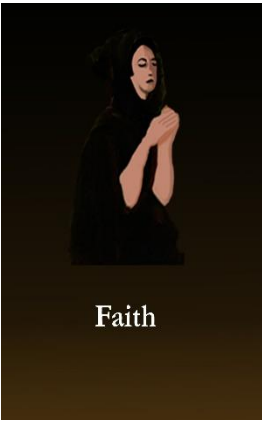


Faith

Spring, 20 CE. In Jerusalem, the impetuous Gila and her older sister, Ziva, meet Jesus of Nazareth on a quiet street corner near the lower market. Later, under clandestine circumstances, the girls and their family are taken into domestic slavery in the family home of a Roman centurion.

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Faith

While Gila is still a child, her family is taken from the life they have known in Bethlehem and now in Jerusalem. They are taken into domestic slavery in the home of the Roman centurion Quintus Caecilius. Gila knows she must learn to curb her independent, impulsive, occasionally disruptive nature, though in light of her enforced servitude, she finds this to be a nearly impossible task. Her only hope is to allow herself to indulge her independent nature in ways that are not obvious to Quintus or to the other members of his household. She starts by reading every scroll she can find in his library and yearns for the day she can return to her

homeland, hoping for another encounter with the exorcist and miracle worker, Jesus.

Ziva is more artistic and less effusive than her younger sister, Gila. She has learned how to put up with Gila in her most disruptive moments, but she also knows that her own patience is not unlimited. Next in line for Gila to annoy is Elias, a brother older by a few years than both girls. Elias likes his duties working with his father, Avraham, taking care of the stables for the horses that are being trained by Quintus for sale to the Roman army.

Part 1

Ziva suddenly calls out, "Gila! This way! Quickly!"

The younger Gila runs to her sister's side to see what she is yelling about. When she sees, her eyes light up. Around the corner, in one of the open shops in the bustling market of lower Jerusalem, a young, bearded man in a light gray robe is talking quietly to a crowd of people. The small audience has turned its ear to the soft words being spoken to them. Gila is surprised to see that the young man is the Jewish exorcist, healer, and

preacher from Galilee known as Jesus of Nazareth. Her father has worked as a craftsman in the Galilee and speaks often of the time he went to temple and Jesus was there. Now, she and her sister have found him, by luck, in the Passover marketplace.

The name Jesus is common. This Jesus is often known as the Nazarene to set him apart from the many prophets, exorcists, healers, and aspiring messiahs who work the crowds in Jerusalem during Passover. Because the preachers from Galilee are especially vigorous and imaginative in their presentations, shoppers will almost always stop and listen if for no other reason than to be entertained on a warm spring day.

This Jesus is well known because his good reputation for healing and exorcism has preceded him. Gila stands on her tiptoes and strains to hear his voice. The market is crowded, so it is very hard to hear his words unless she moves closer.

Jesus the Nazarene speaks of the one God in ways that cause his listeners to bend their bodies and turn their ears toward his voice. His voice is clear and modulated across a range of tones depending on the size of his audience, and on what he wants to emphasize to his hearer. He speaks to each person directly. He engages with them as individuals while they speak. He is alert to their questions and thoughtful about his answers.

His eyes and those of this listener connect in a way that impresses Gila with the power of the bond between the two, even if it is only a temporary one.

In spite of her excitement, Ziva is worried. As Gila pulls on the hems of robes and steps on sandals to get closer to this man, Ziva knows she should not have brought her younger sister to this place full of excitement and strangers without their parents. Jerusalem is a Roman province now, and armed soldiers dressed in leather and metal patrol the streets with dour faces, looking for Jews to bother.

But today is special. It is spring, with all the greenery and flowers bursting through the dusty earth, and it is Passover, a time to celebrate their people's emancipation from slavery in Egypt a millennium ago. Ziva, Gila, and their family came from their home in Bethlehem to the main Jerusalem market in the lower city to celebrate with their friends from the nearby towns.

While their father Avraham chatted with his fellow leatherworkers in the market, the girls snuck off to amuse themselves. Ziva knows how to find the house of the relatives they are staying with, so she knows she's not giving her parents much concern. Avraham had alerted his girls that the Nazarene might be in Jerusalem during this Passover, even though the

distance between Nazareth and Jerusalem is nearly sixty miles, a six to ten-day journey by foot.

“He will be in Jerusalem this Passover,” their father had said, even as their mother, Orli, rolled her eyes. “I am sure of it.”

Clearly the Nazarene’s work as an exorcist, healer, and listener — but most particularly as a prophet who sees beyond the present day — has begun to resonate beyond the shores and villages of Galilee. Jesus’ eventual visit to Jerusalem had become inevitable in the minds of those who know his work, and this Passover was the time for it.

Avraham describes the Nazarene as a fisherman, carpenter, and day laborer. Some part of his work, as with all young Jewish men in Galilee, involves rebuilding the Jewish regional capital of Sepphoris. As construction work at Sepphoris neared completion, construction of the new Roman capital on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee began to speed up. Two years ago, the architect and developer of the Roman capital, Herod Antipas, named the site after his friend, mentor, and patron, the Roman emperor, Tiberius.

Avraham knew these things because of the many weeks and months he spent in Galilee around that time, earning good money as a leatherworker on the various construction sites. He had visited many small communities and had had many opportunities to hear Jesus speak. However, his obvious regard for the Nazarene teacher has caused strains among neighbors and acquaintances of their Jerusalem hosts who are otherwise inclined to be friendly, even to his two girls, even in their most turbulent moments.

Ziva shakes her head at her sister’s antics. The latest hem she’s pulled on belongs to one of the magistrates. He does not look pleased with Jesus’ teachings or with her sister’s mischief. Gila’s curiosity often gets her into trouble with adults as she asks questions that might not otherwise be thoughtsuitable for a child not yet ten years old.

From here earliest age Gila would stop and stoop to turn over rocks in the streets of Bethlehem, to push away weeds so she could pick up bugs, and to dig around in loose soil to see what treasures lay beneath. When she would present nearby adults, even strangers, with a squirmy bug or slimy worm, some shrank away and insisted that she leave their presence or have demanded that her parents retrieve her and take her away. Ziva rolls her eyes — this is a job that usually falls to her.

Gila comes close enough that her sister can grab her arm. “Mind

your manners," she whispers. Gila nods, though her eyes have a faraway look that suggests she won't be paying the command much attention.

This day is one among many in a period of occasionally tense relations between the Jews and the Romans. Conflicts break out over the question of the one god of the Jews and the many gods of the Romans.

Tiberius, like Augustus before him, has no particular antipathy toward the Jews, but he has instructed his bureaucrats in the provinces to, once again, begin questioning Jews about their personal relationships to the many Roman gods. In response to these instructions, Roman soldiers have been confronting Jews on the streets who are known to participate in high holy days.

The soldiers pose questions that could provoke answers by individual Jews that might, or might not, be acceptable to their interrogators.

Depending on the encounter, a soldier might ask about one of the minor gods. Since the Roman gods number in the hundreds, all the interrogatee can do is apologize for his or her lack of knowledge and then go on to promise to learn all that could be learned about whichever minor Roman deity had been the subject of the interrogation.

By this simple pledge, most Jews are released from further interrogation. Some of the community leaders are concerned, though, that some have been taken into custody following these interrogations, and no family member or advocate is allowed to speak with them afterward.

There are rumors in the market that some have been taken away to feed Rome's insatiable appetite for slaves to fuel its expanding empire. Even more important among the upper classes in the City of Rome itself are the constant needs for teachers for their children, and for slaves with skills in cooking, serving, entertainment, and household administration. In these domestic skills Jews are often most favored.

Jesus has now begun to walk toward the marketplace. When only a few listeners are surrounding Jesus, he often prefers to walk with them through the busy streets. Many of the shopkeepers and their waiting customers wave and express their greetings to the preacher from the Galilee. Jesus walks with his hand raised to acknowledge all the greetings, and often tips his head to those who are known to

him.

Ziva and Gila are torn between following the group and leaving to find their parents. At that moment Jesus smiles in their direction and motions for them to come to him. Gila clasps her hand in her sister's and pulls her forward.

When they arrive at his side, Jesus crouches down to their level, and says something in a language that they don't understand. Ziva and Gila share a look, and Ziva shakes her head to indicate that she does not speak Aramaic.

