing of true consequence, this mention had—like most others—gone in one ear and out the other. “Which I found peculiar until I discovered it for myself among Mallus’ belongings in his office.”

Abdes glanced at Seneca as the older man draped his hand against his shoulder. “I never saw that scroll,” he said. “By my breath, Abdes, I never received it. Pulcher thinks that Mallus had been monitoring my correspondences for some time, and that he read your report first—and deliberately kept it from me.”

“You’d mentioned some things left out of your report,” Pulcher said. “Some things that had you’d only more recently learned. And you’d told me Seneca was a part of it. I simply assumed he and Mallus were involved together, given their history of association. It took me some time—too late, in fact, to forewarn Seneca—to figure out it wasn’t Seneca at all. It was Mallus alone and all along.”

“I’m sorry, Abdes,” Seneca said quietly, drawing his gaze. “Too many times I should have come to you myself, to let you know I was pleased with your work, your progress. Mallus was right—I did trust him in my stead to it. I didn’t want you to think I was fostering you with direct attention or coddling you. I wanted you to realize you could succeed on your own.”

He looked down at his sandals. "He was my friend," he said softly. "Or so I thought. And all the while, he hated me. He tried to make you hate me, too."

"If it all happened," Abdes said, blinking between Seneca and Pulcher. "If it was real, then why am I alright? I...I was beaten. Mallus stabbed me. I remember it—I remember it all, and if only three days have passed..."

His voice faded as Seneca and Pulcher glanced uncertainly at one another, both of them looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"What happened to me?" Abdes whispered.

"Your Nazarene girl came," Pulcher said at length, and Abdes' eyes widened in surprise.

"Maryam?" he asked. "But she...she wasn't..."

"She told me she came from Rimmon in your brother's company on the day you were arrested," Pulcher said. "They came to me the day before the riot broke out—the same day you'd told me about the armory, and Seneca."

"They were in Sepphoris?" Abdes asked, seized with sudden, new aghast. "They...gods above, they were in the city?"

"The girl said they were leaving. They'd been told to leave," Pulcher said. "She said something about a shepherd-priest, an Essenic from Qumran, or some sort. He'd told them they had to leave—something was about to happen."

Elizabeth and Maryam had told him Gabriel, the shepherd had delivered him to Rimmon; that somehow, the old man had managed to rescue him from the grim scene of a battle where every other man in Abdes' company had been murdered—a battle in which Abdes' death, more so than anyone else's, had been the point. Gabriel was scarcely capable of bearing his own slight weight erect, and yet somehow, Abdes remembered the old man lifting him from the ground as if he'd weighed no more than a child. He'd carried Abdes miles to the north of their attack with this same apparent—and impossible—ease.

"I think he was likely a Pharisee, not an Essene," Pulcher said. "Someone associated with Zadduc, and a part of the revolt."

Abdes said nothing. His breath had drawn to a shocked halt in his throat. *He's not a Pharisee*, he thought dazedly. *And I...gods above, I don't think Gabriel is an Essenic priest from Qumran, either.*

"She and your brother found us outside of the city, when we left the aqueducts," Seneca said. He looked momentarily puzzled. "Though I don't know quite how they knew where to find us."

"The shepherd-seer told them," Pulcher remarked, looking dubious. "Anyway, they kept with us until the Syrian legions arrived, and then I saw them back to Rimmon. Odd circumstances all around."

Abdes had dreamed of Yeshua touching his lips lightly, the sound of his soft laughter, like the twinkling of bells, delicate and sweet. He remembered in the dream that he'd opened his mouth at this touch, this warbling sound and dragged in a deep breath, free of pain, unabated and wondrous.

Two days later, he arrived at my door, Maryam had told him of Cleophas, her father. *He'd walked, Abdes—from Sepphoris to Nazareth, and not two days before, he couldn't even sit up in his bed...his back has never hurt him since.*

When the Median magi had visited Nazareth, their presence had upset and excited Maryam. *They said they saw something*, she'd told Abdes. *A sign in the sky and they went to Jerusalem, to see the king. They gave us things...the three elders had gifts for us, they said...one for a king...one for a prophet, another for a healer...*

"The baby," he whispered.

another for a healer...

He looked at Pulcher. "Did she have her baby with her? A son?"

"She did, yes," Pulcher said.

“You were dying, Abdes,” Seneca said, sounding stricken. “I don’t...gods above, lad, I don’t know how you lived to make it outside of the city. When we climbed out of the aqueducts, and we found Maryam and your brother waiting for us, you were fading, lad.”

His expression softened. “It was dark,” he whispered. “And I thought it was a trick...a play of the firelight, because we made camp in the hills. But by the next dawn, I could plainly see. It wasn’t a trick. There wasn’t a mark on you. You were alive and you were whole—healed in full, as if it had never happened.”

Abdes blinked at him, stunned. “I have lived for more than forty years, Abdes,” Seneca told him. “I’ve seen more in that time than most men ever have due, but I...by my breath, I’ve never seen the likes of what happened to you. I cannot begin to explain it.”

“Damndest thing I’ve ever seen, too,” Pulcher admitted, raising his brow. “And neither the girl nor your brother said anything about it. She said she would pray to her god for you.” His brow lifted all the more. “Perhaps he really is Almighty.”

Abdes looked down at his chest. Judas ben Hezekiah had thought he was the Messiah of Jewish prophecy; he’d rallied his uprising with that promise of redemption. Herod had thought the Messiah would come from elsewhere, the native village of the ancient Jewish king David. A baby born to the house of David—to men—but one who’d been given the powers of their almighty god himself.

Abdes shivered, blinking up at Pulcher. “Maybe he is,” he whispered.

The tent flap drew back, the snapping sound of the hide startling Abdes. He shied back as a tall, strapping man strode briskly across the threshold. His armor was magnificent and ornate, unlike anything Abdes had ever seen before. His leather breastplate modeled the natural musculature of the man’s chest and was fringed with leather at the thighs and shoulders. He wore a draping purple cloak clasped against his left shoulder with a heavy brooch. This was the most

distinctive feature of his garb—and the most distinguishable. It was the mark of a *legatus*—the highest ranking Roman army official outside of Caesar himself.

“I want him kept in this tent,” the *legatus* said to Seneca, settling his heavy, impaling gaze upon Abdes. Abdes shied under his stern scrutiny, his anxiety fluttering anew within him. “And not a word about this beyond this margin of hide,” the man added.

