

Joseph of Arimathea

The secret disciple who buried the body of Jesus

A Novel

Kenneth R. Westbrook

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Quotations of Scripture are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible. In some instances, words of the KJV have been changed to read more smoothly.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my grandchildren:
Emily, Sarah, Rachel, Caroline, and Brett
You will ever be my prayers.

Prologue

The four Gospels report that a mysterious man, Joseph of Arimathea, so feared the Jews that he lived as a secret disciple until the crucifixion. In a dramatic and public fashion, he revealed his faith by placing the body of Jesus in his own newly constructed tomb. The facts of the case are simple: when everyone else forsook Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea stepped out of the shadows of his fear into the light of his faith, publicly approached Pontius Pilate, requested the body of Christ, and buried it.

Joseph, no ordinary man, was wealthy, prominent, and a member of the Sanhedrin, the religious governing body of the Jews. The Gospels record his courageous act but do not tell us why fear of the Jewish leaders paralyzed him or how he overcame.

At the death of Christ, he bought a linen burial cloth and along with Nicodemus, who provided myrrh and aloes, gave Jesus a proper Jewish burial.

Through two millennia, his secret discipleship puzzled believers and at the same time, his courageous act of faith has inspired them.

This novel takes seriously the New Testament political and religious culture to provide a plausible story that ends in accord with the Gospel account.

You can find the entire biblical record of Joseph of Arimathea in these references: Matthew 27:57-60, Mark 15:43-46, Luke 23:50-53, John 19:38-42

Chapter 1

Jerusalem had never appeared more tranquil. The sky was blue, the air crisp, and the flowers were in bloom. Spring had arrived and the city noise had a cadence that reminded Joseph of the peace of God. The near proximity of the Holy Temple to his house filled Joseph with confidence and if it were not sinful, he would admit to pride. Better said, he felt blessed.

The news shattered his tranquil world.

Pilate had announced a crucifixion at the sixth hour and the thought of it, like every time before, sank like an arrow into Joseph's chest. He told himself to think of other things, beautiful things, or business things. He couldn't. Like a huge boulder tumbling down a mountainside crushing everything in its path, he lost the battle to control his mind.

The very thought of God's chosen people in the Holy Land subjugated for more than a century by a pagan, idolatrous, pantheistic nation and powerless to do anything about it crushed his spirit. To Joseph, Israel was like a castrated bull, an ox, deprived of its virility, harnessed to a plow, plodding on at the wishes of its owner. He felt his insides cramp. In his mind he tried to calculate the wealth that Rome had extracted from Israel over the time of the occupation; the number was obscene. To make it worse, the rape of Israel's

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wealth went to fund the army that maintained the occupation, funded pagan temples and enriched the lavish lifestyle of the pagan, Roman elite.

He tried to tell himself that such thinking was unproductive, even destructive. He couldn't stop. The arrangement the Jews had made with Rome was simple: Rome would control the civil government, appoint the High Priest, and collect taxes, and the Jews could have their own religion and manage it through a court system, the Sanhedrin. It was a corrupt and incestuous relationship. The arrangement left the Jews with only a semblance of power.

Joseph knew that the true Sons of Abraham had never accepted the subjugation, outwardly maybe, but never in the deepest recesses of their souls. Everybody coped in his or her own way. The Herodians accepted the Roman occupation and their Hellenistic lifestyle; the Zealots took the opposite stance, retreated to the mountains, and lived in active resistance as freedom fighters. The Sadducees and Pharisees along with religious scribes and priests, by silence, tolerated the intolerable.

Joseph exercised his own way to resist; he did business with Romans and Jews, but not alike. The Jews always got the better deal; the Zealots got an even better deal. He smiled as he thought of the time he sold 200 horses he did not own to the Romans at a price so inflated that the profit overpaid for his taxes that year. He bought the horses from others and delivered them to the Romans.

Stop, he told himself. Get control of your mind. Wanting to scream, he took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. The obscenity of the pending crucifixion demonstrated the reality he had to live with. It is an affront, a disgrace, and a tragedy of the highest proportions to God and His people.

The reality was stark. The Jews could not rise up and fight the entire Roman Empire and the Romans would never go away on their own.

What could he do but pay his taxes, grow his business, and wait upon God? He longed to see the kingdom of David re-established. The answer? Yes, the only answer is: Live a life of righteousness by keeping the law and wait upon the Messiah.

He reached for a parchment to study a proposed contract but tossed it back on the pile and lowered his head.

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Enoch ran into the house, caught his breath, and yelled, “The Romans are going to crucify two men...today...at the sixth hour.”

Joseph frowned at the grin on Enoch’s face. He rolled the parchment in his hands, pointed with it for Enoch to take a seat on the thick cushion opposite him, and waited as he sat down.

“Don’t you know to knock before coming in here? I could have been in a serious discussion with a client.” Joseph shook his head, “Sometimes you act like a wild donkey.”

Enoch stared at his father and looked down.

“Now,” Joseph said, “learn to exercise discipline. Get control of yourself, and I’ll listen.”

“Peace to you, Father,” Enoch said quietly and bowed his head.

“Peace to you as well, my son.” Joseph slowly placed the parchment on a shelf adjacent to hundreds of others. “I’ve already heard the horrid news; do you have any details?”

“I can tell you what I’ve heard,” Enoch leaned forward, “the men are Zealots. Their story is raging across Jerusalem like a wildfire. They attacked two Roman soldiers along the road to Jericho late yesterday—killed one soldier—wounded the other,” he caught his breath, “who made his way back to Jerusalem. Other soldiers were dispatched immediately.”

Joseph opened his hand toward his son.

“The story gets a little muddled at this point.” Enoch fidgeted on his cushion. “I’ve been told that they found the Zealots’ stronghold, killed them all—about forty—except for the two waiting crucifixions.”

“Any Roman casualties?”

“That’s where the story gets more muddled. The Romans claim the Zealots didn’t kill any of their soldiers. But others, who claimed to know, whispered that the Zealots dislodged large boulders on a mountainside that crushed

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fifteen Romans in a narrow gorge.” Enoch smirked. “They walked into an ambush.”

“I suppose the prisoners had no trial.”

“The word in the bazaar is that Pontius Pilate, who happened to be in the city, sentenced them to crucifixion.”

“That’s what I hate about this horrid occupation.” He lifted his head and looked Enoch in the eye. “If we were an independent state with our own Jewish government and Romans had attacked our soldiers, I can assure you the Sanhedrin would have held a court, albeit a brief one, and we would have provided righteous justice—a quick stoning to death—not an ungodly crucifixion.”

Enoch stared back at his father. “It makes me want to become a Zealot.”

“No, Enoch, you cannot do that.”

“Sure I can. Just yesterday, I spoke with a young man about my age who said he knew someone who could get us into a Zealot stronghold.”

“Enoch,” Joseph clenched his teeth, “I didn’t mean it was impossible for you to become a Zealot. I meant that I will not allow it.”

“Why?”

“You make my point; you are incorrigible.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have a hopeless misunderstanding of how things work in this world.”

“Oh.” Enoch furrowed his brow. “Is that why Dan gets to manage the estate and I have to be your manservant?”

“There are many reasons for that arrangement,” Joseph released a tired sigh, “not the least of which is the fact that Dan is my first-born son. He’ll inherit the estate someday and he will need to know how to manage it.”

“But you don’t allow me to do anything but serve you. I need a purpose for my life. Being a Zealot would give me that.”

“If you were a Zealot, you might hang on a cross someday. It would be utter folly for me to attempt to help you and it would destroy your mother and me.”

“Oh.” Enoch paused. “I need to tell you something.”

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Enoch looked away and then back at his father. "I am going to the crucifixion with my friends."

"Enoch, I forbid you to do that."

"You can't." Enoch's face reddened. "If I don't go, I'll be a laughingstock."

"Enoch," Joseph slowed his speech, "believe me; you don't want to do that."

"Yes, I do. Enoch matched the pace of speech of his father. "I want to know if it's as horrible as people say it is."

"Enoch, when I was about your age, I witnessed a crucifixion," Joseph said. "I had nightmares for months. Those nightmares will probably return tonight over this sordid matter."

"If you saw one at my age," Enoch grinned, "how can you prevent me from doing the same?"

"I want to spare you what I went through."

"I'm going."

"No," Joseph said. "I'm your father and I say no and that ends the conversation."

"I must go."

"Why?"

Enoch swallowed. "I promised my friends at the bazaar that they could go with me."

Joseph stood, placed his hands behind his back, paced about the room, turned, and looked down at his son. "Enoch, you are barely a man. That was a foolish promise."

"So," Enoch smiled, "I can go?"

"It's against my better judgment..."

"Thank you."

"I'm not finished." Joseph lifted a finger. "I want you to come back here immediately after you view that horrible event and report to me."

"Yes, Sir. I'll do that."

As Joseph watched him leave, sadness came over him like a cloud and he wondered, did I make the right decision?

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Naomi stuck her head in Joseph's workroom and thought it strange to see her husband staring at the floor. "Our meal will be ready at about the sixth hour."

"Can it be sooner?"

Naomi smiled. "I suppose so. Let me tell the servants." She turned, took a step, and turned back. "Do you have to leave before midday?"

"No," Joseph said, "I'll be here all day."

Naomi furrowed her brow. "Why the rush?"

Joseph twisted on his cushion. "The Romans will crucify two men at the sixth hour. I couldn't swallow a single bite while that was happening."

"I'll hurry things up." Naomi started to leave but turned and caught Joseph's eye. "Will you tell Enoch about the change in schedule?"

"I can't."

"Okay, then I'll tell him."

"You can't."

Naomi noticed an unusual look on her husband's face and walked closer to him. "What's going on?"

Joseph shook his head. "He's gone with some of his friends to view the crucifixion."

Naomi covered her face with both hands. "Joseph, I'm disappointed in you. How could you allow that?"

"I told him he couldn't."

Naomi raised her voice. "He defied you? That's not like Enoch."

"I told him that I had seen one when I was about his age and deeply regretted it to this day. He argued that in that case, I shouldn't prohibit him from doing the same."

"Did you tell him how it affected you?"

Joseph frowned. "I did, but he said that he had promised some of his friends that they could go with him."

"And you let him go?"

"I did. And I already regret it."

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“You just let him go?”

“I put one condition on it.”

Naomi shook her head. “And what was that?”

“He is to return to me immediately and tell me about the experience.”

“How will that help matters?”

Joseph looked away. “I don’t know.”

Naomi reached out and embraced him. “I know raising Enoch has been a challenge for you. But I think you have done a good job.”

Naomi sat beside him.

“Except for this episode, you mean.”

“I could mention another one or two, but I won’t.”

Joseph smiled. “You are a kind wife.”

Naomi smiled. “Enoch was different from the start.”

“Sometimes he acts like a wild donkey.”

Naomi frowned. “I meant that he looks nothing like you. His muscular frame, skin tone, and facial features are not like yours.”

“It’s his decision-making that bothers me.”