"Do you speak Greek?" she asks.

Jesus nods yes, but before he can say more, Gila announces, "Father says that Jesus is a good Jewish man, so he must know how to speak Hebrew."

Jesus suppresses a grin, then nods slowly at her. Gila can feel her face flush red. He then speaks in a rough Hebrew that he struggles with. "Who... what are your names?"

"Ziva and Gila, daughters of Avraham the leatherworker and his wife, Orli."

"Ah," Jesus says, "I believe I know Avraham. He travels to the Galilee from time to time?" They nod. "He is a kind man, and wise." He looks Gila in the eye. "I have thought well of his words in synagogue."

He sat back on his heels and looked around the market. "Perhaps you should try to find your parents while it is still light. The evening meal approaches, and I'm sure your mother will be getting worried."

They both nod. "Peace be with you," he says by way of farewell. "May we meet again, next year in Jerusalem." He turns back toward his group of listeners and starts again to walk toward the market.

The girls stand briefly, awestruck. They say nothing because he has stolen their voices with his words of wisdom and his respect for their father. They look at each other again, and begin to run, slowly at first, and then as fast as they can, laughing and screaming through the narrow alleys and crowded spaces of Jerusalem's open air markets. As usual, their disruptions cause many bumped and ruffled adults to swear at them and condemn their parents.

Suddenly, as they turn to run down another alleyway, they see a group of Roman soldiers speaking with one of the shopkeepers a few

dozen paces in front of them. Now, the soldiers and the shopkeeper are all looking at them.

One of the soldiers appears to be in charge of four legionnaires near him who are of lower rank. He is not an officer, but by the extra flash of red cloth on his shoulder, he is probably a decanus of the second cohort of the tenth legion. His name is Kanutus. The girls know because they have met him before. He steps away from the group and walks toward them.

The ranking legionnaire speaks a rough dialect of Latin that suggests a poor upbringing and a lack of formal training in the language. Possibly he grew up on a farm near Rome, Ziva likes to think. Since Latin evolved from Greek, she is able to understand what the soldier wants to say, even though he does not say it very well in Latin.

She and her sister turn from his threats and start to move away. "Stop!" the decanus yells. "Are you the ones making all that noise?"

They are terrified, and aware that the decanus is the one largely making the noise at this point, but both nod yes.

"Where are your parents?"

Ziva replies with the name of a nearby neighborhood known for the many Jewish families and storekeepers who live in the crowded apartments there.

"We will be in that neighborhood later today. What are your parents' names?" he asks.

Ziva's voice quavers. "Avraham... Orli." Her lip begins to quiver. "Tell your parents that we will want to talk to them about your bad

behavior. Now go along home, and don't run or scream like the mean and disrespectful children that you are," the decanus says.

They walk quietly past the other soldiers and past the shopkeeper who looks angrily in their direction. By making a scene and by giving up the names of their parents and their neighborhood, they have brought the attention of the Roman government down on their people and their family.

Neither of the girls talks again until they are in their own neighborhood, only a few steps from the shopkeeper's store and

the apartment where their family is staying.

Orli turns from cutting carrots for dinner to greet her daughters. "It is getting dark. I am glad you are home. Where did you go, and what did you do today?"

"We saw Jesus!" Gila shouts, unable to contain herself. "He was in the market with some of his friends. He talked to us!"

"What did he say?" Orli wants to know. "Did he tell you why he is here?"

"He said he hopes to see us again during Passover!" Ziva chimes in, nibbling on a seed of a pomegranate. "We must come back to Jerusalem next year! Oh, please, Mother, can we come back next year?"

"We will have to talk to your father about that," Orli says. "I don't know how this visit is going for your father. The Romans seem to be very curious about whether we like their gods, and which ones we like best. Your father tells them there are too many, and he gets confused. He always tries to convince them that they should think about the one God of the Jews." She pauses and looks out the window. "I worry when he does that."

"Why, Momma?" Gila asks.

A shadow crosses Orli's face, but then she shakes her head as though to clear it away. "Come help me chop up these eggplants, my sweet ones. We will talk later about all of this with your father. For now, I want to know that you know your Roman gods well enough for the street. Who is the god of the hearth?"

"Hestia!" Gila cheers. "That's an easy

one." "All right, then what does

Neptune do?"

"He's the god of the sea. His brothers rule over the heavens and over Sheol below."

"The Underworld, darling," Orli corrects Ziva. "Romans don't say Sheol." She turns around, hands on her hips. "All right, here's a stumper: who's Adiona?"

The girls share a confused look. This certainly isn't a god from the major pantheon, but they know that their mother asks because the Romans are not likely to give them any easy answers. They have been

schooled to answer that they do not know, if that is the truth, but to promise that they will learn the minor gods well. They are children, and it is hoped that this will give them a free pass an adult may not receive.

The answer comes to Gila like a lightning bolt. "Oh! I know! I know!" She waves her arm, nearly knocking over the bowl of chopped eggplant. "Adiona is the goddess of safe return. She ensures that children make their way home."

Orli grins and puts down her kitchen knife. She gathers her girls into her arms. "Precisely right."

Bathsheva, their Jerusalem hostess and friend, walks into the small kitchen. She is carrying a bottle of wine, as well as some olives, garlic bulbs, a tomato, and bread in her shopping bag. "Shabbot Shalom," she says. "Is dinner ready?"

"Shabbot Shalom. I'd like to wait for Avraham. He should be here soon. We can have a glass of wine in the meantime. Where is Aharon?" Orli asks.

"He is at synagogue with some friends. They have been arguing over the meaning of the same part of the Torah for years." Bathsheva speaks in the lowered voice of a man: "Does Avraham have the right to question God?"

I am sure I do not know. After all these years of argument they don't seem to know either." She looks at Ziva by the stove, who is starting a fire to cook the soup. "Since that Nazarene boy is here, maybe he can clear up their points at contention, though I don't know what they will find to argue about after that."

"I have listened to Avraham discuss the two times in Galilee when he and Jesus attended the same synagogue. I have not heard anything from Avraham that tells me that Jesus spends much time resolving points of contention," Orli says. "I understand that Jesus cannot read or write Hebrew, but Avraham says he doesn't seem to have any difficulty picking out elements of flawed logic from the inflated ramblings of the Sanhedrin. But..." She frowns, looks away, and shakes her head. "I'm sure I talk too much."

The newly promoted decanus responsible for patrolling the public market in the lower city of Jerusalem this day was told to stay outside the door while waiting to see his superior officer, Quintus, the centurion primus ordinis of the Second Cohort of the Tenth

Legion. He has come, at Quintus' request, to report on the movements of the charismatic Nazarene around the streets.

Decanus Kanutus was handpicked by Quintus for duty in the Jewish capital of Jerusalem. He is a decorated legionnaire who fought and was wounded during the purge of the Jews from Rome in the previous year. He is loyal to Rome, to the Roman gods, and to Quintus himself. Quintus knows Kanutus can lead a squad of legionnaires into battle and would be effective as an enforcer of Roman law in the contentious Jewish capital.

When Kanutus arrived in Jerusalem, Quintus promoted him to decanus.

Quintus also knows that Kanutus, once engaged in a face-to-face knife fight, will not stop until he has killed his opponent. During the purge, Kanutus watched, helpless, as his brother was killed in a terrible way by one of the Jewish rebels. When Kanutus was able to break free of his own struggle, he followed the Jew, confronted him face to face, and with a single, quick, slashing move of his *pugio*, spilled the man's guts to the ground, then left him to die in the hot, dusty street. He therefore knows to keep an eye on Kanutus and his temper in this Jewish capital.

Quintus is on the balcony of his temporary offices on the Mount of Olives. He is facing the setting sun as it casts the city and the temple before him in growing shadow. He is speaking with Tribune Theodorus, who has come to inspect the work Quintus Caecilius is doing in Jerusalem. When Decanus Kanutus is finally motioned into the room, Quintus greets him with a smile. "Tribune Theodorus: please meet my decorated and very able Decanus Kanutus. He has been down on the streets these past many days and has much to report. Perhaps, if you will give him your time and attention, you can report back to Legate Kaius in Caesarea with much fascinating detail on our work here."