“Yes, sir, *Procurator Crispus*,” Seneca said, lowering his head in polite deference. “Good morning to you, sir.”

“Already there’s enough muttering and rumors about gods and divine intervention and superstitious rot flying around this camp,” *Crispus* snapped. “I won’t lend to it further. All of your men fluttering about saying the gods healed this boy whole, and now my men are yammering about it non-stop, too. That’s all I’ve heard for three days—do you know they’re whispering that the rot damn Hebrew deity blessed him and saw him restored? I’m running a camp under the eagle standard of Rome, and my soldiers are saying we should give lambs to some Jew deity and appeal for our own good fortunes.”

“My apologies, sir,” Seneca said. “It is unusual circumstances, sir, that’s all.”

“There’s nothing unusual to it—a mistake was made,” *Crispus* growled. “In the midst of battle, a man’s to expect being spattered and splashed with gore. He was covered in someone else’s not his own—in the heat of the moment, and the confused aftermath, you were all mistaken.”

“All two hundred and fifty seven of us who escaped the city,” *Pulcher* remarked in his standard dry tone. “Yes, sir, that would seem to be a reasonable explanation.”

Crispus stomped toward Abdes, and Abdes drew back, dropping his gaze toward his toes, his breath hitching in uncertain alarm. “Who’s your patron, boy?” *Crispus* asked. His voice was loud, resonating with authority, and although his tone wasn’t particularly sharp, Abdes flinched, hunching his shoulders as though he’d been snapped at in rebuke.

"I...sir, I...I don't..." he stammered, not understanding the question. Suddenly, in the presence of the Procurator, he doubted he could state his own name with any clear recollect.

"Your patron," Crispus said. "Your deity, boy. My rot damn priests are hounding me to give sacrifice and praise. I can't just throw up my hands and pick a patron for you. To whom do you give the most worship?"

Abdes glanced at Seneca, bewildered. "The goddess Astarte, sir," he said after a moment's hesitation. "And Eshmun, sir, and Hadad."

Crispus blinked, sputtering momentarily.

"He's Phoenician, sir, if I may," Seneca said.

"I thought you said he was Greek," Crispus said, his tone lending itself to a dour frown. "I can't give an offering to a Phoenician deity. My gods, I might as well offer a lamb to the Hebrew almighty." He snorted and then threw up his hands. "We'll say he's Greek. His patrons will be Caesar's."

"Yes, sir," Seneca said.

Crispus turned, snorting again as he walked away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Three weeks passed. The Third Gallic legion arrived from Syria to assume control of the army camp, as Crispus and the Sixth Ferrata and Tenth Fretensis had received orders dispatching them south toward Jerusalem. Judas ben Hezekiah and a contingent of his followers, including Zadduc the Pharisee, had managed to escape the Roman occupation of Sepphoris, and had moved forward with their plans to attack Jerusalem. Fighting was underway, with Roman forces dispatched from Megiddo and southern Judea to supplement the troops of the Twelfth Fulminata legion in Jerusalem against the rebels. Of the thousands of Jews who had revolted in Sepphoris, only these few hundred had escaped. Crispus and his legions had killed or captured the others. Nearly two thousand Jews had been taken from the city, destined for the slave auctions of the eastern Roman empire.

The city itself was gone. Once the riot had been suitably contained, Crispus had fulfilled his orders to see Sepphoris destroyed. The entire city, from the acropolis to the lower markets, had been set ablaze; the light from the fire had turned the darkness of night to the amber-infused glow of twilight for more than a week, an illumination seared into the sky and visible for miles in any direction throughout Galilee.

All of Mallus' carefully manipulated plans, his lofty ambitions had proved futile. Caesar Augustus had approved Herod the Great's final will. His lands had been divided among three of his sons—not given in full to any officiate of Rome. Herod Antipas, the king's son, had been granted authority over Galilee and already, he had sent word to the army camp that he

planned a visit to the smoldering ruins of Sepphoris. He had proffered grand designs for rebuilding the city, making it his capital, and laying it out as his father had the port metropolis of Caesarea—a Roman city designed and crafted in honor of Caesar.

Abdes had been fairly well confined to his tent until Crispus and his legions departed. The procurator had been stubbornly resolute on keeping Abdes well beyond sight or thought of the legionary soldiers. Seneca and Pulcher had visited with him often, however, and kept him abreast of everything that was happening. Abdes had enjoyed a fleeting moment of malicious good cheer when he'd discovered that although Naftali, the merchant, had apparently escaped with Judas and Zadduc, the other conspirators had not been so fortunate. Tarfon had been caught, as had Menachem; both were now shipboard and bound for the north, where they would be sold as slaves. There was an irony—particularly for Menachem—that Abdes might have never hoped more befitting.

Abdes was unable to learn what had become of Judas' nephew, Jacob ben Lamech, the boy who had helped save Salome from her pander. Plenty of children had been taken by the Romans as they reclaimed the city; plenty more besides had managed to flee Sepphoris in the interim between the open revolt and the Roman advance. Though Abdes doubted he'd ever know what had happened to the boy, he held fragile hope that Judas hadn't learned of Jacob's involvement in Salome's disappearance and that his love for the boy would have insured Jacob's escape along with Judas.

Abdes had also been unable to see Maryam or Ham. Crispus had not allowed any civilians within the encampment, and while Seneca had told Abdes that Maryam had returned to Nazareth, Abdes strongly suspected Ham would have dragged her—whatever her protests—back to Rimmon, at least, if not Sidon, to be away from all of the trouble.

He spent three weeks in relative isolation, save for the company of Seneca and Pulcher. The few soldiers he saw, who would bring him linens, food or water, seldom spoke to him, or even returned his greetings. They all stared at him, stealing

curious glances as if he'd been plated in gold. It didn't take long for this attention—and the otherwise lack of it—to whittle at Abdes' resolve, leaving him somewhat despondent. Every day, he hoped for the inevitable news that Crispus and his forces were leaving, because without the general to order him fairly well penned, he might at least be able to venture beyond the walls of his tent.

On the day that blessed news finally came, Seneca joined Abdes in his tent for their morning meal, as had become their habit. Not only had Crispus' orders of dispatch arrived, Seneca, too, had received word from Rome.