“When we found him at our door, a tiny infant, frozen half to death, you didn’t like the idea that I wanted to keep him.”

“You had your hands full with Dan. You couldn’t nurse two babies at the same time.”

“I followed the example of Pharaoh’s daughter. I found a nursemaid to care for our baby Moses. And, in a matter of days, you made a place in your heart for him; and that hasn’t changed.”

“But you are right; he is different. Dan grew up and filled out strong. He, like me, has an aptitude for management and business. Enoch is the opposite. I keep asking God to bless him and make something out of him, but I have no idea what that might be.”

“Are you fearful about how this crucifixion will affect him?”

Joseph nodded.

Naomi stood. “I’ve got to tell the servants to hurry things up.”

Joseph nodded. “Go.”

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Just before noon, Enoch walked slowly through the Fish Gate in the northern wall and heard crowd noises. There were few distinct footprints in the dry dusty path and he wondered how many people would be there to watch the crucifixion. He rounded a boulder outcrop as high as a grown man's head and froze in his footprint as he observed the scene. The earth sloped into a swell from the boulder and rose twice as high across the way. There must have been 200 or more people standing in the swell in small clusters; he could hear a murmur, but no distinct words. On top of the rise were about twenty Roman soldiers dressed in battle uniform including gleaming helmets with red plumage, swords, spears, battleaxes, shields, and body armor of metal plates that covered shoulders and upper torsos.

Enoch looked over the crowd for his friends who were to meet him at the crucifixion but he did not see them. He climbed to the top of the outcrop boulder, a perfect spot for a better look, he thought. He squatted and surveyed the crowd for his buddies. They were not there.

Among the soldiers were two young men, not much older than Enoch stripped naked, backs bloody, bruises all over, hands tied behind their backs, and ankles shackled. They reminded him of bulls brought to the sacrifice except bulls had no idea about what would happen to them. They were crying and convulsing; drool dripped from their noses and mouths. Their twisted faces and shaking bodies left no doubt they fully understood their plight. Enoch couldn't imagine the fear and humiliation ripping through their bodies. Behind each man was a series of holes in the rocks about ten feet apart and large enough that a man's foot and leg could easily fit.

The soldiers didn't say much and when they did, they spoke in Latin. The crowd had no idea what they said. They used hand gestures and moved about mechanically, placed tools in position, and soon all was ready. The one who seemed to be giving orders stepped toward the crowd, stood at attention, and said in Hebrew. "You are about to observe the crucifixion of two men found guilty by Pontius Pilate, governor of the Roman province of Judaea. They are

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guilty of sedition, rebellion, and murder of a Roman soldier. They are Zealots and we are tracking others down as we speak. Never think you can get away with killing a Roman soldier.” He paused, then said, “You may stay as long as you wish, however, if anyone attempts to interfere in any way we will deal with him immediately and harshly, including lethal force.” He paused and looked over the crowd. “If you move toward us closer than you are now, we will consider that to be interference.”

The battered man on the left in a halting voice said to a woman nearest to him, “Mother...please go...home. I don’t want you...to remember me this way.” The woman fell to the ground, wailed, and started to throw dust into the air. Some women huddled around her and soon, they too were wailing and throwing dust into the air. The entire crowd started praying to God, asking for a miracle.

At this point, things happened rapidly. The soldiers grouped themselves around the two men in what seemed like strategic positions. Someone gave an order; they removed the shackles and untied the wrist. The soldiers lifted the men by their feet and hands, swung each over a cross, and held them in place. Immediately soldiers moved into position, placed a nail in each hand, and a hammer slammed the nail through the flesh. The ear-piercing screams caused women to burst into tears and grown men to turn away. A flock of birds exploded from a nearby tree and flew high into the sky. Another swing of the hammer and the fingers curled up and the nails held fast. The men kicked their feet free but more soldiers joined in and held them while another pounded long spikes through their feet and into the crosses. The screams and curses caused everyone in the crowd to shudder.

The man on the left screamed at the top of his voice, “We are the sons of Abraham. Rise up and drive the Romans out of Judah.” He took a deep breath. “Dear God of heaven, may these men die of rotting flesh. May their wives leave them for other men, may their children die at an early age.”

A soldier with a wooden club shouted to him, “Shut up.”

“Pray the Messiah will come quickly and destroy the Romans and re-establish the throne of David.”

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The soldier threatened him again.

“What more can you do to me—you son of Satan?”

The soldier waved the club before his face. “Shut up...now.”

He started to speak...

The soldier struck the man in the mouth with club sending teeth and blood into the air. “Speak more and I’ll cut your tongue out.”

The man spat blood but said no more.

The soldiers took their positions at the top and sides of the crosses as if marching on a parade ground. On a signal from their leader, they heaved the crosses up and let the vertical piece fall into the holes in the ground. The crowd winced to the thud when the crosses hit bottom followed by screams and wailing of those hanging by the nails.

“Dear God,” Enoch said out loud, “how can you allow this to happen to your people?” He sat on the boulder and began to cry and cry. He looked up, wiped his face, and forced himself to look at the men on the crosses. He shook his head. Why did you kill the Roman soldier? That was a stupid thing to do, he said to himself. Who would think of killing a Roman soldier and getting away with it?

He lowered his head between his knees. Maybe they had a good reason, he thought. Yeah, that’s the answer. Maybe the Roman soldiers did something wrong, horribly wrong. They wouldn’t kill a Roman soldier without reason. How stupid of me. In the court of Pontius Pilate there could have been no defense. Kill a Roman soldier and you die by crucifixion. It’s that simple.

Maybe the Zealots were heroes. Maybe they did something good for Israel, for God. He could not imagine what that might have been.

He watched for an hour and noticed that a circling vulture descended from the sky and landed on an outcrop of jagged boulders not far away. He knew what drew the detestable bird, the smell of dying men.

Some of the crowd had drifted back into Jerusalem. The sun at midday and the crucifixion was more than they could endure. He felt the heat on the back of his neck but determined to endure it. Compared to the suffering of the men on the crosses, it was nothing.

The man who had lost his teeth cried out, “Water.”

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A man in the crowd started forward with a jug in hand, but a soldier raised his sword. “You quench his thirst at the cost of your life.” The man melted back into the crowd. The dying man would receive no mercy, not even a drop of water. How cruel can humans be to another human? This is the most monstrous way to kill a man.

Enoch noticed that the men had difficulty breathing. It seemed to him that the weight of their bodies pulled their shoulders out of joint and placed pressure on their chest. When I breathe my chest rises and falls, he thought. But their chests are under pressure and can’t rise. The man who asked for water said only one word; maybe that was because he had only that much air.

Both men groaned with every tiny breath. Tears washed down their faces until there were no more tears. They squirmed as if trying to find some tiny amount of relief; there was none. Blood ran down their arms, dripped from their elbows, and splattered on the ground. The blood from their feet stained the wood all the way to the ground. The longer the men hung on the crosses, the less they moved. Maybe they’ll die soon and this sordid affair can be over.

It was late afternoon and much of the crowd had left. Enoch looked up and noticed that more vultures had descended from the sky. He counted about ten detestable birds perched on the jagged outcropping and shifting from foot to foot, waiting, and hoping to be the first to the feast. Only two Roman soldiers remained to fend off anyone who dared to rescue the victims.

It would soon be dark and only a handful of people remained in the vigil. Two men had gathered sticks to build a fire. The soldiers had gone; Enoch assumed it was because there was no hope of life left. He also noticed that one woman remained. She held a long branch from a tree trimmed to a single stick. He wondered what she was going to do with it. She raised it once it was long enough to reach the top of a cross if she were standing near it. What could it be about? A shadow in the sky caught his eye; it was a vulture swooping near the crosses. The woman raised her stick again. Now it made sense, she was the mother that did not leave. She would fend off the birds all night if necessary.

It was late and the gates to Jerusalem would soon close, he had to hurry.

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Joseph noticed that light was no longer coming through the door; he looked up and saw Enoch slouched in the doorway. With a nod of his head, he motioned for his son to enter and sit on a cushion next to him.

He entered slowly, slumped to the cushion, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Okay, you were right. I wish I had not gone."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

Enoch shook his head.

"But you are." Joseph frowned. "That was the deal. So, how did it make you feel?"

"Sick."

Joseph didn't respond.

Enoch sighed. "You want the whole story?"

Joseph nodded.

Enoch gave him his account of the event.

"How long did you stay?"

"Too long." Enoch wiped a tear. "I stayed until I could see vultures circling high in the sky and a woman waving a stick to fend them off." Enoch shook his head. "The sight of them sitting on a crag of boulders nearby waiting for the end caused my skin to crawl."

"Did you know it can take up to three days for some men to die like that?"

Enoch shook his head. "Then what?"

"The body will rot in the hot sun; the vultures you saw will pick at the bodies until they fall to the earth. Then during the night, scavengers will fight over the leftovers."

Enoch began to sob.

"That's the first time I've heard you cry since you were ten years old," Joseph said softly.

Enoch wiped his tears on the sleeve of his tunic. "I didn't know it got worse."

"Oh, it's worse than that," Joseph said. "Our scriptures tell us that a man who is hanged on a tree is cursed."

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“What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure,” Joseph said. “But I think it means that he is cast out of the sight of God.”

“Why?”

“Remember that Adam and Eve ate the fruit of a tree and were cast out of the Garden, away from God’s presence.”

Enoch nodded.

“I think it means something like that.”

“I understand now why you didn’t want me to see the crucifixion.”

Joseph lowered his head. “Let me tell you the rest of the story about the crucifixion I saw.”

Enoch nodded.

“Two days after he died, a Roman confessed to the crime.”

“He was innocent. Horrible.” Enoch whimpered, “What happened to the Roman?”

“Romans don’t crucify their own. They made him a slave, a rower, on a Roman warship.” Joseph paused. “We heard that he died two and half years later tied to an oar.” Joseph caught his breath. “But who knows? He may be living in a villa outside of Rome to this day. The Romans lie as often as they breathe.”

Joseph stood, helped Enoch to his feet, and embraced him. “I love you, my son.”

Enoch wiped his eyes, cleared his throat, and gained his composure.

Joseph stared at Enoch, “Do you understand why I didn’t want you to view the crucifixion?”

“I think so.”

“The Romans use crucifixions to implant fear in the hearts of their subjects; it demonstrates to everyone that they are in absolute control and can do as they wish without our consent.”

“Did they implant fear into your heart when you were my age?”

“I’d prefer not to answer that.”

“But I want to know.”

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Joseph stroked his beard. “Fear is a strange thing. It intimidated many, and they lived in submission to the Romans. The Zealots, on the other hand, live in defiance. When a crucifixion happens, their ranks grow.”

“So, father, how did it affect you? Do you live in submission or defiance?”

“There is a place between the two. It’s being fearful, but taking sensible actions.”

“I don’t understand that.”

“That’s fine; we can talk of it more in the future.”

“So, is that why you are not a Zealot—it’s not sensible?”