The tribune turns toward the decanus. Kanutus' knees are a little weak in the presence of these two legion officers. Because of their time together in Rome, he feels a powerful allegiance toward Quintus, but he knows nothing of the tribune, except, as is well known among the ranks of legionnaires in the field, a tribune is a political officer, not a fighting man. As such, he cannot be trusted under any circumstances. Since he will never appear on the field of battle, there is nothing that can change Kanutus' opinion of this tribune, nor of any other tribune.

"Hail to Caesar Tiberius." Kanutus snaps a formal Roman salute

toward the Tribune.

"Very good, Decanus," the tribune says and returns the salute.

"Tell the Tribune what you have learned of the Nazarene," Quintus says. "Tell him the same things you have told me."

Kanutus nods and clears his throat. "I don't think the Nazarene is here to cause trouble for Rome. He talks to the people who know of him, or who have heard of him because of his reputation as an exorcist and healer in the Galilee. He stays away from large crowds; he stops talking and walks away when too many people gather round to hear him. I think he will eventually be a bigger problem for the Jews in the temple than for us."

"He is well known and well regarded throughout Galilee," the tribune says. "I have met him myself, and some of my staff have sought healing from him. The Legate is concerned about the effect he is having on the population in Galilee and is very curious to know why he has come to Jerusalem this Passover. Is this his first time here?"

"By everything I have found out about him, yes, it is his first time here," Kanutus says, "but, I think he intends to return."

"Why do you say that?" Quintus asks.

"Because he told two little girls that he met in the market that he hoped to see them at another Passover soon."

The tribune and Quintus share a look. Kanutus hopes they are not doubting his information merely because he overheard it from two children.

"Are these little girls, or any Jewish civilians, inclined to confide in you in some casual way when you are in uniform, Decanus Kanutus?" asks the tribune.

"No, Tribune, but their parents, in hopes of avoiding trouble with Rome, are cooperative and eager to please when they do not see an immediate threat. I knew that when I approached them in their homes at dinnertime later that day. I was discrete and spoke to their father as one father to another, concerned that certain bad behaviors among his children should not continue."

"What reason did you have for going to their home?"

"Their two children, the two little girls, had been in the market and had met the Nazarene. In their excitement afterward they began running and screaming through the streets, disrupting the shops. I

had a bit of business of my own in the market for some repairs to my uniform when they approached. I told them I wanted their parents' names, and they gave them to me. The oldest told me where they were staying.

"It turns out," he continues, "that their father, Avraham, an observant Jew from Bethlehem, has a reputation among the local legionnaires for not responding to questions about the Roman gods with enough seriousness. He is on a list of people Governor Gratus believes need to be watched."

"Governor Gratus causes a lot of problems for himself with the Jews when he dismisses the chosen leader of the Jewish Temple and replaces them with his personal lapdogs like Ishmael," Quintus says. "No wonder he is worried about Jews. I think Gratus may have partially solved the problem himself by accepting the appointment of Caiaphas. At least so far." He cracks his knuckles contemplatively. "This sounds like a political problem among the Jews that will take more time to either resolve itself or mature into something that Rome will need to be concerned about. But that time is not now, and you and I, Decanus, need to think about, and prepare for, our return to Rome.

"I will speak to my superiors in Rome, Tribune, about the problems Gratus has created for himself by his frequent removals and appointments of temple priests. As I said, it may have been partially corrected with his appointment of Caiaphas, but the actions of Gratus need close watching. I hope that you will inform the 10th Legion's legate of what you have learned here today. I hope you will express to him, also, my belief that there is no immediate cause for concern. I'm certain that my superiors in Rome will communicate any further information on this to Legate Kaius in Caesarea whenever it might become necessary." He spreads his arms to envelop the two other men.

"For now, please make yourself at home in my home, Tribune. Decanus Kanutus and I have some operational business to discuss, then we can all sit down to dinner."

Quintus waits to continue speaking until after Tribune Theodorus has left the room. "You have done very good work on this, Decanus Kanutus, but I think your work has only just begun. I want you to somehow arrange for me to get a closer personal look at Avraham and his family. Since you are now acquainted with him on a personal level, a chance meeting in the market might serve my purposes very well."

"This is a surprise request, sir. If I may inquire, what are those

purposes?

"You have told me that Avraham has spent many months plying his leather trade in Galilee and is probably better acquainted with Jesus than most other Jews here. I'm thinking it might be good to get a man like Avraham and his immediate family back to Rome to help us educate ourselves and our superiors about these Jews and their beliefs."

He pauses and grows thoughtful. "You don't need to discuss this with anybody else, but I believe that their belief in one god will corrode the foundations of our faith, and our beliefs in our many gods. Eventually the Jewish faith in one god will replace them. Rome needs to understand the political force these Jews represent, and must begin preparations for dealing with the consequences of their use of Jewish power."

"You may count on me, sir," Kanutus says. "Despite what we faced in Rome last year, I have to admit to a certain admiration for the Jewish faith, and the persistence of it among people who have little else of value that they can claim, though among my fellow legionnaires, sir, those beliefs and the threats they pose to their personal gods do not usually sit well."

The day that Quintus Caecilius and Avraham meet dawns warm and sunny. Quintus is in a corner of the open-air square just off the crowded market. He sits at a table near a large shade tree, sipping a small mug of wine. His uniform is casual, designed to show that he is a field commander in the legion, but with no obvious insignia of rank. Except for a short sword in his belt, he is unarmed.

He tears off a piece of bread and dips it into a shallow dish of chopped olives, oil, and spices. Quintus takes note of a group of ten or twelve ravens hopping around a piece of bread on the street a few steps away. One of the ravens, an odd-looking fellow with a white feather on top of his right wing, looks up to take note of Quintus, and hops sideways toward him. Once able to secure a piece of bread from the table, the raven hops off.

Decanus Kanutus appears at the edge of the square. With him is the subject of the previous evening's conversation: Avraham, the father of Gila and Ziva. Quintus motions them over to his table.

Decanus Kanutus approaches and offers a formal Roman salute. "Good morning, sir. May I present Avraham. Avraham was

working with the leather smiths this morning. At my invitation, he has agreed to come with me to meet with you."

"Very good, Decanus." Quintus motions Avraham to a chair at his table. "Please sit down, Avraham. You may return to your duties, Decanus. I will find my own way back to the Mount of Olives."

"Very good, sir."

The other man looks wary, so Quintus says, "Please relax, Avraham. This is not an interrogation. Neither I nor any of my troops mean any harm to you or your family. I do understand that some of the legionnaires in the market are concerned about your casual attitudes toward our gods, but that is no part of the conversation I want to have with you now. I have always made it clear that I will not tolerate any complaints of harassment by any legionnaires over conflicting Jewish opinions about Roman gods.

"So. For purposes of conversation, do we have at least this temporary understanding?"

"I feel very disadvantaged here. Why have you asked me to speak with you?" Avraham asks.

Quintus pauses to gaze at him. "I don't see any point in wasting your time. I will be leaving Jerusalem within the next two months, and I am looking for a Jewish family familiar with the Judean and Syrian provinces to come to Rome with me and work as household staff to myself and my wife."

"Why don't you simply take us as slaves during the dark of night? That is the usual Roman way, is it not?" Avraham asks.

Quintus cannot be sure if he detects malice in the man's tone. He proceeds with caution. "Perhaps it will be necessary to take you to Rome as slaves, or so it will need to appear to others, but that is not my preference. I can assure you and your family that you will be decently compensated while you work for me, whether as slaves or free. If you work well, we can discuss the return of you and your family to Jerusalem after some period of service, and I can personally guarantee some measure of status and some amount of compensation to help you resettle here again, or in Rome if that becomes your wish."

"You are making a very generous offer," Avraham says. "I have no idea how to respond to you, and I have no idea why you are making such a generous offer to a total stranger who, by his culture and upbringing, may have hostile intent toward you and everything you

hold dear, and who could readily lay in wait for an opportunity to kill you... and your family."

The two men pause and take in the other's countenance for a moment. Avraham, a practical joker at heart, is unable to keep a straight face for longer than that, and, as he looks away his frown cracks into a smile. Quintus, relieved that it appears he will not have to take offense as any good Roman should, also smiles. He looks into the eyes of Avraham as he composes himself and offers apology.

"I apologize to you sir. I have taken poor advantage of your graciousness and hospitality. Please forgive me."