"Augustus was hard pressed to figure out what to do with us," Seneca remarked, rolling the scroll of papyrus back and forth between his hands in idle, distracted fashion. "I've been summoned back to Rome."

Abdes blinked at him, surprised and somewhat dismayed. "Rome?" he asked.

Seneca shrugged. "I've been offered my colonia," he said and he smirked. "It's a forced retirement of sorts—the same one I turned down after Germania. Only now I can't refuse Caesar."

"Why not?" Abdes asked.

Seneca chuckled without much humor. "I was in charge of Sepphoris," he said. "My responsibility was to keep the peace. And I failed."

"But that's not true," Abdes said. "What happened wasn't your fault. You..."

Seneca shook his head. "It's alright. It's what Augustus has wanted for me for a long time. Now, I simply have no polite means to refuse him." He glanced at Abdes. "You've been transferred back to the Third Gallic's archery auxiliary."

Abdes looked unhappily down at his flatbread, picking little chunks out of it without eating any. He'd known this would come; Seneca had warned him of the possibility. Most of the surviving cohort soldiers would be reassigned to those legions and cohorts from which they had originally come. With

no Sepphoris remaining for them to oversee, there were precious few other options.

“As a personal favor to me—and because you have earned it—Caesar has appointed you a tribune,” Seneca said, and Abdes looked up again, his eyes flown wide. “An infantry commander to the Sixth Cohort. Does that suit you?”

“I...I don’t know, sir,” Abdes said. A cohort was a regiment of four hundred and eighty men—all of whom would be under Abdes’ charge. “I’m young, yet and inexperienced. I’ve only marched a decury before, and I...”

“I’ve always said that youth is no preclusion to wisdom,” Pulcher said, ducking his head as he walked into the tent. “And it’s no excuse for ignorance, either. Besides, a man earns experience; it doesn’t just come to him.”

Abdes blinked in surprise, and then Pulcher dropped him a wink, a momentary softening of his otherwise stony facade. Abdes shook his head, laughing.

“You’ve shown more courage in your heart—not to mention wits in your skull—than most men do in a lifetime, lad,” Pulcher told him, leaning over to clap Abdes affably on the shoulder. “You have this due—and you’ll do well at it. I have no doubt of it.”

“Nor do I,” Seneca said, smiling.

“Pardon my interruption,” Pulcher said. “But you have a guest, Abdes.”

Abdes raised his brow, curious and bewildered. “Guest?”

“A Jewish girl,” Pulcher said. “Pretty little thing, really. Says she’s from Nazareth—a friend of yours.”

Abdes’ eyes flew wide, and he grinned. “Maryam?” he asked, hopefully. He laughed when Pulcher nodded, and he scrambled to his feet. “Maryam’s here? Where is she? May I see her?”

Abdes heard the tent flap flutter open and he turned, his smile widening as he watched Maryam step inside. She looked hesitant and uncertain at first, until her eyes adjusted

from the bright morning sunshine beyond the tent to the lamp-lit dimness within. When she saw Abdes, her caution faded, and she smiled at him, color blooming in her cheeks. "Hullo," she said softly, tentatively.

"Maryam, hullo!" he exclaimed, hurrying toward her. He embraced her warmly, lifting her easily from the ground. He spun her in a circle, feeling the hem of her tunics flap against his legs. Maryam laughed, her face tucked against his neck.

"I've missed you," she breathed against his ear, clinging fiercely to him.

"Oh, gods, I've missed you, too," he whispered, setting her daintily aground once more.

"She can't stay long, Abdes," Seneca said. He'd risen to his feet, and he and Pulcher were heading for the tent threshold. "Crispus is busy making ready to leave for Jerusalem, but he remains here at the camp. We had to smuggle her inside—her company is still disallowed."

"Yes, sir," Abdes said, as Seneca dropped him a wink, and he and Pulcher took their leaves. He looked at Maryam and smiled, hugging her again. "You're here!" he gasped. "I've missed you... gods, you can't even begin to know, Maryam. I've been going out of my damn fool mind stuck in this tent."

He took her hands, leading her toward the spread of breakfast against the floor. He eased her into sitting, and then knelt beside her, pouring her a cup of water and offering her some bread. "It's not as good as yours," he said, making her laugh.

"I'm not hungry, Abdes," she said.

"You've fed me for months—it's my turn," he said, making her smile all the more as he pressed bread against her palms. "So much has happened. I've wanted to tell you. They're sending me to Syria, back with the Third Gallic. I've been made a tribune over the Sixth Cohort of the archery auxiliary. Seneca just told me this morning."

She blinked at him, wide-eyed and momentarily stricken. She managed a smile, lowering her eyes toward her

lap. “Abdes, that...that’s wonderful,” she said. “You must be so pleased.”

“I don’t know if I’m more pleased or afraid,” he admitted, making her smile again, more genuinely this time.

“When will you go?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Probably within the month.”

She looked forlorn at this, and he took her by the hand. “Syria isn’t so far away. I could travel here to see you whenever I get leave. And I’ll write to you—every day, at least and twice, if some prolific thought comes to me.”

Maryam looked up at him and laughed.

“I’ll send you money for ink and papyrus, if you’ll write me back,” he said. “Yoseph won’t even have to know that way. I think we’ve made our peace, of a sort, anyway, but I wouldn’t want him to...” His voice faded momentarily. He’d meant this last as a jest, but he could tell by the way she cut her eyes downward again that he had just hit upon a painful subject. “Does Yoseph know you’re here?”

She shook her head. “No, he’s still in Rimmon. Ham is keeping with me and my parents in Nazareth. My father said it wasn’t safe for Yoseph to come back yet. Not with so many soldiers here, and so many Jews caught who knew of his association with Judas. They have been crucifying them. The ones who knew.”

The Roman legions had swept through Galilee like a dark and brutal wave, as ruthless as the attack against Bethlehem perpetrated by Herod’s soldiers. Any rumor or hint of involvement in the conspiracy had been as good as proven guilt to Procurator Crispus. Thousands of Jews had been forced into slavery in punishment, and hundreds more had been crucified, their bodies left to rot in grim warning, trussed to wooden cross beams along almost every major highway.

Abdes leaned toward her. “Maryam, what happened?”

She knew what he meant. He could tell in the way her posture grew tensed, her hand tightening against him. “I...I don’t know,” she said.