“There are some things I can do and others that I dare not do. Let me leave it at that.”

“You are wealthy, a member of the Sanhedrin... a powerful man,” Enoch said. “I don’t think the Romans would want to tangle with you.”

“At one time I thought that and I’ve tried to gain as much wealth and power as possible.” Joseph frowned. “But I know that with a simple flick of his finger Pilate could destroy everything I’ve achieved.”

“So, what sensible things are you doing that Rome would not like?”

“Enoch,” Joseph reached and touched his shoulder; “secrecy is a powerful shield for the fearful.” Joseph smiled, “Remember that Delilah enticed Samson to reveal the secret of his strength. It did not turn out well.”

Chapter 2

Joseph usually felt strong, confident, and eager for his next project. That was all gone. He tried telling himself that nothing had changed. He still owned his splendid two-story house in Jerusalem, he was still a member of the Sanhedrin, and his family was the same. He couldn't shake his sadness and he feared that depression would visit him again. He slowly climbed the stairs to their sleeping quarters, knelt, and settled on the fleece mat next to Naomi. He prayed that he would feel better the next day.

In the middle of the night, Naomi shook him awake.

"You were screaming about Enoch on a cross," Naomi said.

Joseph shook himself to clear his head. "Sorry, I guess I had a bad dream."

Naomi settled back on the fleece mat.

He fought to get back to sleep and awoke with a heavy spirit just before sunrise. He thought a change of scenery, that's what I need.

Joseph roused his wife. "Get up sweetheart; we're going to the estate today."

Naomi yawned and rubbed her eyes. "You go. I'm staying in Jerusalem."

"No," Joseph said. "We're all going."

"Not on foot I hope."

"Why not?" Joseph tried to smile, "Walking is good exercise, it will keep us young."

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“If you expect us to walk, the girls and I will stay in Jerusalem,” Naomi said. “You and Enoch can stay young. The girls and I will be happy to age gracefully.”

“Actually, I plan to hire a donkey and cart to take us.”

“Bless you,” Naomi bowed to him. “However, I prefer a wagon.”

“Why?”

“Carts dart about at every move of the donkey; wagons have four wheels and offer a much smoother ride.”

Knowing that an argument would further depress him, Joseph said, “Fine, just get the girls up, have the servants prepare breakfast, and pack a lunch. I’ll go and engage the wagon and driver.”

She threw a cushion at him. “Yes, master. Anything you say.”

He tossed it back toward her, forced a smile, and felt better.

On his way to arrange for the wagon, he could not help but notice that, even though two sons of Abraham still hung on crosses, Jerusalem looked and acted the same. Sad, but such things have become normal, he thought.

When he returned, the family was not ready. The time it took his family to get things done always disappointed Joseph; but on this day, he would not hurry them or show his disappointment. He would avoid anything that might worsen his spirit.

Joseph ignored Naomi’s complaint that the wagon was small and pulled by a donkey rather than a horse. He watched as she packed the wagon with pillows and arranged them so each person had one to sit or lean on and stashed the lunch basket in a place out of reach of the sun.

Midmorning already, Joseph thought; at this pace, we’ll need that lunch.

The wagon pitched and swayed along the changing curvature of the road. At least, Joseph thought, the Romans knew how to build cobblestone roads.

Enoch leaned on his pillow as if taking a nap; the girls giggled and played word games. Naomi appeared to watch the scenery creep by. In his mind, Joseph composed words for a contract he would offer a prominent neighbor for his small adjoining property. He could feel his sadness lifting the closer he got to his estate.

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They arrived at the estate in the late afternoon. Their house was the largest by far of the long string of houses along the dirt road. The dark spirit Joseph woke within Jerusalem was all but gone.

Servants waited for them at the door. “Sir, the meal will be ready in a matter of minutes.”

Joseph sat at one end of the table, his wife Naomi at the other. Dan, his nineteen-year-old son sat beside Enoch on one side and his two young daughters, Esther and Miriam on the other side.

After everyone settled, Joseph cleared his throat, raised the prayer shawl from his shoulders to the top of his head, and recited a prayer. “Blessed art Thou, Jehovah our God, King of the world, who causes bread to come forth from the earth. Amen.”

Naomi rang a small bell and two servants entered the room. They retrieved a pitcher of water and an empty basin from a marble shelf protruding from the plastered wall. They helped each person wash their hands according to Jewish ritual, poured wine for each person, and left the room.

Dan took a sip, savored it, and smiled. “Ahhhh...this is the best wine in all of Israel, grown, gathered, and processed right here on our estate. And, I might add,” he paused, “poured from an amphora made in our own pottery house.”

“Son,” Joseph said, “let me remind you of a proverb. *Let someone else praise you, not your own mouth.* Let me boast for you; we all know you are doing an excellent job managing the estate and especially so at such a young age, better than I had expected. It allows me to work out of our home in Jerusalem and...”

“And to serve in the Sanhedrin,” Naomi said.

Joseph picked up some flatbread, pulled a piece of stewed meat from the roast on the table, and consumed it. “Daughters, someday I pray you will be able to cook for your husbands as well as your mother.”

“But, sisters,” Dan said, “we all know mother doesn’t cook, our servants do.”

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“That’s very true,” Joseph said, “but I will boast about her. I assure you she can cook even better than this. Praise be to God; He blesses us so much that she doesn’t have to. Her time is more valuable for household management.”

“So, sisters,” Dan winked at them, “pray that father will be wise enough to marry you off to a rich landowner like himself so you won’t have to cook and he can pocket a sizable bride price.”

The girls giggled.

“Dan,” Joseph said, “I’m going to quote another proverb, so forgive me. *Whoever trusts in riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like a leaf in spring.* Let us not speak of wealth. Instead, let us speak of God’s blessings and focus on righteousness.”

Naomi reached over and touched Miriam’s dark curls that dangled beside her face. “Daughters, your father will seek God’s direction in selecting a husband for you. We know you will make wonderful wives and mothers. We will make sure that you have a worthy husband.” She looked at her husband, “Won’t we, Joseph?”

“Yes, of course.” Joseph tore another piece of flatbread and dipped it in the bowl of broth. “My concern, however, is for our oldest son who shows little interest in marriage. Many of his friends have already taken a wife and some already have children.”

Naomi looked at Dan with a long stare. “Aren’t you going to respond to what your father said?”

“I’m interested in getting married,” Dan said, “but not eager. Managing the estate leaves me no time to think of such things. Maybe I’ll find a wife one of these days.”

His sisters giggled.

“Or, maybe I’ll find a bride for you,” Joseph said.

Naomi smiled. “When that day comes, would you like to bring your bride into our home, or build your own house?”

Dan’s face flushed. “Can we talk about something else? I’ll find a wife in my own time; let me assure you, I don’t need your help.”

Enoch wrinkled his brow. “It’s strange that no one mentioned me getting married.”

“What do you mean?” Naomi said.

Joseph of Arimathea

“Since I don’t have any family credentials,” Enoch hung his head, “I don’t think I’ll be able to find an honorable Jewish girl whose family will agree for me to marry her.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Joseph said. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m not even sure that I’m Jewish,” Enoch said.

“You are a member of our family. You are as Jewish as anybody on this earth,” Joseph said with passion.

“But there are a lot of questions about my real parents. Were they even married? Were they both Jewish or was one Roman? There is no way to know. My skin color is not dark like yours and the color of my hair is not the same either.”

“Enoch, according to Jewish law you are our child with all the rights of any child born to us. I will hear no more of this silly talk.”

“How will I answer such questions of a family whose daughter I might want to marry?”

“Enoch,” Joseph said slowly, “I don’t want to hear any more about this. When that time comes, I will talk to the family, explain things, and things will go well.”

“Not even the poorest family on our estate would allow one of their daughters to marry me. They say I’m illegitimate—but they use another word.”

“Son,” Joseph said, “I’m sorry you feel this way. But let me assure you, when the time comes, you will have no problem being accepted as a son of mine.”

Enoch started to speak, but Joseph held up his hand, “I said I didn’t want to hear anything else about it.”

Enoch snatched a piece of bread, got up, and stormed out of the room.

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The next day Joseph and Dan strolled to the stables and found their horses prepared and waiting. Joseph rode a large Arabian stallion with a burgundy bridle and saddle that contrasted sharply against the pure whiteness of the horse. The horse was one of a few indulgences Joseph allowed himself. He never rode the

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horse except on the estate because he knew those living and working for him took pride in the success of their *master*, as they called him. He didn't think of himself in any way as a *master*, but he did feel a great responsibility for those on his estate. He understood that without them and their loyalty, the estate could not function. When they saw him riding the Arabian stallion, they would judge him to be a man of means and worthy of their respect. When tenants spotted him, they stopped what they were doing, stood, watched, and waved as he rode by. He always smiled and waved back.

Although Dan rode a smaller gray mare with a black bridle and saddle and looked impressive, Joseph knew that Dan, because of his young age and unmarried status, was not as respected as he was. He also knew that the tenants would follow his directions because he was doing a good job and, as his son, he would not ask them to do anything not in accord with his wishes.

It was a wonderful spring day; the clouds were fluffy and high in the air. It was the month of Adar, almond trees were in bloom, the rains had lessened with the coming of spring, the barley fields were green and lush, and it was lambing season. There was much to see and for Joseph and Dan to talk about. They rode along the main road with the long string of single-story, square, flattop, mudbrick, tenant-houses. Each had a walled-in courtyard attached at the back and some had flowers growing near the front doors. All the houses were a consistent yellowish-brown, the natural color of the soil from which they were constructed. Joseph's heart sang with the vivid awareness of what God had allowed him to accumulate over the years, but the crucifixion two days before still stirred a lingering sadness and fear.

"Dan, I want to drop by the ironworks and check on the improvements our new Damascus artisan is bringing to our craftsmen," Joseph said.

"If you are expecting to find him there, you will be disappointed."

"And why is that?"

"He left two days ago."

"That's strange," Joseph frowned. "He didn't honor his contract for six months of training."

"Some strangers came by four days ago, called him out, and spoke to him at length. He returned, finished what he was doing, packed up his things, and left word for me that he was leaving."

Joseph of Arimathea

“Do you know who the strangers were?”

“I didn’t get any names.”

That’s a good thing, Joseph thought to himself.

They stopped at the ironworks, dismounted, tied up their horses, and went inside. Joseph greeted the workers and they welcomed him. He spoke to and praised each worker for their willingness to learn new things. He inquired about the Damascus artisan and got rave reviews. They showed him knives, spearheads, a sword, and arrow points he had made. Joseph saw the telltale pattern he expected in the Damascus steel.

“So, he did this while he was here and you carefully observed him in the process?”

“Yes, Sir, we all did,” one of the workers said.

“Can you duplicate his work?”

The workman hung his head. “We can try, but that man has magic in his hands. He knows more about iron than we could learn in a lifetime. Much of what he was saying was new and strange to us; we had a hard time understanding him.”

“I had hoped that we could make wool shears that were sharper and that would last longer between sharpening. Did you show him our shears?”