"Accepted. Decanus Kanutus said you were a reasonable man," Quintus says, "but very sharp and very persistent. I will make a guarantee to you now that your return to Jerusalem with your family is assured, though we will need to negotiate a date... perhaps three or four years into the future. When you return, you and your family will enjoy considerable status among your peers, in whichever ways you and your peers define that term. You have my personal assurance of that.

"Let us leave aside the questions of motive, intent, and trust for now. Instead, let me describe the work I have in mind. I promise you, when the time is right, that I will tell you all that I have in mind as reasons for making this offer, and for making the offer to you in particular. First of all, I'm sure you realize that men in the upper reaches of Roman society often have extensive Jewish staff in their households, and that they are usually treated quite well, whether slave or free.

"My estate is just outside Rome on the way to the port of Ostia. I have been away from Rome and away from my estate for over a year. For now, my wife, Cornelia, is supervising others who are taking care of the properties, but when I return, they will also return to their own properties, and I will need a staff to work the property right away. If I don't bring staff back with me, I will need to recruit in Rome, and that will be very difficult and very time consuming at this time of year. Worse, I fear that I won't find enough good staff to turn the soil, plant my crops, and husband my stable of horses. This worries me a great deal.

"So. My first three reasons are relatively simple: property maintenance, spring planting, and animal husbandry. Decanus Kanutus tells me you are a leather smith. I can assure you that you will have plenty of challenge for your skills in taking care of the six horses and

tack on the property.

"But let me give you one more reason why I hope you will respond favorably to my invitation, then I will give you as much time as you need to ask me questions. Will that be all right with you?"

"Of course," Avraham says.

"My last reason is just as simple, though of more of a political bent. You see, Avraham, I see a worsening of tensions between the Romans and the Jews in the coming years, and these can lead to war. Do not misunderstand. I am a senior officer in a Roman legion. If my legion is assigned to go to war, then I will go, and will command my legionnaires in ways that virtually guarantee we will win any battle. However, in peacetime, I will do all in my power to avoid war, and I will do all in my power to root out the seeds of war if I find that they will grow if left unchecked.

"So, my main reason is one of diplomacy. I would like to do everything I can to lessen these tensions so that we may both continue to prosper. For diplomacy to flourish, I need a much deeper understanding of the Jewish people, and I believe you and your family, over some period of time, can give me that."

He looks hopefully toward Avraham. For his part, Avraham looks at the space between them and says nothing. Quintus waits.

"I don't disagree with your view of the tensions between Romans and Jews," Avraham says at last, "but beyond the travel and the opportunity to see Rome as something other than a slave or prisoner, I don't see much of lasting value to me or my family if I were to accept your offer.

However, I do see a great risk. What if you change your mind? What if you decide to keep us as slaves, or to sell us to someone who does not feel as kindly as you do toward the Jews? Perhaps of most importance to me is what will happen to my four children. They are good children, and they are too bright and inquisitive to be happy peeling fruit and emptying chamber pots at the direction of your wife, no matter how pleasant she may be."

Quintus pushes the loaf of bread he has been dipping toward Avraham. "Rest assured that I will be paying you and the members of your family for the work you do for our estate. Your work with the horses will be well known among other horse owners in my area, and I will encourage those needing your skills to do business directly with you. Though I will want you to oversee the planting, cultivation, and harvest, I also expect you to hire the members of your family and to

recruit others of your choosing when necessary to assist with the farm work.

"I am aware, in particular, of your two daughters, Gila and Ziva. My decanus has told me of their boisterous behavior in the marketplace of late. They will both be in the care of my most trusted household staff, Kema, an Egyptian slave woman. Kema is with me here in Jerusalem. She is looking after my household on the Mount of Olives. I will make sure you have an opportunity to meet her before much time passes. She is an educated and intelligent woman. She will keep your daughters challenged in all that they do, including the sciences, the arts, and mathematics."

Avraham folds his arms. "I also have two sons. Elias and Avi. Only Elias is old enough to work."

Quintus nods. "Your son Elias will work with another Egyptian slave on my staff. His name is Anyim. He, too, is very intelligent and is educating himself in his spare time when he is not repairing and replacing all the items necessary for the proper functioning of the house and properties. I am certain that Anyim will welcome some help from Elias."

Avraham is thoughtful again. He pushes the bread back toward Quintus without taking any. After a few moments, he speaks. "You have given me many generous guarantees. I know your title and status in the structure of the legion, but I don't know your real status within the Roman army here in Judea, let alone your relationship to the emperor in Rome. If you lose their support while my family and I are under your personal protection, I fear the worst for us."

"I think I can arrange a secure way to get your family back to Jerusalem without my protection," Quintus says. "Let us consider those possibilities as part of our larger negotiation. For now, I think we have laid out our concerns, and you need to begin a discussion with your wife. I would urge you to keep this entire discussion between you, me, and your wife for now." He peers down at the untouched loaf of bread. "Is there some reason you don't wish to break bread with me?"

"Only that Passover forbids my eating of leavened bread. Nothing more." Avraham leans forward. "There is one more important topic I want to discuss. You and your position in the legion are well known in the markets here. If I return to Rome with you in apparent friendship and collegiality, I may never be able to return to Jerusalem with the degree of respect among my peers that you claim you can guarantee. In fact, by the time of my return, any form of

collaboration with Rome may condemn me, as it would with any Jew, to permanent exile or worse... to my death."

Quintus nods. "Any guarantee among men is subject to the whim of the gods — your one god and my many. The trip from Caesarea to Rome by ship will probably take most of a month if we have good weather, fair winds, and strong oarsmen, but my point is that there is no guarantee against powerful winds at any time on the northern stretches of the sea.

"The gods are always willing to participate in the affairs of men, and when they do participate, the first to go on the chopping block are often the guarantees made in good faith between men. The thing to keep in mind is that the gods always need to be kept well fed, happy, and unconfused."

He stands and dusts off his uniform. "I will leave you now. If you are contacted by Decanus Kanutus in the next several days, please pay careful attention to everything he has to tell you. Good day."

With that, Quintus departs. Avraham wonders if he should have stood and shown some kind of respectful acknowledgement of Quintus' status relative to his own.

"Too late now," he thinks to himself. In the meantime, he decides to return to leather market, and to figure out how to talk to Orli about all that he has heard.

Ultimately, after many hushed conversations with Orli, late at night at Aharon's kitchen table, Avraham and his family go with Quintus to Rome. First, they returned to Bethlehem after Passover. In early summer, neighbors reported that they had disappeared from the streets there in the way that many Jews had disappeared from the streets of Jerusalem following Herod Antipas' instructions regarding the Jews and the Roman gods — quietly, in the night, and without a word to friends or associates.

So far as anybody knows, even close family friends, Avraham and his family have been taken by the Romans. As with many other cases, anyone who asks the Romans where Avraham and his family might have gone off to is met with silence.

On being told of their disappearance, a common response became: "Ach. I knew Avraham's making fun of the Roman gods would someday ruin him and his family. I am so sad for the children."

Gila would tend to agree. She is sad for herself. In fact, she is miserable. Her father has explained their situation to her and to her siblings, but she still does not feel safe. Her friends in the marketplace said that all Romans are liars. Their fickle promises can't be trusted, and besides, she does not wish to serve them.

As the shores of her home drift farther away, she wallows in feelings of self-pity. She had always known that attending Passover in Jerusalem next year was never very likely, but now it is impossible. She knows for sure that she won't see the young Nazarene man, won't watch him perform his miracles, and this makes her glum. She and Ziva try to boost their spirits by playing a game of hide and seek.

It is while shirking her duties, hiding from her sister in a mostly empty grain barrel, that Gila hears footsteps approaching. Even more than she does not want her sister to find her, she does not want an adult to fuss at her for her insolence, so she burrows down deeper into the grain.

"I'm sorry, Quintus," she hears her father say, "but even with your full assurance, I am still concerned about your frequent absences from Rome on military business. What if you get called to duty in some remote province and get killed or wounded there? I'm sorry to bring such a ghastly image to mind, but how will we get home?"

Gila's little forehead puckers. She hadn't thought of that. She listens closely to Quintus' reply.