“Maryam, please,” he said. “I need to know. I remember the revolt. Mallus stabbed me. He drove his dagger through my lung. I remember choking on blood.”

Maryam nodded, her eyes trained on her lap. “You were dying, Abdes. When they brought you out of the aqueducts, you weren’t breathing.” Her eyes swam with sudden tears with tears. “Seneca let me hold you. I...I held your head in my lap, and I watched you die.”

That’s impossible, Abdes thought. He’d known that he’d wavered on the tentative threshold of death, but no one had told him more than this. *I couldn’t have died.*

“Ham was holding the baby,” Maryam said. “And when I began to cry, Yeshua...he...he laughed. It was this sweet little sound, like he was trying to tell me not to be sad. Not to weep. And then he touched you. He touched your mouth, and you gasped for breath. You said, ‘it’s so beautiful’ and you started breathing again.”

She looked at him. “You don’t remember, do you?”

Abdes was stunned. He sat motionless against the ground, his eyes wide, his voice tangled in his throat. “I...I’ve had dreams,” he said. “Dreams that are like that, but it...” *It can’t have happened like that*, he thought. *It’s not possible.*

“You dream about before, too, don’t you?” she asked quietly and he blinked at her in new and bewildered surprise. “That’s why you could never sleep, why you always seemed so tired. You dreamed about what happened to you in Sepphoris.”

He drew back slightly, his brows lifting. *She can’t know about that! How could she know?*

“That day in Nazareth,” Maryam whispered. “When you first brought Ham. You were so frightened. They frightened you—those women from the village—and I knew what you thought. You heard it, too, and you were frightened for me. You thought they said ‘Pantera.’”

“Maryam...” he began. *Did Yoseph tell her?* he thought, anguished. *Gods above, that rotted bastard—did he tell Maryam what I said? Who I am, hoping she’d hate me for it?*

“They didn’t say ‘Pantera,’ Abdes,” Maryam said. “They said ‘*ben* Pantera.’”

Abdes blinked at her, startled. “Ben Pantera?” he whispered. ‘Ben’ was a common name prefix, meaning ‘son of.’ His eyes widened all the more.

“They weren’t talking about you, Abdes,” Maryam said. “They didn’t know who you were. They were talking about Yeshua. They knew who I am.”

He remembered lying on the alley floor after Lamech and Heth had attacked him. He remembered the girl leaning over him, weeping for him, trying to comfort him despite her own desperate, frantic terror. *It...it's alright. Hush...it's alright...it...please, it's alright...*

The day he had met Maryam at the citadel, when the women had come to claim the bodies of Lamech and Heth, Maryam had been frightened of him until he’d taken off his helmet. *Until she saw my face*, he realized.

“It’s not possible,” he whispered, forcing some feeble semblance of breath and voice out of his throat. He stared at her, his eyes enormous and shocked. “She’s dead. Jobina is dead. They found her body.”

“They killed her,” Maryam said. “Salome told me Jobina belonged to Menachem. He let them kill her because I ran away. They couldn’t find me, and they knew they needed a body. A Jewish girl’s body.”

She smiled at him sadly. “My father owed him money,” she said. “He knew Yoseph had asked to marry me, that he’d promised Father enough in dowry to pay his debts. Menachem didn’t care about the debt—that’s why my father was so frightened. Menachem wanted me to work in that terrible place, like Salome. He thought if he could ruin me for marriage, my father would have no choice.”

She looked down at her lap. “When I learned I was pregnant, my parents panicked. They thought for sure Yoseph would find out what had happened...that everyone would know.”

"So they sent you to Rimmon," Abdes whispered, and she nodded.

"And then straight to Nazareth when Yoseph said he'd still wed," she said. "But there were always people who were suspicious about it. They'd whisper and point at me, and then, when Yeshua was born..." She closed her eyes and trembled. "They'd whisper and point at my son. They had no proof, but they still thought it."

"Maryam," Abdes breathed, anguished for her. "Gods above, I'm sorry."

"Sometimes I...I wished it was true," Maryam whispered. "That's the worst. They should hate me. Yoseph most of all—I have no right to have him love me. I wish sometimes that he'd hate me, not you, because sometimes I still wish it—and he knows that I do." She blinked at Abdes, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I...I wish that Yeshua was *ben Pantera*—your son. That you loved me, Abdes, and that you...you wanted to be with me."

I love you, she'd told him outside of Nazareth, when Yoseph had sent him away. She was precious to Abdes, the most beloved friend he'd ever known, and he'd thought she meant the same. He blinked at her now, in startled realization. "Maryam..."

She began to cry, pressing her hand against her mouth, and turning her face in shame. He reached for her, whispering her name again, but she shrugged him away. "Please don't," she gasped, her voice choked with tears. "I...I shouldn't have told you. I shouldn't have even come here..."

She started to rise, meaning to flee, but Abdes caught her by the hand, staying her. "Maryam—"

"Please don't," she said again, trying to pull away. He slipped his hand against the back of her neck. She resisted only briefly, and then let him ease her near, tucking her cheek against his shoulder, shuddering against him.

"I'm sorry," he said, kissing her ear. Her mantle had drooped from her head, and he brushed it down in folds about

her neck with his hand to stroke her hair. "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

He cradled her face between his palms and kissed her. It was an impulsive reaction; in that moment, with her against him, her tears drying against his skin, there was nothing that felt more natural or right in his heart than to give her this—what she wanted; what she thought she needed. She had known so much pain and fear, and for just that moment; that fleeting little while, he wanted Mary to feel as she'd always made him feel—safe from harm or ridicule, comforted and beloved.

Instead, her breath drew sharply still against her mouth. She uttered a soft little mewl; a frightened sound and tried to turn her head; immediately, he understood, and he recoiled.

"I'm sorry—!" he gasped.

She blinked up at him, ashen and trembling, and then her eyes flooded with tears. She looked away from him, turning her cheek toward her shoulder, drawing her hands toward her face. She shook uncontrollably, her voice escaping her in a helpless, miserable little mewl.

"Mary...!" he said, stricken. "Oh...oh, gods, I'm sorry."

"I...I haven't..." she whispered. "Not...not since it happened...not...not even with Joseph."

Oh, gods, what have I done? Abdes thought, dismayed. He scooted near to her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know. Please, gods, Mary, I...I never would have if I...I..."