“Yes, but he only wanted to make knives and swords.”

Dan spoke up, “I’m sure they could try making Damascus steel blades for our shears.”

Joseph looked at his manager who said, “We will try.”

“Can you have a pair ready for this shearing season?”

“We’ll do our best.”

Dan followed his father as he walked toward the horses.

“I had hoped that we could develop a superior wool shear that would serve us well and we could sell to our fellow shepherds all over Israel. I was not interested in weapons. I know I had made that clear to him.”

“Father, I should have been more observant. I should have insisted that he work on that plan. But I thought his techniques would be transferable to any cutting device.”

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“You are probably right,” Joseph said. “Did we pay him the full contract price?”

“I don’t think we paid him anything.”

“That’s very strange.”

“Should I pay him part of his contract in case he returns for it?”

“You are the manager; I’ll leave that decision up to you.”

Dan mounted his horse. “Let’s take a look at the new crop of lambs.”

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The grazing sheep moved aside as if blown by a small breeze as the horses trod slowly into one of the meadows. The sweet smell of the sheep and green grass kindled childhood memories for Joseph. Suddenly it struck him how long it had been since he had ridden across the estate. His spirit lifted. It felt good to be out in the pasture with the herds, watching lambs bounding across the pasture, and the ewes nourishing their young. Jerusalem seemed to be a long way off.

“Will we be able to make our quota for the Temple this year?”

Dan smiled at his father. “Last year’s lambing went well.” He paused. “I think we will make the quota. It’s the following year that concerns me”

Joseph frowned. “And why is that?”

Dan turned toward the flock, “This crop of lambs was not as large as the previous year.”

“Do you know why?”

Dan turned sideways in his saddle. “The shepherds tell me that our producing ewes are getting older. We need to save some of the ewe lambs for breeding next year.”

“I agree. But, make sure you keep the largest, healthiest, and strongest. Put the others up for sale. The same goes for a new selection of rams as well.”

Dan smiled “That’s exactly what I had planned.”

“So what is the count for the Temple this year?”

Dan rubbed his chin. “We’ll be able to supply nearly a thousand. But this spring, we only had about two thousand lambs; with divine providence, half will be male and a high percentage of them will be without defect.”

Joseph of Arimathea

“That cuts the margin thin,” Joseph frowned. “I don’t want to purchase sheep from another man’s flock again. We need to meet our quota for the Temple ourselves.”

“No man can control how many lambs will be born, their sexes, or how perfect they’ll be,” Dan said, “and there is always a market, though less, for the lambs with defects.”

Joseph leaned forward on his horse and let him graze, “For next year, let’s retain about eight hundred ewe lambs and add them to our breeding stock. That will increase our prospects of more lambs without blemish.”

“We’ll need to sell some of the older ewes who are not producing,” Dan said.

“Of course.” Joseph pulled his horse’s head up. “The communities living in the mountains will need them for meat. They have a hard time eking out an existence in those rocks.”

“Father,” Dan paused, “I’ve heard that those folks are Zealots.”

“I don’t know that for sure and I don’t think you do either, Joseph said. “However, it makes little difference to me in any case. They need sheep, we have sheep, and their money is good.”

Dan frowned. “Sell them at the same discount we used last year?”

“That’ll be fine,” Joseph pulled on the reins of his horse and turned it toward the stables.

They rode side by side in silence for a while and watched the sun rise high into the sky.

Joseph pulled his horse to a stop. “Dan, I want you to know something.”

Dan’s horse stopped with Joseph’s horse. “You’re going to tell me that the mountain people are Zealots and you have known about it for years.”

“That’s right.”

Dan frowned. “Father, selling to Zealots is dangerous and you know it.”

“Yes,” Joseph said, “and this stays between us.”

Dan nodded.

Westbrook

Joseph turned his horse toward Dan. “Even your mother doesn’t know about this. What people don’t know; they can’t inadvertently tell someone—the wrong someone.”

“How many on the estate know about it?”

“I’ve never discussed it directly with anyone except you.”

“Father,” Dan said, “I think the Damascus artisan may have gone to one of those mountain communities to teach them how to make weapons.”

“Son, that’s your opinion. We can’t know that.” Joseph nudged his horse to a walk, and Dan’s horse followed by his side. “Dan, never, and I mean never, express that opinion to anyone or answer any questions about the Damascus artisan: family, tenants, strangers, and, especially, Romans. If the Romans ever suspect that we assist the Zealots, everything we have could be confiscated and I hate to think of what else could happen.”

“What if I’m asked a point-blank question about the Damascus artisan by a Roman? I would have to answer something.”

Joseph thought for a moment. “Just be honest, but don’t go beyond the question. I mean, do not offer additional information or opinions. He was here for a brief time. He left and we do not know why. We don’t know where he went. He was teaching our people how to make Damascus steel for farm implements. That’s it.”

“So, why do you help the Zealots?”

Joseph started to turn his horse toward the stables but stopped. “I think it’s a risk worth taking. The Romans won the war, and Israel has been a province of Rome for a little more than a hundred years; I understand that. But, God himself promised this land to us; it is a holy land and it will be ours forever. The Zealots understand that.”

Joseph turned away and then looked back. “My father and grandfather believed that God would send a Messiah who would re-establish the kingdom of David, and they made a pact to do all in their power to prepare for his coming. Their pact required them to gain as much wealth and power as possible in their lifetimes so they could assist the Messiah when he arrived. I made the same pact with my father when he passed his wealth and position to me. So, I’m being faithful to that pact. Gaining wealth is a passion for me because it will allow our

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family to assist the Messiah in a special way. One of these days, our land will become an independent Jewish nation again.

“You asked about the Zealots. They may annoy the Romans now but when the Messiah comes, they may be a great help to him. So, I’m willing to give them a little encouragement now, then we all will need to help.”

“It’s been a long time and He hasn’t come. Are you sure He’s coming?”

“Yes,” Joseph said with a frown. “God’s ways are not our ways. He acts in His own time. When it happens, everything will change.”

“And if He doesn’t come in your lifetime?” Dan said.

“Then I’ll expect you to continue the pact with our family, and if He doesn’t come in your lifetime, the pact must continue through all generations until He comes.”

Dan was silent for a moment, “What if I can’t agree to that?”

Joseph’s face contorted. “What did you say?”

“Who else knows about this pact?”

“No one.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“Maybe I should have or maybe I should have waited longer. Sometimes I feel that the Messiah’s coming is many years away but at other times, I feel it could be any day now. In any case, we need to be prepared.”

“That is a lot of wealth to give away. The family worked hard for it and you want to give it to somebody. Surely there would be conditions on the gift.”

“You don’t get it.”

“I guess I’m confused.”

“It is not really ours; we only manage it for God.”

“How can I be sure that a person who claims to be the Messiah is telling the truth?”

“That I can’t tell you.” Joseph looked eyes with his son, “I hope it will be obvious to us.”

“So, back to my question.”

“If you can’t agree?”

Dan nodded.

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“Then you will not inherit the estate.”

“That would break Jewish tradition.”

“More than that, it would break my heart, but I would have no alternative.”

“You want me to make this pact and pass it on through my eldest son.”

“Correct.”

“Would I be restricted in how I use it until I give it away?”

“You could use it to invest, meet the needs of the family, maintain our properties, but not waste it.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“The family wealth has more than doubled each generation. I would hope it would happen again under your management.”

“How did you manage to grow it that much?”

“I think the hand of God has been on us.”

“Okay.”

“What does that mean?”

“I will agree to continue the pact.”

“It’s a sacred obligation that you are agreeing to.”

“I understand,” Dan smiled. “The wealth is ours until God needs it. Is that right?”

“Yes,” Joseph smiled. “I will pray that God’s hand will be on you as it has been on our family.”

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On the way back, Joseph spotted a group of people gathered around one of the tenant houses and heard someone wailing.

“Whose house is that?” Joseph said.

“That must be where Samuel, the sandal maker lives,” Dan said.

As they drew closer, they saw Samuel sitting in the dust by the side of the road wailing, throwing dust into the air, and letting it fall on his head.

Joseph looked more carefully; Samuel had torn his tunic. He dreaded to hear the story but knew he had to stop by and speak to him.

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They dismounted, let the horses graze by the side of the road, and walked slowly toward Samuel. They saw at least twenty other tenant family members wailing, thrashing about, and throwing dust into the air.

They moved closer. Samuel looked up and screamed, “Master, please, please—they have crucified my son.”

Joseph felt faint. This can’t be true, he thought.

“Samuel, I’m so sorry,” Joseph said softly. “When did it happen?”

“Two days ago, at the sixth hour, they nailed him to the cross and they tell me his body still hangs there.” He fought to control his breathing. “Can you help me?”

Joseph shook his head. “My friend, I’m afraid only God can help you.”

Why did he ask me to help? It’s absurd, Joseph thought. No one can help him in this pathetic situation; he must know that.

“It was my son, Benjamin,” Samuel paused. “He was born in this house. He worked for you as a shepherd.”

“I remember him. So, why did the Romans think he was a Zealot?”

“He left about two weeks ago without telling me where he was going or why. I didn’t know he was a Zealot. I don’t know what got into him. I don’t know why he left. He was my only son and his mother is dead. I don’t know what to do.”

Joseph sat on the ground beside him surrounded by wailing people. He put an arm around his shoulders and prayed silently; Lord, what can I say to help this poor man?

“I’m sorry your son is dead and I’m sorry that there is nothing I can do about that. Nobody can do anything about it.”

Samuel caught his breath, breathed deeply, and said, “I know that.” He paused again, “I want to bury him alongside his mother behind this house.”

“That will be fine with me; please do.”

“I don’t know how to ask Pontius Pilate for his body,” He paused. “They may think I’m a Zealot myself and tear my house down.”

Yes, that is a problem, Joseph thought—a real problem.

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“So, I beg you. Please go and ask for his body for me?” He wiped tears from his muddy face and looked into the eyes of Joseph. “I can’t stand the thought of his body being eaten by the birds or being thrown on the trash heap in Gehenna. I’d rather die myself.”

“I understand,” Joseph said.

“I can be proud he died as an enemy of Rome, but I can’t stand the thought of him not having a proper Jewish burial,” He lowered his head. “I just can’t.”

The crowd around him stopped wailing and started pleading with Joseph to claim the body and bring it home.

Lord, Joseph prayed, I don’t want to do this. It’s dangerous. It could put my life and everything I own in jeopardy. I know the Romans are furious about the attack on their soldiers and they want revenge. I don’t think they will give up the opportunity to make this death as repulsive as possible. He clenched his teeth so hard that they hurt.

Joseph sat in the dust, felt stunned, and wept with Samuel. Then he heard himself say, “I’ll go to Pilate tomorrow and ask for your son’s body.”