"Avraham, please. I have promised to make arrangements if such a horrible event came to pass, but, if it makes you feel better, I will ensure that Decanus Kanutus and I show you around Rome and introduce you to our particular set of friends and associates, who will make sure no harm befalls you, your wife, or your children. Can you agree to our assurances?"

Her father still sounds conflicted. "Too many possibilities..." he mutters. The legionnaire must give him a stern look because his voice changes. "You must forgive me, Quintus Caecilius. I am a man grown skeptical by my life on this earth. It will take time for me to fully invest my faith in you, but I do not doubt your intentions."

"I have asked you for a great deal," Quintus says. "That is all I can expect for now."

The footsteps fade, and Gila emerges from the barrel. She takes her father's lead: she is not sure what to feel in light of Quintus' words, but for the time being, she won't stand fully on faith until the centurion has earned it.

On the sea voyage between Caesarea Maritima and Rome, the weather is fairly calm except for some contrary north winds near the Greek port of Rhodes. By his status in the legion, Quintus is able to command space on a military trireme with a larger sail, and a keel and a hull that have been lengthened to include more rowers and lightened by removing much of the battle gear to enable more speed.

Though Quintus and his precious cargo are not trying for speed, his military attitudes as a centurion — and, therefore, the superior officer on the vessel — are always in play. He keeps the pressure on the oarsmen for a steady and deliberate rowing pace during windless days on their journey toward Rome.

Along with Gila and her family, Quintus travels with his housekeeper in Rome, Kema, his Decanus, Kanutus, and two of Kanutus' most trusted subordinates.

Avraham's family, always mindful to keep up the charade of their slavery, pass their time on the trip helping with cooking, cleaning, and loading supplies when in port. Elias is particularly eager to help in running messages between Quintus and the captain, and then the captain and the rowing supervisors and sail pullers. When not running messages, he is ready with his full water bucket to go up and down the ranks of rowers several times a day, always eager to satisfy the thirst of the sweating oarsmen.

Most of the rowers are very grateful for the attentions of the children of Avraham, though their patience is tried by the constant questions from Ziva and Gila. They want to know everything about the oarsmen's lives when they are not on the vessel. Kema keeps careful watch over the girls when they go on these forays among the rowers. Kema is quick to gather them up and carry them away at the first sign of a scowl on a tired rower.

It seems that an eternity has passed since Gila boarded the trireme with her family. Finally, though, they make it to the port of Ostia outside of Rome.

Quintus' estate is near the small community of Vitinia, a few miles west of Rome. Quintus has been as good as his word that Avraham's family would be well received by his household staff. His wife Cornelia, the overseer of the estate in his absence, goes out of her way to welcome the newcomers and make sure they are comfortable in their new home.

Kema introduces Avraham's children — from the youngest, Avi, all the way up to the oldest, Elias — to the household staff. Gila and Ziva become quick friends with Shani, an African girl who works directly for Cornelia; and Anyim, a young African who works with Quintus when he is on the property and with Cornelia when Quintus is not available.

After the introductions, Quintus motions for Avraham, Anyim, and Elias to follow him out to the stables. Quintus introduces Avraham and Elias to the six horses, and to the arrangement of the tack and harnesses, the workshop, and the tools. Avraham can see that he will have many happy days working in this fine shop.

These good beginnings continued with only minor conflicts and upsets for several years. Ziva and Gila help all the members of the household staff with their conversational Greek and Hebrew, the conversational language of Jerusalem, and Orli works with Cornelia on the general oversight of the sometimes rambunctious children and adults. When they have time available, the male members of the household, including Quintus and Kanutus, also find themselves being tutored in Hebrew language and reading by the girls.

Gila was greatly pleased, and her curiosity greatly rewarded when she discovered the library in a corner room of the house. She had learned to read early, whenever someone would teach her, but she knew that her ability was rudimentary at best. This library, and Cornelia's promise to help her read any of the scrolls in it, left her awestruck. Out of politeness toward the centurion's wife, she expressed her appreciation quietly. Secretly, though, she was barely able to contain her impulse to pull a scroll off the shelf and begin reading at once.

Ziva is also a reader, though somewhat less intense about it than her sister. Ziva's enthusiasms are more for writing and the use of calligraphy in forming the letters of the Greek, Roman, and Hebrew alphabets. The library contains so many scrolls and maps that Ziva immediately realized that she could not master all of the writing styles no matter how long she remained in the Caecillius household.

Kema, Shani, and Anyim also prospered by their close proximity to Avraham's family, particularly the children, and most particularly by the training in language conducted every day by Ziva and Gila. For the Africans training in everyday Greek was constant with reminders, penalties, or rewards as needed, and at any time of the day, and as determined by the girls.

Gila can be pushy and is often intolerant of errors. She is often short-tempered with whoever had allowed errors to happen. Anyim, growing quickly into manhood, often became frustrated by this abusive treatment by a child, and would stomp out of the room. After a cooling-off period, one or the other of the two combatants would extend a hand of friendship, and the learning would then resume.

In the summer of her sixteenth year Gila sits in the library, curled up in her favorite spot, on a bench covered in soft blankets, near a window facing south. She has learned the names of the places beyond it: Vitinia, Ostia, the wild lands gradually being forced into Roman civility beyond.

She is young, but she hates when her parents tell her so. She knows more than her sister and brothers, more even than many of the politicians Quintus brings to dinner, and she does not appreciate having to put on the role of slave girl for them.

On this day, she is researching the works of Cicero; his subject the Roman Senate. Her father has suggested that she might compare his thoughts to writings in the Torah, primarily ones about Sanhedrin tribunals. She is chewing the nib of a stylus, wondering how she might weave logic between the two works like the strands of a plait, when Quintus himself walks in. He smells strongly of sweat and hay and warm horse, so Gila surmises that he is stopping by on his way in from the stables.

"*Salvete* and well met, Gila," he says. "What are you learning today?"

"I'm exploring the similarities between Roman and Jewish governance," she says, hoping to get a rise out of her so-called master. She is of the age that such things please her.

"The similarities, you say?" He frowns as he takes a seat opposite her. He digs beneath the strap of his sandal to satisfy an itch. "And what might those be?"

She hadn't expected him to take the bait. She gnaws on her lip, doing her best to come up with an answer that he'll accept, that won't insult him or ruin her father's position in his house. "Well, sir," she begins, "I wager that they both operate on behalf of the people they represent. Your Roman senators and consuls make decisions based on what is best for their people, even electing the emperor at times, while the judges in our Sanhedrin use the word of Jehovah as a basis to settle everything from land disputes to exemptions from tithing."

She scratches her nose. "Allegedly speaking, of course."

This amuses Quintus. "Of course. So, does Miss think that either governing body represents its people truly?"

Gila thinks of the young carpenter from Galilee, who had stood in the market and lambasted the Sanhedrin. Rebellion thrills down her spine at the memory. "Not always. I feel that they could be more democratic;... have more care for the common man."

"Ah! How very Greek of you, like Cicero himself." Quintus knocks his signet ring against the table between them and stands up. "Keep up the good work, Gila. You have a strong mind, and it will serve you well."

Avraham enters the library. As Quintus departs, he and his daughter exchange warm glances as they bask in the glow of Quintus praise for Gila's initiative in her studies.

As time passes, training in the spoken languages of the surrounding community are expanded to include lessons in writing for all of them by Ziva, and by special tutors brought in for the purpose by Cornelia.

Avraham maintains his part of the bargain with Quintus. Several times each week, and more frequently during important Jewish festivals, Avraham sits down with the centurion to discuss one of the many topics that he wants to know about. In return, Quintus takes Avraham with him when he goes into Rome on either legion or personal business. Quintus introduces Avraham to his professional friends and business associates as a slave, captured with his family in Jerusalem. After a pause, he always adds, "...and a very valued member of my household staff."

Avraham's work with the horses allow him to compete with other horse owners in his neighborhood and in Rome for selection to two chariot teams. Chariot races are held regularly in the Circus Maximus a little way south of the Roman Forum. These intense and exciting races provide the final test of a horse's ability to carry a chariot driver and a centurion, or a chariot driver and a pair of archers into battle.

This, in addition to the *cursus publicus*, is much of the purpose of raising horses on the rural estates outside the city. The legion pays well for good horses, and Quintus is able to earn significant amounts of money from the horse husbandry that Avraham brings to his estate.

Shortly after the Roman midwinter celebration of the solstice, Quintus calls his household together to discuss their return to Jerusalem.