"Sometimes he...Joseph tries, and he...he loves me so much, and I...I want to for him, Abdes," she whimpered. "Because I know he loves me." She opened her eyes and looked at him, anguished. "But I...I get so scared. Every time, I...I can't breathe, and I see their faces. I...I can smell them...their sweat, their...their breath...the...the way their clothes smelled. I remember what their hands felt like...they...they had callouses on their palms and fingers,

and...and their beards were coarse. They...their beards scraped at my face..."

"I didn't think, Mary," Abdes whispered to her. "I...I wanted to make you happy. I thought that was what you wanted."

She managed to smile weakly at him, pressing her fingertips against his mouth. "I thought that was what I wanted, too," she said.

They were quiet for a long time, listening to the muffled sounds of the army camp beyond the tent walls. "Oh, Abdes," she whispered. "I don't want you to leave."

He turned to her. "Come with me, then."

Maryam blinked at him, surprised. "What?"

"Come with me," Abdes said again. "To Syria, Maryam. Go right now to Nazareth. Get Yeshua and bring him here. Stay until they dispatch me, and then come to Syria." It was reckless and mad, but all at once, it was what he wanted.

"I have money," he said. "I will do right by you—buy you a home, hire servants for you—whatever you want, anything you need. I can take care of you and Yeshua. I can't marry you...not right away, but one day, when I'm out of the army..."

Her dark eyes were troubled, and he fell silent. What he had asked of her was an insult, in essence to be no more than a mistress to him, but it was the best he could offer. He could not promise her his heart—not yet, at least, not beyond friendship, but he felt he could learn. He could try. He already loved her in so many ways.

"I would be a good father to Yeshua," he said. "Not like my father—a thousandfold better, Maryam. By my breath, my honor, my life, I swear it."

She smiled at him gently. "I know, Abdes."

She'd told him she'd wished that Yeshua was his son, that she wanted to be with him, and he was offering that to her—earnestly, honestly. He had never had much by way of family, save for Ham, and the weeks spent languishing at the

army camp had only served to remind him of just how alone—and lonely—he truly was. All at once, he could imagine things so wondrously and plainly; a splendid house overlooking a scenic vista along the Syrian countryside, with Mary and Yeshua waiting there for him. He imagined coming home to them, of Yeshua as a toddling child rushing toward him, arms outstretched, agape and awed by this man he thought of as his father—Abdes in his armor and uniform, agleam in the midmorning sun. *A family.* Within Abdes' heart, there was suddenly nothing more he wanted in the entire breadth of the world.

“Yoseph can’t stop you,” he said. “He’s still in Rimmon, you said. He won’t even know you’re gone until it’s too late. Please say you’ll come with me.”

She was quiet for a long moment, looking into his eyes, her expression unreadable. In his mind, he saw it clearly, Yeshua’s arms in a throttling embrace about his neck, and Maryam’s smile, her kisses to welcome him home. He would grow to love her as his wife, as well as his friend. In time, he would forget Salome, and his heart would begin to heal. He would love Maryam truly, deeply, as she wanted him to; as she needed him to. “Please,” he whispered. “Say you’ll come, Maryam.”

She touched his face, caressing his cheek. “Alright, Abdes,” she said, nodding.

He fell asleep spooned against her, but when he awoke, she was gone. He sat up, groggy and momentarily disoriented, and shoved his hair back from his face as he looked around. The tent was empty, the space on the blankets where Maryam had been resting was vacant, save for a slip of parchment, folded in half. He picked it up and saw she had written his name against the page.

I miss you already, she wrote in the letter. You cannot know how it pains me to leave you, Abdes, and yet I must. I’m grateful for your offer to me and Yeshua. But I can’t accept, and in your heart, you know this. You don’t love me, not like I love you, and if I came to Syria, you’d spend the rest of your life trying to shame and chastise yourself for it. You

don't deserve that, Abdes. You deserve to be happy, to love freely and truly as your heart wills it, not as your mind demands it.

You told me once that Yoseph was a good man and this is true. He's known the truth about Yeshua all along, just as he has always known that my heart is with you. But he's good to me, and to Yeshua. He will raise Yeshua as his own, and Yeshua will live his life as if nothing within it is anything less than it seems.

There will be whispers for awhile, but they will pass and what will remain is a quiet, comfortable place for us in Nazareth that we'd never know in Syria. You could never hide what I would be if I left with you, Abdes, and the greatest shame would come upon Yeshua for it. I cannot be that selfish, no matter how much I want to be with you. There is more to Yeshua than any of us can ever know or fully understand. Great things will happen to him. Great things will happen because of him. I am as certain of this as I am that the sun will rise on each new day.

I'll write to you as often as I can, in care of your legion. I hope that you will write to me in reply, but will understand if you don't. I will always love you. May the Almighty forgive me for what I've done—and what I now must do. Good-bye, Abdes.

The parchment fluttered from Abdes' hand to the ground, and he sat for a long, quiet moment, his heart aching. Of course, she had left him. Of course, she could not stay. *In your heart, you know this*, Maryam had written, and it was true; he'd known all along, even as he had pleaded with her, even as he had imagined some fanciful, impossible life for them together.

He forked his fingers through his hair and sighed. He could go after her, follow her to Nazareth, but knew it would be futile. She was right; he did not love her, not in the way she hoped for, the way she needed. Although he might have loved her as best as he was able, it would not have been enough, no matter his intentions, or his desperate attempts to the contrary. With Yoseph, Maryam could be a wife, and Yeshua, a son; the three of them a family. With Abdes, Maryam would never be more than a kept woman, and Yeshua, the bastard son of a Roman soldier.

There is more to Yeshua than any of us can ever know or fully understand. Great things will happen to him. Great things will happen

because of him. I am as certain of this as I am that the sun will rise on each new day.

Abdes looked down at his body, whole and unscathed, the injuries that should have seen him dead vanished from his form. *I'm certain of it, too*, he thought, as he smiled forlornly, seized with simple but poignant regret.

Good-bye, Abdes, she had written.

“Good-bye, Maryam,” he whispered in reply.

EPILOGUE

“You’ve said that it’s the Law that one does not commit adultery,” Abdes heard a boy saying as he addressed a group of men dressed in the robes of Jewish teachers along the steps of the Temple in Jerusalem. “But isn’t true to say that any man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart?”