Chapter 3

Joseph and Naomi left the estate immediately with their girls and Enoch to return to their home in Jerusalem where Joseph spent a sleepless night. He kept asking himself, why, why, why did I say that I'd ask for the body? He tried to concoct a plausible explanation for not doing so. No scheme that crossed his mind would withstand the barest of scrutiny. He could not violate the promise he had made to Samuel. The large number of people who had heard it by this time would have shared it with everybody on the estate. He tried to put himself in the place of Samuel whom he had known for better than twenty-five years. How would I feel if the body of Dan, my oldest son, was hanging on a cross? He also considered the repercussions Pilate could exact against him if he chose to do so. The thoughts caused his stomach to churn. He had no choice; he had to ask for the body. Emotions exhausted, he fell asleep.

He awoke drained of energy but told himself that he had no choice; he had to get on with the task. He went to the first floor and dressed in a way to accentuate his position as a member of the Sanhedrin and a Pharisee. He picked up his phylactery and caressed it. It represented the purest act of keeping the law that he could imagine. The phylactery was made of leather from a clean animal and the cord from the intestine of the same animal. It had been colored black and sewn together according to a precise set of laws. It was perfect in all respects

Westbrook

of the law. He quoted the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One," the scripture that was contained in the phylactery. He placed it on his forehead and tied the cord at the back of his head. He chose his most ostentatious headdress, placed it on his head, and donned his tunic and black over-garment with the longest tassels. He chose his broadest white linen girdle and placed it around his waist. He then picked up a pouch with a considerable amount of coinage in it and tucked in into his girdle. Who knows, he thought, I might have to pay a bribe. He strapped on his leather sandals and was ready to make his way to the praetorium. He knew that he appeared confident and assured; inside he felt like a lamb going to the slaughter.

Naomi met him at the door. "Do you have to do this?" There was a tremor in her voice. "It could bring disaster upon our family."

Joseph looked into her teary eyes. "I'm afraid I do. Pray for me as I go."

He stepped out of his house into the narrow cobble street and turned in the direction of the Fortress Antonia, which contained the **praetorium**. He had never been inside and the few times he had to walk past it he had always moved to the other side of the street. It was located at the northwest corner of the Temple Mount and it would take him about a quarter of an hour to arrive, maybe longer, because he would stop along the way and recite prayers aloud on the street corners. He would plead with God for protection and the hearers along the way would know the anguish in his soul; he did not care. This was not for show or pretense; it was a real crying out to God for deliverance as he walked into the lion's den.

The closer he got, the more his heart pounded. He told himself that he was a prominent man of Jerusalem, a man of means, and a religious leader; Pilate would not dare harm him or his family. But a persistent voice told him that Pilate had the absolute power of the Roman government behind him—life and death. That same voice reminded him that he had never seen Pilate up close or spoken to him personally and that his anger might still be smoldering. The closer he came to the Praetorium, the stronger the urge to stop and reconsider.

He turned and started back toward his house; but after a few steps, the mental image of Samuel wailing and sitting in the dust with tunic torn brought him to a halt. He stopped, took a deep breath, and turned back toward the Praetorium.

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From a distance, Joseph could see Roman soldiers entering and leaving the Fortress Antonia. Two soldiers guarded the entrance. They were in full military dress, heads covered with polished brass helmets topped with bright red plumes, abdomen and shoulders covered with shining metal plates, upper legs protected with a skirt of chain mail, legs and feet protected with leather greaves, a sword attached at the waist, and a spear held by their sides.

He approached the entrance and the soldiers crossed two spears and blocked the way.

“What business do you have here?”

“I’m here to see Pontius Pilate about the body of a man that hangs on a cross outside the city.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“No,” Joseph hesitated. “I appeal to the graciousness of the governor.”

The soldier said flatly, “Please wait.”

One of the soldiers turned and entered the building. Joseph stood like a statue.

He returned. “You may enter. Speak to the centurion at the end of the hall.”

They returned their spears to their resting places beside their bodies and Joseph stepped up and into the spacious hewn-stone building. The clap of his sandals against the tile floors echoed against the stone walls. He walked about thirty feet, stopped before the centurion, and realized he did not know how to address him.

“My name is Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, and I’m here to speak to the governor regarding a request.”

“My name is Crispus,” he said. “What shall I tell the governor about your request?”

“Just tell him I have a personal request regarding the Zealot named Benjamin, son of Samuel, whose body hangs on a cross outside the city.”

“He rarely sees people on personal business. If you could make it official business, you may have a better chance of seeing him.”

Westbrook

Joseph thought, I'll keep it personal, maybe he won't see me, and then I can honestly tell Samuel that I tried but couldn't see him. "No, please tell him it is personal business, a personal request."

"I'll be back in a moment."

Joseph took a deep breath, stepped backward, and noticed pictures hanging on the walls and carved stone busts of prominent Roman emperors on pedestals along the wall. Colorful Roman battle flags hung from poles that protruded from high on the walls. So, this is the praetorium—disgusting, ungodly, graven images. He felt unclean; he did not belong in this place.

He heard the centurion's footsteps and turned toward the sound. "You are a lucky man; the governor is in a good mood today and disposed to see you. Follow me."

Pilate sat in a chair with armrests and a high back carved from solid white marble. He was dressed in a red tunic, a blue girdle about his waist, and his bald head was uncovered. He leaned an elbow on an armrest and looked straight out. It's amazing how white his skin is, Joseph thought; he must spend little time in the sun.

Joseph lowered his head, remained standing, and said, "Thank you for seeing me today. I'm sorry I could not arrange for an appointment."

Pilate rubbed his head. "I don't think we have met."

"You are correct."

"So, to come into a gentile house makes you unclean," Pilate sneered, "your request must be important to you."

Joseph's tongue seemed stuck to the roof of his mouth. "I...I have a tenant, a friend, a person who works on my estate just outside of Jerusalem. I'm here on his behalf."

Pilate sat up in his chair and barked, "Why didn't he come?"

"He didn't feel he had the standing...the position...the authority." I'm not doing well, Joseph thought.

"Go ahead, I'm listening."

"I learned yesterday from him that his son, Benjamin, or the body of his son, hangs on a cross outside of Jerusalem."

Pilate leaned forward and rubbed his head again. "He's the father of one of the Zealots?"

Joseph of Arimathea

“Yes, I’m afraid that is true.”

Pilate stood and walked back and forth in front of his stone chair. “Rome has no patience with insurrectionists. You know that, don’t you?”

Joseph nodded.

“So, he wants to bury his son in the Jewish way.”

Joseph nodded again.

Pilate’s white face turned red. “From our perspective, every Zealot, every insurrectionist should rot on a cross and does not deserve an honorable burial. Rome cannot tolerate disloyalty and rebellion. Such things put me in a bad light with Tiberius Caesar. I need to discourage this rebellious spirit in every way I can. If I grant your request, my men will see me as weak and so will Rome.”

“Neither Samuel nor I had any knowledge that his son had joined a Zealot group. Had we known, we would have prevented him from doing such a thing.”

“Do you understand the position this would put me in?”

“I think I do.”

Pilate climbed back into his chair, rested his elbow on its arm, and propped up his chin with his hand, “You are asking me to give preferential treatment for an insurrectionist, a criminal who has received his just punishment. I’m afraid that such a decision would be an encouragement to others.” Pilate sat up, raised his voice, and waved his arms. “What would those under my command think? Several of my soldiers lost their lives in this episode. And you want me to allow an honorable burial for this Zealot?”

“May I say a word in defense of my request?”

Pilate sat back and looked straight at Joseph and sneered, “Permission granted.”

“Samuel is a good man, loyal to me, and to Israel. He is a godly man. His wife died last year and now his only son is dead. He is a broken man and this... this death...is about to destroy him.” Joseph took a step toward Pilate, “As governor, you have two constituents to deal with: Rome and the citizens of Judah.”

“I don’t call them citizens...I call them subjects...this is not a democracy.”

“I get that as a legal matter.”

Westbrook

“I don’t quite get the meaning of the word *constituent*,” Pilate huffed. “What does it mean to you?”

“It means a group of people you want to serve and to influence...lead.”

“I’m not answerable to the Jewish people in any way. The only *constituent* I need to impress and serve is Tiberius Caesar.”

“But you don’t want them to riot, pillage, or to rise up against you; that would displease Caesar...right?”

“I think I get what you are talking about...a better relationship with certain people or groups could be to my advantage.”

“That’s close enough.”

“So, if I released the body of a rebel—a Zealot, how would that build a relationship with the Jewish people?”

“I understand that you consider us an unpacified minor province in the Roman Empire, and I understand that any disturbance like this is a great cause of concern to Rome and to you. But, releasing the body to be buried by a grieving father might make the Jews feel less resentful of your governorship.”

Pilate’s head jerked. “Less resentful—did I hear that right?”

Joseph nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

Pilate lifted his eyebrows. “What have I done to cause such resentment?”

Joseph paused to consider the consequences of his answer. “Do you want an honest answer?”

“I admire honesty.”

Joseph prayed silently and spoke slowly, “The fact that you are the Roman governor is reason enough. Jews recognize your power, but not your right to govern our land.”

“I was appointed a few years ago and I’ve never understood the mind of the Jew. We pacify other conquered provinces in a matter of a few years. It’s been over a hundred years and none of the provinces of what you called the Promised Land have been pacified—none.”

Joseph took a step to the side and then turned to face Pilate. “I remember that soon after you took your office, a group of soldiers marched into Jerusalem with ensigns topped by a golden image of an eagle and flags bearing the likeness of Tiberius Caesar.”

Pilate frowned, “That was a mistake.”

Joseph of Arimathea

“I also remember that a delegation of Jews from Jerusalem approached your palace in Caesarea and caused you to be extremely angry.”

“That’s right; they were a vicious mob.”

“I seem to remember you had your soldiers surround them and you threatened to kill all of them—about two hundred. You were surprised when they all exposed their necks to make it easier for your soldiers to cut off their heads.”

Pilate smiled. “You have an excellent memory.”

“After a while, for some unknown reason, you withdrew your threat, promised you would never again march soldiers into Jerusalem displaying any kind of images, and let them go.”

Pilate leaned forward and stared into the eyes of Joseph. “I was appalled that they would cause a disruption of the peace where I lived. It was disrespectful and subversive. I’ve never understood why they were willing to die for such a simple thing. I could have killed them all, but I realized that another two hundred would appear the next day. Rome would not have ignored such carnage that could cause a greater uprising. They put me in an untenable position. The best choice was to adjust a simple procedure and bow to their demands. It worked out best for all concerned. Sometimes even I have to compromise.”

Joseph took two steps to his left and turned. “You say you don’t understand the Jew. Do you really want to understand, or, do you just want to control the Jews?”

“My primary objective is to maintain peace, so control I must, but I suppose understanding would help.”

“How have you attempted to understand us?”

Pilate rubbed his bald head. “The only Jew of status I’ve talked with to any extent is Caiaphas, the high priest. My predecessor appointed him to the position and he has held it for almost seventeen years. He’s nothing but a common politician; I don’t consider him honest or forthright. He wants to placate me and use me for his own ends.” Pilate laughed, “At least you are honest and foolhardy enough to ask permission to bury the body of a Zealot,” he laughed again. “That intrigues me.”