"I have asked you all to join me to discuss a matter of considerable importance to all of us, though it is of particular importance to Avraham and his family. The governor of the province of Judea Palestine, Pontius Pilate, has asked me to gather my staff and others who can support my work, and come to Jerusalem to help resolve some emerging conflicts between the Jews and the Romans. These conflicts need to be resolved soon because they have the capability of escalating into situations that can be violent, situations that none of us want to contemplate. Pilate and I want to do all that we can to bring about as many resolutions as we can."

Quintus pauses a moment, then turns to Avraham. "Since I first met Avraham in Jerusalem, we have discussed the day when he and his family must return to their homeland. That day is now rapidly coming, and it is time that we all hear his thoughts on the very important decisions that are coming upon us."

Gila is so thrilled by this revelation — home! — that she almost doesn't hear her father's question.

"You have not said how many people will be allowed to accompany you," Avraham says.

Quintus responds. "Pilate sent his formal request to me by personal courier. The official document was signed with his own very distinctive signature. Along with Pilate's signature, there were several signatures of my colleagues in the Tenth Legion. I don't think anybody will refuse to honor whatever request I might make in terms of the people I chose to bring with me."

"So, you are saying that I can bring my entire family back to Jerusalem?"

"Yes. Though I think you need to discuss this with each of your family members before making your decision. Under the tutelage of my Cornelia, Orli has become a very accomplished fresco painter and sculptor; Elias is now a grown man and has gained many skills that are very useful, and valuable, in animal husbandry and maintenance of an estate of this size; Ziva's teaching skills in reading and writing are very impressive.

These skills are valuable anywhere within the Roman Empire,

and their language abilities, as well as their ability to read and write, mean that they can make their way anywhere. I would ask each of your children to consider whether they want to pursue their futures here, in the heart of the Roman Empire, or in the distant, rural provinces of Syria and Judea."

Orli speaks up. "My children, except for the youngest, Gila and Avi, can make up their own minds on their futures. I will go where my husband goes."

Quintus thinks to himself for a few minutes. He rubs his chin as he often does when confronted with a difficult and tangled problem. "I want to speak about Gila. She is now an almost grown woman, and a very attractive one at that, but her real beauty is not only in her pretty face. It is in her mind. In addition to her constant work trying to bring all of us up to some unreachable standard of literacy, I have taken note of the time she spends in the library looking at the scrolls and making notes to herself.

"I hope everyone understands that I very much want Gila to come with us to Jerusalem. Her erudition and charm will work miracles on the contending parties there. I can't imagine trying to do my job without someone as talented and as competent, but it is up to Avraham and his family to make the decisions on which of his family, besides himself, will come with us."

Several similar meetings take place over the next few months as each member of the household makes their personal and collaborative decisions on whether to stay in Rome or move on to Jerusalem. Finally, it is agreed that Avraham will take Elias and Gila with him. Despite her desire to go with her husband, Orli decides – after extensive discussions with Avraham to stay on the estate until Avraham calls for her to return. Neither she nor young Avi will have much to contribute to Quintus' mission. At the same time, she has much to learn about the visual arts and the wonderful and colorful clays and stones that she has become so adept at working into the creation of beautiful objects.

One of Orli's most prized works is fashioned around a thumb-sized piece of almost translucent blue polished stone. She has crafted a beautiful flowered medallion from gold to hold the stone and with Cornelia's blessing presented it to Quintus. On receiving the beautiful piece Quintus says nothing for a moment; then, his eyes red with tears, he says that he had not thought about the stone for many years, but he could not have imagined a more beautiful gift nor could he imagine a finer piece of craftsmanship.

Gila is not sure why the Roman is overcome with emotion upon receiving her mother's gift, but she imagines it has some personal value to him. At any rate, the setting is breathtaking. She runs to her mother and gives her a great hug. "Mother, your work is so beautiful," she says.

Orli breathes into her daughter's neck, inhaling the smell of a girl teetering on the precipice of womanhood. "Thank you, *haim shelli*," she responds.

The sea voyage is mostly without incident except for some stormy weather and stiff, choppy, northerly winds in the crossing from Corinth to Rhodes. Pilate is eager enough to have Quintus in Jerusalem that he has yet again requested one of the faster triremes to transport him.

As the sea wind whips Gila's hair, she idly wonders if she'll see Jesus there, in Jerusalem. She wonders if she'll appreciate what he has to say even more, now that she's grown in wisdom and in stature from her tutors in Quintus' library.

Even with a strong crew, the choppy winds in the Aegean cause a lot of rocking. Rowing becomes difficult. Using the sail to power the ship becomes difficult and dangerous on the surging deck. The guests of honor on the boat – Quintus, Decanus Kanutus and his two Legionnaires, Avraham, Kema, Gila, and Elias – are advised to stay in their quarters below decks at the rear of the ship for their own safety. Initially, Gila and Elias are both disappointed that they cannot mingle and work with the rowing and sailing crew as they had done when Quintus first brought them out to Rome from Judea.

After a few days in enclosed spaces on rough seas, though, the entire party, even Quintus and Avraham, are glad that they have no immediate responsibilities.

Quintus is the ranking officer on the trireme, but the ship's captain knows that he has a free hand to deal with the weather and the crew however he sees fit.

As always Quintus is inclined to allow the captain full authority over the trip, except when the captain has to recommend that the ship be taken to an area of calm where repairs can be made, and the crew given a period to recuperate. Quintus knows that Pilate is eager for his arrival, and any unnecessary delay will not go well for either the captain or himself. He allows the captain one such unscheduled stop

for crew rest and ship repair at the Isle of Rhodes, a port on the eastern end of the Aegean, just south of Rome's Asian province.

Fortunately, the winds to the east of Rhodes abate, and the remainder of the trip is relatively calm.

At Caesarea, Quintus and his party are met by a welcome party sent by Pilate. To Quintus, the welcome seems warm and genuine enough, although the delegation spokesman, a tribune named Ephesius, suggests that they take a few days to get rested and settled, then plan to meet with Prefect Pilate midmorning on Friday.

"The scale of events is growing more intense. Passover is coming soon. The contending parties need attention, and we need some of your skills in diplomacy. Are you and your staff up to it?" he asks.

"I have every confidence in my staff. If you will give us a chance to get our feet on the ground and get cleaned up and organized, we will be ready to discuss our plan with the prefect," Quintus replies.

Three days later, Quintus and his private staff of Avraham, Gila, and Elias arrive at the governor's offices to meet with Prefect Pilate. Decanus Kanutus and his legionnaires have been detailed to acquaint themselves with the senior legionnaires in order to give Quintus a report on the likelihood of receiving their full cooperation if and when it's needed.

Quintus notes that, as usual, Pilate likes to keep important visitors waiting as a reminder of his authority over the agenda and schedule of whatever meeting is to occur. Senior legionnaires like Quintus recognize the need to tolerate these delays even when there is urgency in the topic; Pilate has a nasty habit of abruptly cancelling important meetings if he becomes offended by the actions of one of the participants. Sometimes he does not reschedule the meetings. In this case, however, Quintus is sure that Pilate wants this meeting more than he does.

Eventually, Pilate welcomes them in. After an exchange of greetings, Quintus, Avraham, Gila, and Elias sit down on one side of the table, and Pilate and Tribune Ephesius sit down opposite them.

"Two of your staff members seem very young, Quintus," Pilate says. "Do they have the skills and experience necessary for such an important mission?"

Quintus replies, "The two youthful members of my staff, along with their father, Avraham, have been slaves in my household since their capture in Jerusalem nearly eight years ago. They have lived and worked with my family in complete harmony for that whole time. They have immersed themselves in Roman culture and attitudes. They have learned and have become adept at all the languages of the Roman Forum and marketplaces. At my request they will be training selected members of my legion staff in the nuances of Greek and Hebrew in the Jerusalem marketplace.

"As you know, I have an extensive library of writings by prominent Roman, Greek, and Egyptian writers. Gila, in particular, is now fluent in those languages, and she has become learned in many of our most important writers. She has been developing a comparison of the Roman gods, with references to the Jewish Torah, based on her research in my library. She is young, but I believe she can hold her own in any discussion of nuance between Roman and Jewish philosophers."