The rabbinical teachers murmured together at this, as if it had opened some sort of discussion among them. Their voices overlapped as they debated the matter back and forth, and then the boy’s voice rose above them, drawing them quiet once more.

“If your right eye causes you to sin, shouldn’t you gouge it out and throw it away, rabbis? Isn’t it better for you to lose one part of your body than for the whole body to be thrown into hell?”

“Veritable sage, isn’t he?” someone remarked from Abdes’ right. Abdes turned to find one of his cohort centurions, Pertacus enjoying the cool comforts beneath the portico ceiling.

Twelve years had passed since Abdes had been transferred to Syria. The Third Gallic legion had been sent back into Judea to Jerusalem to help supplement the influx of Jewish pilgrims gathered for the annual Passover celebration. Tensions were historically high during Passover, as Jews from every corner of the empire converged upon Jerusalem in order to worship and offer sacrifices at the Temple. Visitors were not limited to Jews; a sprawling courtyard at the Temple was

designated for gentile-use, and it was not uncommon even during Passover to find as many Romans, Greeks, Phoenicians, Syrians and Egyptians at the Temple as devout Jews.

The feast of Passover had officially ended three days' earlier. The crowds were significantly less, as most pilgrims had left Jerusalem for their homes, and with them, the tension had significantly decreased as well. For the first time, many of the soldiers felt some semblance of ease, as if they had just narrowly missed some enormous disaster by the most narrow of margins. After an afternoon spent nearly roasting alive in his armor beneath the unseasonably fierce sun, Abdes had been grateful for the opportunity to stroll along the perimeter of portico, finding some comfort in the shade. He had walked toward the rear of the Temple building, an area called Solomon's porch. Here, his attention had been drawn toward the gathering of Jewish men who curiously seemed to be listening with avid attentiveness to this peculiar and outspoken young boy.

Pertacus smirked and nodded his chin toward the gathering of men. "The kid," he said. "I said he's a veritable sage."

"Who is he?" Abdes asked, turning to look toward the boy again.

"Don't rightly know," Pertacus said with a shrug. "I've seen him here these past three days, out on that porch at all hours, talking with the rabbis and scribes, asking them questions. I think he must have been left behind by someone heading home and too hurried to notice. I haven't seen him around before the Passover."

"How could someone not notice they left their boy behind?" Abdes asked, raising his brow.

"You have a family of, say, six kids, plus all of the in-laws and their kin, and soon you travel in a big throng to the Temple," Pertacus remarked. "Happens all of the time. A kid lags behind; he gets curious and here's something interesting enough to distract him, and then there you go—his family is gone, and what's he to do?"

Abdes began to walk toward the porch. "Where are you going, sir?" Pertacus asked.

Abdes turned, walking backward to offer reply. "I'm going to fetch the boy and see if he's indeed left behind," he replied. "And if he is, I'm bringing him to Centurion Leddicus so that we can try and locate his wayward family."

Pertacus laughed, shaking his head. "Are you that aching for something to do, Tribune Pantera?" he called.

Abdes laughed back, flapping his hand dismissively. He turned around again and moved toward the boy. As he eased his way through the gathered men, they drew back from him, surprised and alarmed by his uniform. They withdrew in a broad circumference, clearing a path for him to the boy, who paused in mid-question and looked up at Abdes. Unlike his elders, he did not seem frightened by the appearance of a Roman soldier, only curious.

"What are you doing here, little one?" Abdes asked him in Aramaic.

"I'm speaking with the rabbis, sir," the boy replied. If Abdes' address in his native tongue surprised him, it didn't show in his face. He blinked at Abdes, more inquisitive than anything.

"Where are your parents?" Abdes asked. "My man says he has seen you here for three days now. Are you from Jerusalem?"

"No, sir," the boy said. "I'm from Galilee. My parents are likely either half-way there, or nearly half-again here, having turned around to come back for me."

Abdes arched his brow, amused by the kid's wit, but unwilling to let it show. "Come with me," he said, hooking his forefinger in beckon.

The boy frowned slightly. "Why?"

"Because I said so," Abdes replied.

The boy's frown deepened, growing petulant, nearly a pout. "That's no reason," he said. "I haven't done anything

wrong. My parents will come for me. They'll know to find me here."

"Yes, well, in the meantime, you're coming with me," Abdes said, letting his brows pinch a bit now to convey his utter lack of amusement. "Up now, there you go. Fall in step."

The boy rose, looking decidedly begrudging about the effort. He hunched his shoulders and tromped past Abdes. "My parents will come for me," he said. "I'm hardly lost if I keep in one place, as I have been. It's when I'm made to move that it becomes harder for them to find me."

Abdes shook his head, planting his hand on the boy's shoulder to keep him from scampering off. "You've got a mouth on you, boy," he said. "Your father doesn't take after you with a strap for it?"

"My father doesn't hit me," the boy said, trying vainly to shrug his way from beneath Abdes' hand. "I'm sorry yours did, but that doesn't make it right or deserved."

Abdes blinked, momentarily startled. He nearly drew his hand away in surprise, and then shook his head again. Every child got whacked a time or two by his parents; it didn't take a prophet to deduce this. The kid had made a good guess, that was all. It wasn't as if he knew Abdes, or his past. "How old are you, boy?"

"Twelve, sir," the boy replied.

"What's your name?"

"What's yours?" the boy answered.

Abdes frowned, growing weary of the game. "Are you going to be insolent to everything I say?"

"You're the one whose dragging me off like I've committed some crime, sir," the boy replied pointedly, trying again—with no better success than before—to shrug away from Abdes' grasp.

Abdes sighed. "Pantera," he said. "My name is Pantera."

“Mine is Yeshua,” the boy said, and Abdes drew to a startled halt, the last decade of his life slapped from him. He has not seen Maryam since the day she had left the army camp. They had exchanged countless letters back and forth over the years, and he had hoped she might be among the crowd at Jerusalem for the Passover, although he hadn’t seen her. “Yeshua ben Yoseph, sir,” the boy said. “I live in Nazareth.”

He mistook Abdes’ pause for reconsideration and turned, lifting his chin and looking him squarely in the eye. “They’re coming, sir,” he says. “I have two brothers, sir, and we traveled here with plenty other kin, but they’ll notice me missing straight away, sir, I know it. They’ll look for me here.”