Westbrook

“I’m sorry you have received all of your Jewish perspectives from one man.”

Pilate got out of his chair, took two steps, turned, stared Joseph in the face, and spoke slowly, “By any chance were you one of those in the mob that day in Caesarea?”

Joseph caught his breath and cleared his throat. “I was there.”

“I’ve always wondered what would drive men to such a desperate act over such a trivial thing. Could you tell me?”

Joseph stroked his beard. “Our God, the one and only God has revealed to us that we are to make no graven images.”

Pilate twisted his face. “Why is that?”

“It’s His law. He is invisible and there is no way to capture the invisible in a representation of any kind.”

Pilate shook his head. “But, the eagle and the likeness of Caesar were not intended to represent your God.”

“Our commitment to God prevents us from making or looking at any image for fear that we may be tempted to worship it or think of it as a god. Some of our people in the past have turned to false gods, images made of wood or stone. We consider that an abomination. When you brought the images into Jerusalem, our holy city, it was like driving a spike through our hearts. We rejected your contempt.”

Pilate smirked, “So, what do you think of Zeus, **Apollo, Ares, or Dionysus?**”

“They are myths, not real. Our God has acted in history and chosen the Jews as His special people. We must obey him and forsake all other gods as false.”

Pilate grinned. “Your God seems to be harsh and demanding. Does he love to see you suffer?”

“Your man-mad gods give you permission; it seems to us, to do the most sensual and cruel of things.”

“I suppose we will never agree about such things,” Pilate returned to his chair and took a seat. “Herod the Great tried everything he could to placate the Jews. He took from the Roman treasurer at great cost, rebuilt your Temple, constructed an amphitheater in the heart of Jerusalem, built an aqueduct for Jerusalem, built cities, and improved the roads in the region. He was at least part Jew; didn’t he understand your religion?”

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Joseph frowned. “Herod the Great is considered by all Jews who are educated to have been a ruthless and ungodly tyrant.”

“In the annals of Roman history, he is considered one of the great rulers.”

“That proves how out of touch Rome has always been with the Jewish perspective.”

Pilate stood again, joined his hands behind his back, and walked back and forth before his stone chair. “Back to your request...I suppose I could grant it for a certain price.”

Joseph put his hand on his girdle. “I brought some money with me.”

Pilate waved his hand. “It’s not your money I want. I have all I need.” He paused, turned, and looked at Joseph. “What I need is someone inside the Sanhedrin who will give me honest insight into their thinking and understanding. This culture is impossible for me to understand. Could you do that?”

Joseph cleared his throat. “You want me to be a spy?”

“No. I need a listening ear, a person who can answer my questions honestly. But, the other members of the Sanhedrin did not know about it. It would be a secret agreement.”

Joseph paused and thought for a moment.

“Take your time.” Pilate walked back and forth a couple of times. “We could meet when I’m in Jerusalem, no more than three times a year. You would come here dressed as an average Jew and—at night. It would be too easy for someone to observe me going to your house.”

“Is there any other way?”

“I’m afraid not. If you can’t agree, we will take the body down today and throw it on the fire of Gehenna, the worst possible outcome for a Jew,” Pilate grinned. “Do I have that right?”

“You have it right.” Joseph paused. “I agree to your terms.”

Forced into a deal he didn’t like and contrary to everything he held sacred, Joseph seethed with disgust.

Pilate called the centurion in and said, “The body of the man called Benjamin whose body hangs on the cross is released to this man, Joseph of Arimathea. See to it.”

Westbrook

The centurion said, "Yes, Sir."

Before Joseph left, the centurion handed him a slip of paper written in Latin.

Chapter 4

Joseph walked slowly toward his house in Jerusalem. He had gotten what he wanted, but at what cost? He tried to process the matter again and again in his head. Would it be possible to keep this arrangement secret? What if Caiaphas learned of it? The answer was simple. He must never know.

Naomi met Joseph at the door. “Praise be to God. I thought Pilate might have arrested you.”

Joseph smiled. “He gave me permission to take the body.”

Her face brightened. “I’m surprised.”

“So am I.”

Naomi frowned. “Now the hard part begins for you.”

Joseph took a deep breath. “I’m not sure how I’m going to deal with it.”

“You promised me that you would never have anything to do with another crucifixion. I recall that for months you didn’t want to eat, talk, go anywhere, or make difficult decisions. It was a horrible time for you and the family. I thought you were demon-possessed.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“It could happen again. I can’t stand it when your spirit is crushed.”

“I know,” Joseph said. “It’s a horrible thing to experience. It’s why I didn’t want Enoch to see a crucifixion.”

Westbrook

“Now you have to take down a body that’s already started to decay, bathe it, wrap it with spices, and transport it to the estate.” Naomi took a breath. “How are you going to deal with all of that?”

“I’ll take three servants to help me.”

“You will have to be there. The smell, the sight, the cross will haunt you for months.”

“I promise you that I’ll not touch the body.”

Naomi jerked back. “It didn’t cross my mind that you would touch the body. I couldn’t do that either. It makes a person unclean.”

“For a proper burial, someone will have to prepare it for burial.”

“And you promise me that you will not do that?”

“I know my limitations. Yes, I promise for the second time.”

“How can you avoid it?”

“I’ll deliver the order signed by Pontius Pilate to the guard, walk away, and let the servants do their job. When they load it on the wagon, we’ll go to the estate. I will ride ahead on my horse.”

“I’ll pray for you.”

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Joseph took three men with him to the cross and looked to the ground to avoid seeing the cross. He noticed a long tree limb trimmed to one long single piece next to the remains of a fire. He assumed that the mother had fended off the birds until her son had died. He was here for the body of the other one. He met the soldier in the swell below the cross and gave the slip of paper written in Latin to the guard, walked away, and waited behind a boulder.

Although Joseph could not see what was happening, he could hear his servants prying the body from the cross and smell the decay that had already started. He heard when the servants lowered the body, prepared it, wrapped it in a white linen cloth with spices, and loaded it on a cart. When they yelled, Joseph mounted his horse and led the cart from a distance as they transported the body to Samuel at the estate.

Samuel wept with gratitude to Joseph, heaped praise upon him, and pledged his eternal loyalty as his master. Soon all the tenants on the estate came

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and praised Joseph as a master like no other, as fearless, and as one who had influence with Pontius Pilate. With loud voices, they shouted their pride and privilege to live on his estate.

Joseph knew Caiaphas would hear of the story and be offended but he did not care.

He gradually felt better about the deal with Pilate, and he was somewhat looking forward to getting to know him and if possible, influencing him to be more caring toward the Jewish people. Things could get better—maybe.

He learned a few days later from Enoch that the body of the other Zealot had rotted, fallen to the ground, and been consumed by scavenging animals; even his bones could not be found. That man had died as an unknown freedom fighter, without recognition or honor, for a cause that everybody in Israel cared about but no one had requested his body for an honorable burial. Joseph prayed as he had many times before; Lord how long can Israel continue without the Messiah? We need Him. Now...please.

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Joseph and the other members of the Sanhedrin waited for the high priest in the Hall of Hewn Stones built halfway into the northern Temple wall. Members all appropriately dressed stood in clustered groups and engaged in private conversations. Joseph knew what was about to happen. The high priest would enter, the crowd would take their assigned seats arranged in a U shape, and Caiaphas would go through a brief opening ceremony of prayer and quotations from the Torah. After that, they would hear the cases and pass judgment by vote.

The court heard three minor cases found each of the accused guilty, and sentenced them to a flogging of twenty strikes each by the Temple guards. Following the session, Caiaphas went directly to Joseph.

“I need a meeting with you at your earliest convenience.”

“Where?” Joseph said.

“At the second hour tomorrow here in the small annex room.”

Westbrook

“I’m so sorry, I have a business meeting until about the ninth hour. Would that work for you?”

“If that’s the earliest you can meet,” Caiaphas said, “that’s fine.” He turned and walked away.

He didn’t seem to be very happy, Joseph thought. I wonder how much he knows about my meeting with Pilate. I hope all he knows is that I met with him and secured the body for burial. If he knows more, that could be disastrous.

Joseph returned to his home, went about his business as usual, and tried not to dwell on the meeting with Caiaphas; but that was impossible. The thing that stuck in his mind most was that he had never had a private conversation with the man. The thought of a personal relationship with Caiaphas or any member of his family had never entered his mind. Previously he had not thought of him as an enemy, but things could be changing.

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Joseph arrived at the Hall of Hewn Stones on time and dressed in his usual pharisaical attire. He was ushered into the presence of the high priest and stood before him.

“Peace to you,” Joseph said and nodded his head.

“And peace to you,” the high priest said in a monotone voice and motioned to Joseph to take a seat on a cushion.

They sat facing one another with a small low table between them.

Joseph waited for the high priest to speak.

“Thank you for coming,” he said.

Joseph nodded.

“I understand that you requested the body of a Zealot from Pontius Pilate so that his family could bury him.”

Joseph nodded.

“I wanted you to know that by doing so you broke a long-established tradition.”

Joseph bit his lower lip, “I thought I was doing something good, helping a fellow Jew gain access to his son’s body for a proper Jewish burial. Do you know

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what would have happened otherwise?” Joseph grimaced, “So, what tradition did I break?”

“The tradition is simple; the high priest is the only one who negotiates with the governor. That’s the problem.”

Joseph thought this was a tradition that I’d never heard of. Maybe he made that up in his own head for his own purposes.

“I’m ignorant of such a tradition. Can you tell me when this tradition began? Can you quote a reference to it? I would like to know as much as possible about this tradition.”

Caiaphas cleared his throat, “The principle is more important. When members of the Sanhedrin negotiate with the governor, it sows discord and confusion. We need one and only one voice representing the Sanhedrin before the governor. When more than one person negotiates with him, he can play one against the other, thus causing division.” Caiaphas frowned and leaned toward Joseph. “And you didn’t ask my permission to speak to him.”

“I met with him because of a personal request that he granted. I did not represent myself as speaking or acting on behalf of the Sanhedrin. It was not an official Sanhedrin matter. Thus, it could not qualify for violation of which you accused me.”

“We are all amazed that he granted it. I can’t recall that he has ever released the body of a Zealot before.”

Joseph smiled, “Are you more concerned that he granted my request or that I met with him to make the request?”

Caiaphas sneered, “We know you are a wealthy man and I am concerned that he required a bribe of you.”

“I can assure you that no money exchanged hands,” Joseph said. “But in all honesty, I had carried some with me and was willing to spend it to get the body released.”

“Why?” Caiaphas grimaced.

“The man’s father is a tenant on my estate and I’ve known his son since he was a child,” Joseph said. “His father was desperate and wanted to give his son a proper Jewish burial. I promised him that I’d try to speak to Pilate and request

Westbrook

the release of his son's body. I was surprised that Pilate would see me and more surprised that he granted my request.”