Pilate looks at Gila, then, after a pause, looks again at Quintus. Pilate's reputation for lechery is on Quintus' mind as he waits for the prefect's next question. "So, Quintus. A very solid endorsement of this very beautiful young woman. Avraham and Elias? How do you see their role in any mission I may assign to you?"

"Avraham has been taking care of my horses," Quintus answers for them. "The horses are bred for sale to the legion. Avraham has developed a very fine breeding line of such horses. He works with other horse wranglers in my area west of Rome to develop racing horses for contests in the Circus Maximus. The horses bred under Avraham's husbandry consistently win those contests. I believe that whenever he is called upon to share his knowledge either with your horse handlers, or with any other Roman horsemen or handlers we might come in contact with, the dealing will have very favorable results."

"And Elias. What special talent does he bring?"

"Elias has been responsible for the day-to-day workings of my estate, and for making sure that everything is in good working

order, so it is always ready when needed. He works closely with my wife Cornelia, and with my household staff in taking care of purchasing and storing items needed by the household. He works with his father in taking care of the horses, and with his sister, Gila, in helping with the language education of all the members of the household.

When I send either of them into the marketplaces of Jerusalem or Rome, I trust absolutely in all they will report to me on their return. I consider them to be indispensable," Quintus concluded.

"There is one last note that I want to pass along to you," Quintus says to Pontius Pilate. "Avraham, Gila, and Elias are Jews. They were born Jews and have been Jews all their lives. I have not interrupted their study of their books, and I have not prevented them from attending synagogue in Ostia. This is not favoritism on my part. My two other household slaves are Nubian from the mountains at the sources of the Nile river near Aethiopia. I do not interfere with the practice of their religion either.

"For myself, my wife, my children, my household staff, and the legionnaires on my personal staff as centurion primus, we are Romans, and we live by the Roman gods. I encourage all the members of my household to observe as we pay obeisance to our gods, which they sometimes do, and they invite us to return the favor, which we also sometimes do."

With a barely concealed sneer, Pilate interrupts. "That is all very noble and generous of you, Quintus. You have convinced me of the qualifications of the people you have brought with you for this assignment. To have brought such accomplished and knowledgeable Jews will no doubt be of interest to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, and may help gain his support for whatever you propose to do. But my patience grows thin, the day grows long, and my reasons for bringing you to Jerusalem have not yet been introduced."

Hesits forward. "The Jewish Passover will be upon us in about six weeks. It is important that you and your staff be there for the weeklong celebration. Over the past few years, there has been a growing stir east of here, in the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias, and in the farming areas and villages around the Sea of Galilee.

"This particular stir — and the reason I brought you here — concerns a new, badly dressed prophet of baptism, and a new movement that has grown up around his preaching. While I am usually not much concerned about these minor sects that grow, live, and soon die outside Jerusalem, I am concerned when the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem gets all excited and begins to describe one of them as the new Messiah.

"Herod Antipas, has had the most prominent of the preachers, John the Baptist, arrested, but not before he baptized one of the other well-known preachers out there, Jesus of Nazareth."

At the mention of Jesus of Nazareth, Gila can feel her eyebrows start to furl. She quickly restores her face to the submissive state she is trying to maintain for this meeting. Fortunately, Pilate is turned toward Quintus, and does not see the change. Quintus, however, takes note of the subtle shift in her demeanor.

"The legionnaires in these rural areas have told Herod that an arrest of another one of these baptized preachers, particularly the Nazarene, will generate a lot of anger among these Jews in Galilee," Pilate says. "This is a growing concern. The Jewish 'nobility,'" he says this with an arched eyebrow and rolled eyes "the Sadducees, Pharisees, and the Sanhedrin, are also concerned about this 'baptism' because the idea of total immersion as the only way to wash away sin and corruption does not conform to their most cherished beliefs. They are equally concerned about this Jesus fellow.

"So far, I have said that I have no plans to interfere with Jewish teaching or teachers, but I cannot speak for Herod, or for Phillip, the tetrarch of Gallica and Syria. If the Jewish leaders are concerned about the welfare of John the Baptist while he is being held captive, I have told them that I will carry a message to Herod. I will recommend that he be released to your custody Quintus. If that is not possible, I will strongly recommend that they make sure he does not come to harm while in their custody.

"To me it is either make all the religious sects in the provinces of Syria, Gallica, and much of Judea angry as hornets, or make a small and clubby group of Jews who believe themselves to be infallible understand that they have no monopoly over the practice of faith, especially when it is their own faith they are worried about.

"So, Centurion. As you can see, the situation is complex. I want you and your staff to come up with a course of action for determining what to do about this. For the next two weeks, you will have whatever military resources you think you need from among your fellows in the available cohorts of the Tenth Legion; your experts – particularly Gila – will have as much access as they feel they need to our libraries, and to our best local thinkers and observers of the situation here.

"For the next two weeks after that, plan on being in Jerusalem with all your civilian and personal staff, and plan on staying at least another week beyond. Depending on your findings during Passover, I think we will want to meet here again to decide the next step in our plan. Questions?"

"No, Prefect. We have all we need. We will take our leave and check back with you on travel arrangements to Jerusalem in two weeks, if necessary. Of course, I am available to you at your request any time."

"One thing more," Pilate said. "I'm told you are from the Sea of Galilee. Is that correct, Avraham?"

Avraham replies, "No, Prefect. I was born in Bethlehem, as were all my family. We had a leather working business in Bethlehem before being taken as slaves. Before that I spent several years working on the rebuilding of the temples and monuments at Sepphoris, and on the construction of several structures in the new capital of Tiberias, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee."

"Would you be comfortable returning to Galilee and reacquainting yourself with past friends and co-workers?" Pilate asks. "I ask this only as a way of introducing Quintus to them as part of his larger responsibilities as a diplomat. Be assured that I do not see any trips to the Gallilee before Passover has come and gone from Jerusalem."

"Yes," Avraham replies.

Pilate looks at Quintus. "Please consider sending Avraham into Galilee as part of your plan. Questions?"

All of Quintus' party rose, gave a proper salute, and departed.

As part of their education process, Avraham, Elias, and Gila have come down to Jerusalem from Caesarea to reconnect with their friends from years ago, Bathsheva and Aharon. Avraham hopes that Bathsheva and Aharon will agree to invite Centurion Quintus along to the Seder, and to other celebrations and rituals that will take place during the week of Passover.

Avraham explains their new situation and what they are now doing on behalf of the Centurion Quintus and the Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate. He explains that Pilate himself has brought Quintus back from Rome, and that Quintus has brought Avraham and his family along as indispensable staff.

Avraham has complete trust in Bathsheva and Aharon, but he knows that the issues and problems he is telling them now will test that trust in ways that none of them would ever have anticipated in their many years of friendship.

"You must trust me, Aharon, when I tell you both that Quintus bears no ill will against any of us here, or against any of the Jewish people. Based on our family's several years of intimate service in his household, I believe he and the prefect are working toward a long-lasting peace that will include all of Syria, Palestine, Gallica, and Judea. This is in the long-term interest of all Jews and all Romans."

"I would trust you with my life, Avraham," Aharon says.

Bathsheva also spoke: "I share my husband's feelings, Avraham. I only wish your entire family were here with us. I am overjoyed to see what a handsome and intelligent young man and woman Gila and Elias have become. If possible, can you have Quintus visit with us before the start of Passover so we will have a better idea how to introduce him to our friends at the various events? As I am sure you can imagine, there will be many questions. We must be open to whatever is said, and we must be willing to fully answer whatever questions are asked.

"I'm sure you realize, Avraham, that there is an increased level of tension in Jerusalem because of the capture of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas several months ago. The longer he remains in prison, the more this tension increases the risk of violence during Passover. I

am also told that the Nazarene, the most prominent of those Baptized by John the Baptist, will be coming to Jerusalem from the Galilee, and may already be here."

Gila cannot contain her excitement at this. "Oh, Father! I must go to meet him! I know him, and I am sure he will remember me from the meeting Ziva, and I had with him on the streets here several years ago."

Avraham smiles as he puts his hand on Gila's shoulder. "I don't know if I have told you that Quintus and I have been discussing such a meeting,

Gila. It is potentially fraught with difficulty and risk. Jesus is probably a much different person than the one you met. The cult of baptism is a challenge to the established rules of worship by the Sadducees and Pharisees, and they are very sensitive to the possibility of further degradation of their authority.