How Yeshua had managed to escape Maryam’s notice for that long was astonishing to Abdes. She was an admirably diligent mother, from what he’d been able to glean from her letters—and she remained as fiercely protective of Yeshua as she had from the moment of his birth. The fact that within the past two years, Yoseph had begun to bring Yeshua with him as his apprentice, traveling daily into the reconstructed city of Sepphoris had been a cause for great concern for Maryam.

I wish that he wouldn’t, she had written. I’ve told him that, but he tells me I’m being foolish. That more people will notice if I keep him here with me, when he’s of a proper age to set to work at his father’s side. Maybe he’s right. I don’t know, Abdes. But every morning when they go out that front door, I can’t breathe, it seems like. I feel like I hold my breath the whole day through until they return for their suppers.

Maryam still lived in anxious fear that somebody somewhere would suspect something, either that Yeshua wasn’t Yoseph’s birth son, or that he was in the right lineage and generation to match the Messianic prophecies. She’d never written of any other healings at Yeshua’s touch, but Abdes had always wondered if that had been because she was frightened of disclosing it on papyrus. He’d always suspected it had happened again, and more than once, but Maryam had simply kept mute about it.

Abdes struggled to find his voice. “Well, you...you must be hungry,” he said. He could tell from Yeshua’s hesitant expression that he was. Abdes managed to smile. “If you come

with me, I'll find you something to eat. We'll go together, and then we can come back here. I'll wait with you until your parents come."

"Why?" the boy asked, suspicious again.

"So that nothing happens to you," Abdes said. "The city isn't a safe place for a boy on his own."

He led Yeshua away toward the portico. "I'm hardly on my own," Yeshua said. "I'm safe here at the Temple."

"Yes, well, we'll be right back," Abdes said. *And if anything happened to you in the meantime, Maryam would never forgive me—not to mention what Yoseph would do.*

Yoseph was another topic of conversation that had remained unbroached in his correspondences with Maryam. He doubted Yoseph knew of their kiss so long ago, but assumed that he was perfectly aware of his wife's letters. Scribing supplies remained an expensive luxury that Abdes did his best to supplement for Maryam, as he had promised. He'd send extra papyrus sheets rolled about his letters, or have Ham travel to Nazareth to deliver coins for ink and styluses. Ham and Salome had moved five years earlier to the town of Cana, just north of Rimmon in Galilee. Salome had family here, a younger sister who lived in the company of an aunt. Ham was fond to write to Abdes, pestering him gently about meeting this sister, and perhaps forgoing Roman custom by marrying her.

It's not so steadfast or set in stone anymore that soldiers can't marry, Ham had written. I know because I've seen it—especially here, away from Rome's eye. Happens all of the time, and Minna is a nice girl, pretty and bright. You'd find her good company—Salome and I both think so.

Abdes found some bread for the boy to eat, along with a flask of water and then they returned to the Temple grounds. He and Yeshua sat side by side and he watched the boy tear voraciously into the bread, munching hungrily.

"Why do Romans believe in so many gods?" Yeshua asked, looking up at Abdes, startling him from his distant thoughts.

"I...I'm not Roman," Abdes said. "I'm Phoenician."

"Pantera is a Roman name," Yeshua said pointedly.

"That's the name they gave me when I joined the army," Abdes said. "My birth name is Abdes."

Yeshua looked thoughtful. "My mother has a friend named Abdes," he said, and Abdes blinked at him, unable to stop himself from smiling.

"Does she?" he asked.

Yeshua nodded. "She talks about him sometimes. He sends her letters. She can read. She's the only woman in the village who can. She taught me." He nibbled on his bread again. "Her friend must be Phoenician, too."

Abdes looked down, still smiling. "Yes, he...he must be."

"They gave you a Roman name?" Yeshua asked. "What was wrong with your other one?"

"It wasn't Roman," Abdes said.

"So does that make you a Roman now, to have a Roman name and be a Roman soldier?"

"Yes, by the law," Abdes said. "But I'm Phoenician by birth."

"Do Phoenicians believe in one god?" Yeshua asked.

"No," Abdes said carefully.

"Why not?" the boy asked, and Abdes nearly winced, having anticipated this to come.

"Because my ancestors were conquered by a lot of different empires," he said. "Not just the Romans. It's been a long, long time since we governed for ourselves. And every time new people came among us, we learned from them. We borrowed from them. So if we liked a god they worshipped, we would worship that one, too."

"My people have been conquered a lot, too," Yeshua remarked, munching again. "And other people have tried to make us borrow their gods, too. But we never have. We believe

only in the Almighty. How can you hold faith in so many when one by one, they accomplish so little? Wouldn't it be more comforting to realize the Almighty takes care of everything for you, as long as you honor him?"

Abdes looked at him for a long moment. The Messiah was to be a descendant of King David, Maryam had told him. It might have been possible had Yeshua been Yoseph's son; Yoseph had blood ties to David. But once Abdes had realized that Yeshua was not Yoseph's son by blood, he had also realized that Yeshua could not possibly be any Messiah—and that anything wondrous that seemed to come because of his influence was surely no more than coincidence.

But now he was uncertain again. Now, as he gazed upon the boy, listening to him speak, to the profound and gentle wisdom in his words, he remembered something long forgotten; Maryam had told him that she and Yoseph were distant kin. Yeshua might not have been a descendant of King David by the benefit of Yoseph's blood, he still could be—through Maryam.

"I don't think your Almighty looks after me," Abdes told him. *Maybe once, but not anymore*, he thought.

Yeshua blinked at him, puzzled and somewhat wounded. "Why wouldn't he?" he asked.

"I'm not a Jew," Abdes said. "You're his chosen people, aren't you? Why would he look after me?"

"My mother says the Almighty looks after us like we look up at the stars," Yeshua said. "Some are bright, while some are pale. Some flicker and others are steady. Some are in patterns, aligned with each other, while others glow alone. When the seasons change, the heavens revolve, and the stars move. But if you look skyward long enough, you can always find them again, no matter where they roam...because you know them."

Abdes blinked at him. "You're a smart lad, Yeshua," he said at length.

Yeshua smiled brightly, pleased by the praise.

“Yeshua!” someone called out sharply, loudly. Yeshua and Abdes looked in unison to find Elizabeth and Yoseph running across the porch toward them. Abdes stiffened, his eyes flown wide, immediately stricken breathless and immobile.