“Everybody is surprised. Everyone in Jerusalem knows the story and thinks of you as a magician,” Caiaphas frowned. “What kind of argument did you make to Pilate that was so powerful?”

“At the moment, that is a little blurry in my memory. I think he trusted me. I think he wants to develop a better relationship with the Jewish people. I told him that releasing the body might help that relationship.”

Caiaphas cleared his throat. “Well, I'll take no actions against you on this occasion.”

Joseph tilted his head. “But?”

“If anything like this happens again,” Caiaphas grimaced, “I will demand the Sanhedrin issue a ban against you.”

Joseph jerked. “That's absurd.”

“I consider it a reasonable action.”

“You would go to that extreme?”

“To protect the position of the high priest and the integrity of the Sanhedrin,” he said, “yes, I would.”

“I can't remember when a member of the Sanhedrin has been banned.”

Caiaphas twisted on his pillow. “It has happened, maybe not in your lifetime, but it has happened and I can make it happen again. It happened when a member of the Sanhedrin publicly denounced an action taken by the court. But I think your action is so egregious it qualifies you for the ban.”

Joseph stood to his feet. “You would declare my seat vacant, ban me and my family from the synagogue and the Temple, and forbid other Jews from doing business with us or speaking to us?”

Caiaphas stood and faced Joseph. “I'm glad you understand the seriousness of the matter. And, in case you don't understand, we will revoke your privileges of selling sheep and exchanging coinage at the Temple.”

“If you were to initiate such an action,” Joseph's face flushed, “I assure you that I would fight the action with all the resources at my disposal,” Joseph took a deep breath. “Just in case you don't understand, I have considerable resources.”

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“Defy me and I will crush you like a bug,” He glared at Joseph. “But, it need not come to that.”

“It will come to that if you initiate such an action. And you do realize that you occupy the position of high priest at the will of the governor.” Joseph paused and thought his anger might be getting the best of him, but he continued, “If Pilate would release a Zealot’s body to me for burial, he might do me another favor.”

“Now, let’s not proceed with this. I have addressed the matter and I’m satisfied that you will take no action that will necessitate a ban.”

Joseph stood and bowed, turned, and walked out. His heart was pounding so hard in his chest, he wondered if people could see it by the heaving of his tunic. His heart calmed the closer he walked to his house until he realized that the new relationship with the governor could complicate matters beyond what he had imagined. If Caiaphas learned of his deal with Pilate, what will he do? He would invoke the ban. Everything he had worked for, everything he had accomplished, and saved for the Messiah’s coming would be lost. His fear turned to anger. The high priest was a son of Beelzebub. It would be best not to risk crossing this infidel. He’s crazy enough to do anything. I hope my response didn’t inflame his antagonism beyond his control.

Chapter 5

Joseph sat in the Hall of Hewn Stones waiting for the Sanhedrin to meet in its regular afternoon session. During the past six months, Joseph's attitude toward Caiaphas vacillated between hatred and disgust. At this moment, he thought, it was closer to disgust.

The session started and ended as expected.

Joseph stood to leave when the high priest called for everybody's attention. Joseph continued toward the exit because his comments were unofficial, often meaningless, and a waste of his time, but he stopped when he heard the words, "I want to bring to your attention a troubling matter."

Joseph cringed and slipped back into his seat.

Caiaphas faced the half-full assembly seated in a semicircle, "I've heard rumors of a man preaching near the Jordan, baptizing people, and in the process, disparaging our great name and reputation."

Members turned to one another; a murmur swept over the assembly.

"I sent some representatives to check on the situation and report to me." He paused. "They tell me that he pointed to them, my representatives, and called them a nest of snakes, most disrespectful since it was a snake that deceived Eve. They also tell me that he made sure the entire crowd heard what he said about them. He is trying to create a following for himself and leading the people to reject our righteous leadership and authority."

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“He presumed they would defend themselves as the Sons of Abraham and he was correct. But he said that God, if he chose, could raise up Children of Abraham from the stones. He also announced that an ax had been put to the root of the trees. I assume he meant his preaching was the ax and we are the trees.”

Someone in the assembly yelled, “Who does he think he is?”

“I’m not sure, but it seems he doesn’t like our Jewish leadership and his mission is to destroy us as an axman destroys a tree.”

“He’s insane,” someone yelled out, “I put no stock in what he says.”

“He’s crazy like a fox,” the high priest said. “No one in my memory has overtly attacked us with such cutting rhetoric. We all know we have our enemies, but for fear of a rod to their backs, they have the decency to keep their mouths shut or speak behind closed doors. He is saying what they would say if they had the courage. That’s why they flock to him.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” someone yelled. “Let’s call him before this council and interrogate him.”

Caiaphas frowned. “He indicated that someone is coming after him who will be stronger than he, and when he comes, he will act in judgment against us. If that happens, he will be the one we have to deal with.”

“Does he call that person the Messiah?”

“Not exactly,” the high priest said.

“Does he claim to be the Messiah?”

The high priest rubbed his face and coughed. “He said he is not.” He motioned for a person to come forward. “Let me ask Saul of Tarsus to answer that question. He has checked the situation out on his own. He can give you a more comprehensive report.”

Joseph knew of Saul. Everyone in the Sanhedrin knew him or of him. Although not officially a member, he was a young apprentice of the Sanhedrin and outstanding because he was a prodigy of Gamaliel. He made a striking appearance, tall, and slender, with black hair, a short trimmed beard, and a sharp tongue.

Westbrook

Saul stood next to the high priest, “The man’s name is John, the son of Zacharias. He grew up in Jerusalem and was destined to follow his father as a priest in the Temple, but for some unknown reason, he left and lived in the wilderness. We think he is an ascetic and may be associated with the Essenes. He subsists mostly on wild honey and locust and wears clothing made of camel hair. Recently, he appeared near the Jordan preaching that people should repent of their sins and submit to his baptism as a sign of their repentance. He calls upon everyone to repent, publicans, priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, soldiers, and common people. The strange thing to me is that people step forward and receive his baptism. It is an amazing thing to observe.” Saul spoke louder and increased the pace of his speaking. “They come by the hundreds. He kept talking about the person he is preparing for, a prophet, a preacher, someone much more important than he. The day we left, he pointed to a man and yelled,” Saul raised his voice. “Look, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.”

A hush filled the Hall of Hewn Stones.

“What did he mean?” someone shouted.

Someone else yelled, “Who was he?”

“Please, I can address only one question at a time,” Saul paused. “We were able to learn that the man’s name is Jesus of Nazareth. That’s about all we know.”

Someone stood and said, “What did he mean by calling Jesus *The Lamb of God*? I’ve never heard that expression applied to a man.”

“No one in Israel has ever heard that title given to a man, but he obviously intended messianic implications.”

Caiaphas stepped forward. “I know you have many more questions. We can’t answer all of them; I simply wanted to make you aware of this concerning development. I also wanted you to know the facts before rumors flood the city; you may hear things that are not true. I assure you we will continue to investigate this matter and report to you. I urge you to allow me to be the official spokesperson for the Sanhedrin. Because of my position, I can learn and verify information better than you can. I will consider any member out of order if I learn that you are speaking things I have not approved. If anyone disobeys this order, there will be serious consequences.”

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Joseph of Arimathea

The discussion that followed the Sanhedrin meeting was so interesting that Joseph was one of the last to leave the Hall of Hewn Stones. He walked slowly through the narrow streets to his home. He knew Naomi would be waiting for him and the evening meal would be prepared. As much as he wanted to think about his wife and the food, his mind kept drifting to the story of John, son of Zacharias. Could it be that the Messiah was in their midst? The Messiah should come through the priesthood or from a prominent family, not from Nazareth. This Jesus that no one had heard of, how could it be? No one in the entire Sanhedrin took the claim with any seriousness whatsoever. But that begged the question, what was going on with John that attracted so many people?

He turned from considering the possibility that the Messiah was among them to think about the changes that would be coming if it were true. There would be no need for a Sanhedrin; the Messiah would judge everything with perfection and set everything right. The Romans' occupation would end, and Jerusalem would become the capital of the entire world. Peace would reign. All peoples of the earth would come to Jerusalem to worship. Maybe there would be business opportunities beyond his ability to imagine. In accordance with his family pact, he wanted to be prepared to assist the Messiah if he needed it and to provide for his needs from his wealth. If it were true, his life would be in for many changes, he thought, good changes.

Whether true or not, his goal would be to learn all he could about this John, son of Zacharias, and Jesus of Nazareth. If God had chosen this time to send His Messiah, he had to know, whatever the cost. He felt the grip this man had on him, a grip like a lion that would not let loose.

Chapter 6

Caleb, a tax collector, sat on a cushion and stared at Joseph over a small table in his Jerusalem home. From the introduction, Joseph knew he was a Jew by heritage but thought of him as a traitor, a contemptible Son of Abraham, and a collaborator. I have no choice, he reminded himself, taxes are due. If I refuse, Pilate will take possession of my property without appeal.

Joseph squirmed. “Where do you live?”

Caleb frowned. “Is that important?”

“It’s just that I don’t recognize you.”

“I’m from Tyre.”

Joseph tilted his head. “You’ve come a long way,” Joseph slowed his words, “just to inform me of my obligations to the Roman Empire.”

Caleb smiled. “I work at the direction of the governor. I have no choice in where I go.”

“There was a different tax collector last year,” Joseph said. “Why the change?”

Caleb took a deep breath. “When possible, the Romans have decided that it’s best to import tax collectors from another province because they are apt to be more objective. They believe the less connected to the local citizenry the more objective the tax collector will be. They want to avoid collusion and favorable treatment based on existing relationships.”

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Joseph smiled. “I can assure you that the previous tax collectors gave me no preferential treatment.”

“I don’t know if they suspect that about you or not,” Caleb said. “I understand your concern. It is a prickly business. Family relationships in Judah can be very complex and extended. I think the Romans just wanted to eliminate as much potential for corruption as possible by bringing in people who may be more objective. They also plan to rotate us every few years. For the Romans, it’s just a more reliable process.”

Joseph squirmed on his cushion. “Could I ask you a personal question?”

Caleb shrugged.

“What made you stoop to the level of collecting taxes for the occupiers?”

Joseph noticed Caleb’s jaw muscles tighten. “It’s simple—reality. The Romans govern our country. I don’t see myself as a collaborator. I’m doing my country a favor.”

Joseph cringed. “How so?”

“Would you rather deal with a Roman tax collector? At least I understand your feelings and can appreciate your anger.”

Joseph felt his anger ignite. “That’s supposed to help?”

“If you expressed anger to a Roman, it could result in a violent conflict and an increase in taxes. You can vent on me and I have no power to punish you. I can sympathize with you.”

Joseph smiled. “You’ve dealt with this question before.”

“Daily. I’d be disappointed if you didn’t object. However, the Romans have done some good things for Judah. I know you, as well as I, hate their religious beliefs and detest that they have no regard for the traditions of Judaism. I understand that, but they have improved roads and built aqueducts and cities while maintaining peace and a business climate where commerce can flourish. They also do not interfere with the Jewish faith but give us complete freedom to worship God in our own way.”