"Depending on the setting and circumstances the Nazarene is the kind of speaker who can turn a simple discussion of faith into an incitement to violence. Both Quintus and I are very concerned about this. It is contrary to what Quintus and Pilate are trying to do here, and, more than any other consideration, I fear for your safety."

"Do you trust me father?" Gila asked.

Avraham is surprised at this bold question, but answers "Yes. Of course, Gila."

"Then let me work out a plan for how such a meeting might take place with safety, and how it can be made to serve the needs of all of us. Elias, will you help me? Will you agree to go with me to whatever meeting I am able to work out with the Nazarene?"

"Of course, my sister. I will follow you wherever you go, and I will protect you with my life."

Avraham and their hosts seem to be struck silent by this expression of confidence and faith by these two children. Avraham knows that he must say yes to Gila's request.

"Can you be ready to discuss your plan with Quintus and his legionnaires in three days?" he asks.

“Yes, Father.”

Avraham rises to gather his family and thanks his hosts for their hospitality. He asks, softly, if they might be willing to work with Gila depending on what she may propose.

“Yes, Avraham,” says Aharon. “Of course, you may count on both of us to do all we can in the interest of lasting peace.” Bathsheva nods her assent. She looks deeply into their eyes and smiles when each of them looks directly at her in turn. Gila proposed a meeting with the Nazarene close to one of the main streets in the lower marketplace, but at least partially isolated from the crowd that would flood Jerusalem on this precious and popular holiday.

Quintus consented to these arrangements. He would attend the meeting with Gila. They would invite the Nazarene to bring along whomever he might choose. Discussions would take place in the language the Nazarene is most comfortable with. If the chosen language is Aramaic, Quintus and Gila will bring an interpreter skilled in the nuance of that language. If the Nazarene prefers a language he is not totally comfortable with he may bring also his choice of interpreter to assist him.

The purpose of the meeting is simply to explore issues and problems of concern to the Nazarene, with the promise that Quintus and Gila will carry his concerns to the appropriate senior Roman and Jewish officials.

Other meetings with the Nazarene will follow. Quintus will have a small contingent of no more than ten battle-experienced legionnaires with him. They will be in uniform with minimal battle gear. They will be moving casually, but together, and out of marching order in full view of passersby in the market. They will be ready to act quickly, and with deadly force if necessary. They will be trusted men who fully understand and support this initiative. They will give their lives to it if that is what is required.

Jesus the Nazarene agreed to all these proposed arrangements when he attended a dinner at the home of Bathsheva and Aharon a few days before the Passover Seder. Bathsheva and Aharon were both held in high regard by most of the Jewish factions in Jerusalem. In

large part their good standing — and their success in persuading the Nazarene to come to their house — was a product of their good works in the Jewish community and their long association with Avraham, who had spent so many years working in the hotbed of religious tumult around the Sea of Galilee.

When introduced to Gila, the Nazarene is very pleased to make her acquaintance again after many years. “I knew we would meet again, though I did not think it would be so long. I hope our time together will be profitable for all parties. With your full participation, I have no doubt that it will be.”

As the meeting breaks up, the Nazarene asks Avraham if he can have a few private minutes with Gila. Avraham agrees.

In the shadows outside the house of Aharon, Jesus speaks quietly in Aramaic: “I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you are involved in this, Gila. I knew when I first saw you that you had a great intelligence that will be essential as we Jews continue to work toward religious and cultural independence and security within the Roman Empire.

“But you must be careful. I’m sure you know by now that the leadership of the Romans and the Jews have a great capacity for deceit; they may say many things for effect, but they have very simple goals: the Pharisees and the Sadducees do not want to see the Baptists gain influence because they are a clear threat to the religious authority of the Sanhedrin. The Romans probably don’t care how the Jews sort themselves out, but they have no interest in losing control of the situation in Judea, Syria, and Palestine. The Romans will sacrifice whoever is necessary on whichever side to insure that result.

“I do not want you to be hurt because I believe you, and Elias, and your family, and even Quintus and his family are very much at risk in this process that Pilate has set up, and I believe you are all very important to the future of this part of the world.”

“Your words take my breath away,” Gila says. “I feel a great burden, and I am frightened that I will not be able to do what I am being called upon to do. Can you help me?”

“I will be with you whenever you and your friends and family are among my people. For various reasons, I cannot be with you

when you are among the ones who fear me, nor can I be with you among those who have called me 'enemy.' In those times you must rely on the word of Quintus that he and his chosen legionnaires will protect you from physical harm and will protect all of those you hold dear. I have looked into his eyes on many occasions, and I believe him to be a good man."

"How do you know Quintus?" Gila asks. "Have you ever met him?"

"The same way I know you." Jesus pauses. "I must ask you to do one last thing for me."

Gila finds that she has lost her breath. "Of course. Anything you ask."

"I have come to believe in the power of fully immersing the body in the baptismal pool. It is only in this washing away of all of the sins and corruption of the body that redemption and rebirth are possible. This is what I have learned from my own baptism by the hand of John the Baptist. I believe this, and I believe that all who have followed the example of myself and John also believe it."

She begins to feel a little uncomfortable. What is this leading up to? "Do not be disturbed, Gila. I know you and all your family are devout Jews, and you have now become a very learned young woman. I only want you to realize that there are new ways of expressing devotion to God, and I want you to be aware of the one way that I am most pleased with. If you ever decide to be baptized, please be assured that I will want to conduct the ceremony. Will you keep me in your thoughts?"

Though she knows it is wrong according to the powers that be, though she isn't entirely sure what she is feeling, Gila leaps into the arms of Jesus and hugs him very tightly. She has not had these kinds of feelings before, and though they immediately make sense, she is still a little shocked and amazed at them, and what they made her do. For his part, Jesus hugs her in return with some of the passion he feels toward her. Their cheeks touch and rub together for a moment. Though he knows he is not above the sins of the flesh, he has no desire to take advantage of this beautiful child.

He turns her face toward his and kisses her fully on the lips. As the kiss ends, she pulls slowly and carefully away from him, unwilling to

look away from the eyes of this man. Jesus smiles, then turns away and is gone into the night.

Pilate's plan has worked, at least for the time being. Passover goes without incident, and Jesus of Nazareth is able to move freely among all those who observe Passover with varying degrees of devotion and emotional intensity. As promised, Quintus has taken the concerns of Jesus to Pilate, and Pilate has given every assurance to Quintus that he will take them up with the tetrarch and with the other powers that be in the empire just as soon as it is appropriate.

The party that traveled to Judea with Quintus all return to Rome. Avraham discovers that his work with the horses in Quintus' stable is far more interesting to him than anything that might happen during the years left in his life in Jerusalem. Elias also feels that his future lies more in Rome than in Jerusalem.

Gila returns to her now well-trodden path of scholarship and diplomacy. Quintus makes sure that she is enrolled in the finest teaching institutions available in Rome, and that she is given full access to all of Rome's philosophers and statesmen. Following the period of study in Rome Quintus has also made sure that she will have many opportunities to travel to the far corners of the empire. In this way Quintus believes she will learn the local languages and customs necessary to the completion of her training.

In Quintus' plan for her she will then be ready for appointment as a high-level diplomat with a specialty in the religions and languages of Rome's eastern provinces.

As Gila prepares for a course of learning for several months at the Great Library of Alexandria in Egypt, Quintus approaches her. "I want to give this to you," the centurion said. From the pocket of his cloak he produces the beautiful blue stone, nestled safely in the gold work her mother had crafted. "For your work on our mission of peace in Jerusalem and across the Empire, he said, handing it to her. "My great-grandfather was given this as a commendation by Julius Caesar himself, in gratitude for his action on the field of battle against the last of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt.

"I now give it in gratitude to the sacrifice you and your family

made all those years ago. Like my great-grandfather, you are a warrior, Gila. I know it may not have been easy to leave your home and all you knew, especially not for the little girl you once were, but I am very glad to have had your help.”

For her part, Gila is pleased with all of this. She continues to train for and hone the diplomatic skills that she feels blessed with. She hopes that she will eventually reach the upper echelons of Roman society, but her mind does often wander to the night in Jerusalem when she was kissed by a man considered by most to be the Jewish Messiah.

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