“Yeshua!” Elizabeth cried, not looking at Abdes’ face, seeing only his uniform. She darted up the steps and snatched the boy by the hand, jerking him to his feet and away from Abdes. “Shame on you!” she exclaimed, breathless and flushed, near to tears. She jerked him against her, hugging him fiercely. “Everyone is looking for you, Yeshua ben Yoseph—shame on you! Your mother is frantic with worry! Don’t you ever give us such a fright again!”

Yoseph had drawn to a halt behind his wife’s aunt. Unlike Elizabeth, he looked at Abdes squarely and recognized him. His eyes widened in reflexive shock, and then his brows furrowed. He stepped forward, moving to position himself between Abdes and his family.

“Why were you frightened?” Yeshua asked, sounding genuinely bewildered. “Why didn’t you just look here first? Where else would I be?”

“Your father nearly—” Elizabeth began, and then she looked up, finally taking Abdes into full account. It took her a moment, and then she recognized him, too. Her voice abruptly faded, and her eyes widened.

“This is Pantera,” Yeshua said, turning and smiling brightly at Abdes. “He’s my friend. He’s kept me company awhile and given me some supper.”

“He isn’t your friend,” Yoseph said, frowning, stepping in front of his son. He glanced over his shoulder at Elizabeth. “Take him and go.”

Abdes rose to his feet. He didn’t say anything to Yoseph; he looked at Elizabeth, his brows lifted in implore. “Is Maryam here?” he asked. “Is...is she with you?” He looked around, hopefully, without seeing her anywhere. “She’s here in Jerusalem?”

“Take Yeshua and go, Elizabeth,” Yoseph snapped, his tone sharp. Elizabeth drew her arm around Yeshua and began to lead him away.

“Why are you angry, Poppa?” Yeshua asked, looking back at Abdes, his expression bewildered and hurt. “He didn’t do anything. He was nice to me.”

Yoseph glared at Abdes, until Abdes lowered his gaze toward the ground, ashamed. “You keep away from my family,” he said. “You have your letters—and you’re lucky I give you that. It should be enough. That is enough, boy.”

“I...I meant no harm,” Abdes said. “I did not realize who Yeshua was until...”

“I don’t care,” Yoseph snapped. “You stay away from my boy.” Abdes did not miss the clear and brutal inflection on the words *my boy*; the harsh tone of Yoseph’s voice was like a physical blow that hurt him deeply, and shamed him even more.

“I wouldn’t have hurt him,” he said helplessly. “I’ve never wanted to hurt any of you, Yoseph.”

“Then you’ve failed, Pantera,” Yoseph said, another cruel blow delivered with the sharp, disdainful utterance of Abdes’ Roman name. Yoseph turned and stomped away, leaving Abdes alone where he stood.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

He walked away from the porch toward the portico, feeling numb and leaden and empty inside. He passed Pertacus without even noticing the centurion still keeping to the cool shade of the colonnade.

“Looks like they finally noticed, eh, sir?” Pertacus asked with a laugh. “Now what will you find to do with your...Pantera? Pantera, hold up!”

Abdes didn’t answer. He walked away, leaving his friend bewildered behind him.

He abandoned the portico and crossed the broad stretch of the gentile courtyard, ducking and shouldering his way past people milling about. He didn’t even realize someone

followed him, calling to him, until he felt a small hand catch his own, slender fingers curling against his palm.

He turned, startled from his dismayed thoughts. He was startled all the more to find Yeshua behind him, holding his hand. He looked about in reflexive alarm for Yoseph, half-expecting to find him shoving his way through the crowd, ready to pummel him. There was no sign of the man, and Abdes blinked down at Yeshua, bewildered. "Where...where are...?" he said.

"I know," Yeshua said, looking shamefaced and sheepish. "Twice in a row. Now Poppa probably *will* take after me with a strap."

"Why did you follow me?" Abdes asked.

"I didn't get to say thank you," Yeshua said. "For being nice to me. For the supper."

He looked so earnest, turning his large brown eyes up toward Abdes, that Abdes softened. "You're welcome, Yeshua," he said, genuflecting before the boy. "It was my pleasure."

Yeshua lifted his hand, brushing his fingertips against Abdes' mouth. It reminded Abdes of the sensation he had felt, the tickling of a baby's fingers against his lips, coaxing a smile from him. He remained as helpless now as he had then, and he smiled at Yeshua.

"You're my mother's friend," Yeshua said softly, and Abdes nodded.

"Yes," he said, smiling, feeling tears well in his eyes. He looked down at the ground, blinking stubbornly to stave them. "Would you tell her you saw me?" he asked, his voice hoarse and warbling all at once. "Would you tell her I'm sorry I didn't get to see her, but I...I said hullo?"

Would you tell her that I love her? he wanted to add, helpless to voice the words.

"Yes," Yeshua said, nodding. Abdes glanced up at him, and the boy smiled. "I'll tell her, Abdes."

“You should go,” Abdes said, rising to his feet. “If your father finds you with me again, he...we will both be in for it, lad. He doesn’t like me very much.”

Yeshua looked at him for a long moment, and then his smile widened gently. “You’re wrong,” he said. “My Father loves you.”

With that, Yeshua turned and ducked among the crowd. For a long moment, Abdes stood immobilized and helpless, watching the boy go, his body filled with a comfortable warmth. For one fleeting, breathless moment, everything in the world seemed bright and vivid to him, as if he gazed upon it all for the first, wondrous time. He watched the people fill in the space between them, until Yeshua was lost from his view and gone. As the world slowly slipped back into its gradients of ordinary, dull colors, the luster he had imagined gone, Abdes smiled and turned, walking away.

End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"Definitely an author to watch." That's how *Romantic Times Book Reviews* magazine describes Sara Reinke.

New York Times best-selling author Karen Robards calls Reinke "a new paranormal star" and Love Romances and More hails her as "a fresh new voice to a genre that has grown stale."

Dark Thirst, the first in her Brethren Series of vampire romance is available now from Kensington/Zebra Books, while the sequel, *Dark Hunger*, will be available September, 2008.

Other available titles include *Tethers*, a science-fiction thriller, the historical romance, *An Unexpected Engagement* and the fantasy series, the Chronicles of Tiralainn.

Find out more about Reinke and check out more of her free electronic reads at her website: www.sarareinke.com.