Joseph frowned. “I grant that to be true, but this land does not belong to them. It is a holy land given to the Jews by God. They cannot change that, it is eternal. They don’t belong here. They have no right to rule over us.”

Westbrook

“Although they don’t have the right, they have the power to control and we either revolt or submit to their power. A revolt seems out of the question to me and most Jews. I’ve just accepted the reality of the situation.”

“One of these days...”

“I know, one of these days the Messiah is coming.”

Joseph stroked his beard. “So, you don’t believe in the Messiah?”

Caleb shrugged.

“Enough of this talk,” Joseph said, “let’s get to the point.”

Caleb took a parchment from his pack and unrolled it to a particular place.

“Let me review your holdings to see if anything has changed since last year.”

Joseph knew he had no choice so he waved his hand in agreement.

“It seems like you are wealthy,” Caleb said.

“Wealth is relative and temporary. It can change without a moment’s notice.

Proverbs says *take a quick **glance at riches, and they are gone; they sprout wings and fly off like an eagle.***”

“You still own the estate just outside of Jerusalem?”

Joseph nodded.

“And you produce two thousand or more sheep each year?”

Joseph nodded.

“Your farm produces wool, goats, olive oil, iron farm implements, pottery, figs, barley, and wheat. You also have about one hundred permanent tenants.”

“That’s about right,” Joseph said.

“You are from Arimathea. Isn’t that correct?”

Joseph squinted. “Yes.”

“I wonder why no one has ever listed your estate in Arimathea on your tax roll.”

Joseph felt a spasm in his gut. “I’ve never been asked about it.”

“I checked and found that your ancestral home is still under your ownership.”

Joseph stared at him.

Caleb smiled. “It is large, but not and productive like the one here.”

“I suppose it’s never been listed because it never makes a profit. It is a break-even enterprise.”

“If that is the case, why don’t you sell it?”

Joseph of Arimathea

“A business not making a profit—who would want it? In any case, your job is not to tell me how to run my affairs but to assess taxes.” Joseph clinched his teeth so hard he feared breaking a tooth.

“Are there any other businesses I should know about?”

Joseph breathed. “You may know that I do business with the Temple. I sell sheep to pilgrims who offer them for sacrifice. I also have a number of people who run a money exchange for the same pilgrims because the Roman coinage is not accepted for the Temple tax.”

“I knew about that. It’s on the list. Thanks for being honest.”

“And, since you are from Tyre, you also may know that I own a couple of trading ships based there that carry freight across the sea.”

“That too is on my list.”

Joseph exhaled. “That’s it?” He paused. “I had thought about buying another ship, but with the increase of taxes on the Arimathean estate, I suppose that will have to wait.”

“Give me a moment to make a few calculations,” Caleb said.

Joseph nodded.

Caleb took a few moments and wrote a few things on the parchment roll. He held it so Joseph could see it.

Joseph could not withhold his smile.

“I thought you might like that.”

“It’s less than last year.” Joseph stroked his beard. “How did you come up with that since the Arimathean estate was added to the tax roll?”

“You were overcharged last year. The tax collector put a lot of money in his own pocket.”

“He was a thief?”

“Not really,” Caleb paused, “Rome allows us to add a margin for our fee and doesn’t ask questions about it; many take advantage. To be honest, my fee is also part of the charge.”

“Can you tell me why you didn’t take advantage of me?”

Westbrook

Caleb put his parchment away. “On my way to Judah from Tyre, I came by way of a road through the Jordan River valley, and I encountered a very unusual man, a preacher.”

“John?”

“Yes,” Caleb smiled, “you know of him?”

“I know a few things about him.”

“He preaches with fire in his eyes,” Caleb said with excitement in his voice. “I’ve never heard such passion, such drive, such urgency and demand that people repent and prepare for the coming of the Promised One.”

Joseph’s eyes widened. Maybe he does believe....

“At first, we thought he might be the Messiah; but he denied that he was. He’s only preparing the way for him. I was so impressed I spent two days listening to him. He called for people to repent of their sin and to submit to his baptism. I was not the only tax collector there. We asked him about our trade. He told us not to demand more tax than was appropriate. Those two days changed my life. I can still feel his spirit walking with me. It was amazing.”

Joseph couldn’t think of anything to say.

“So, I’m being obedient to the commitment I made on that day. I will never charge anyone more than what is due and my fee will be reasonable and proper.”

Joseph stood and walked out of the room for a few moments and returned with a leather bag filled with coinage and handed it to Caleb. “It’s all there.”

“Thank you,” Caleb said.

“I am the one to thank you for your honesty and fairness,” Joseph said.

They stood and bowed to one another and Caleb left.

Joseph felt stunned. This John, this wilderness preacher, has more effect on people by his preaching and baptism than all the beatings handed out by the Sanhedrin. What am I missing here? Could John be right? Is this Jesus of Nazareth the promised Messiah? I am more eager than ever to find the truth about this mystery man.

Chapter 7

It was late, but Joseph hoped Naomi had not gone to sleep. He crept up the steps to the second story in their Jerusalem home and into the bedroom. The oil lamp mounted on the wall cast a yellow glow across the room and Joseph saw that Naomi was asleep on the fleece mat. He removed his outer tunic and eased himself beside her. He wanted to touch her but was reluctant to wake her.

She turned. “You are late to bed again. Your work is too important to you. You need your rest.”

“Yes, yes, dear. I know.”

“Had you come at the regular time, we both would be sound asleep by now.”

“Sorry.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, but if you are not too sleepy, we could have a serious conversation.”

Naomi took a deep breath. “You know I’m sleepy, but when you put it that way, you also know I can’t go to sleep until I hear what you have to say,” She sighed. “So, let’s have it.”

“What do you mean? *Let’s have it.*”

“Every time you have used the phrase *have a serious conversation*, it was serious stuff. I hate that expression. You know I’ll never get to sleep worrying about what’s on your mind. So, out with it so we both can go to sleep.”

Westbrook

Joseph leaned on his elbow so she could face him and took a deep breath. “You remember that I spoke to Pontius Pilate and asked him to release the body of Benjamin so his father could bury him?”

Naomi rolled to face him. “Of course, I remember, just a few weeks ago. Your tenants think of you as a king. They are proud that you stood up to Pilate.”

“But it did not set well with Caiaphas.”

She frowned. “Oh. Why was that?”

“He accused me of breaking traditions by not getting his permission before I spoke to Pilate.”

She rolled to her back. “I’ve never heard of such a tradition.”

“I don’t think there is one, except in his head.”

“There’s nothing he can do about it; it’s a minor matter. Right?”

Joseph cleared his throat. “He threatened to have the Sanhedrin ban us if it happened again.”

Naomi sat up. “He wouldn’t do that. He couldn’t do that.”

“He made the threat that if I ever went to Pilate again without getting his permission, he would.”

“So, all you have to do is avoid meeting with Pilate or get Caiaphas’s permission.”

Joseph sat up and looked away. “It’s a little more complicated.”

“Oh...that’s not what I wanted to hear.”

He cleared his throat. “I had to pay a price to get Benjamin’s body released.”

“That’s done and over with. How could that complicate matters?”

“Pilate didn’t want money,” Joseph paused. “He wanted me to meet with him about three times a year and inform him of what the Sanhedrin was doing or thinking.”

Naomi said with a raised voice, “And you agreed...to be a spy?”

“Yes,” He was silent for a moment. “I’m afraid I did.”

There was a tremble in her voice, “How could you do such a thing? I’m surprised.”

“You are not surprised, you are disappointed.” Joseph sighed. “I understand that; I’m disappointed in myself. I hate to live in fear of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin.”

Joseph of Arimathea

Naomi lay back on the fleece. “It’s not just you to think about, it’s our status in the community, our children, our welfare, and our properties. With a simple act, he could destroy our lives.”

Joseph lay down and looked straight up. “You don’t have to tell me. I know what a ban means.”

“So, are you going through with it?”

Joseph paused. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I said I would. I made a deal with him and I always keep my end of a deal even if it costs me.”

Naomi shook her head. “You are stubborn beyond belief.”

Joseph thought a minute. “If I broke the deal, Pilate wouldn’t have to keep his end of the bargain either. He could tell Caiaphas and the result would be the same or worse.”

Naomi sounded angry. “I wish you had not told me about this sordid mess.”

“Darling, I promised to keep you informed about everything in my life. I need your support and understanding. There’s no one else I can tell.”

“Thank you...I think.”

Joseph cleared his throat. “I expect you to keep this secret as well—even from the children.”

“Is there anything else?”

Joseph turned toward her. “There is one other thing I need to inform you about.”

Naomi shook her head but did not respond.

“It’s all good...I think.”

“I’m listening.”

“Recently in the Sanhedrin, Caiaphas announced....”

“Hush, the proceedings of the court are confidential.”

Joseph waved his hand in the air. “This was just an announcement...no action was taken. It’s not confidential information.”

“Can you make it quick? I need my sleep, if I can manage it.”

“It’s about the Messiah.”

Westbrook

Naomi sat up and turned toward Joseph. “Messiah?”

Joseph rolled to his elbow. “There’s a preacher, John, son of Zacharias, in the upper part of the Jordan that is preaching and calling people to repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.”

“How do you know this?”

Joseph frowned. “Caiaphas spoke to the Sanhedrin. He has taken issue with John’s criticism of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

“Does he claim to be the Messiah?”

“No,” Joseph said. “But he pointed to a man, Jesus of Nazareth, and called him ‘The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.’”

“So, what does that mean?”

Joseph shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t know. No one seems to have a clue. It’s the first time anyone can recall that title applied to a man. It must be his way of declaring this Jesus to be the Messiah.”

“It all seems strange to me.”

“Hundreds, maybe thousands, of people are following this baptizing preacher, even our tax collector became one of his converts and received his baptism.” Joseph smiled. “By the way, our taxes went down. He told me it was because of his encounter with the preacher.”

Naomi laughed. “Now that’s amazing. You think there might be something to this regarding the Messiah?”

“I’m not sure.” Joseph’s voice filled with vigor. “But what if Jesus is the Messiah, alive in our time? If it is true, how blessed we would be. Our whole world would be changed, and I want to be a part of it.”

“He’s just another crazy eccentric, and it will come to nothing.” Naomi paused and took a deep breath. “But if true, it could mean war and horrific suffering; the Romans will never leave without a fight.”

Joseph said, “War or not, the Messiah would be the best thing that could ever happen for the entire world and us.”

“No one wants war. Our sons may have to fight. Our estate would be attacked because we could provide the Zealots with food and support.”

“War would also offer us business opportunities. We could help the Messiah in amazing ways.”

Joseph of Arimathea

“Good night Joseph. I hope you sleep well. I doubt if I can get to sleep after this *serious conversation*.”

“I’ve got to learn more about Jesus of Nazareth.”

Joseph lay down and sensed the movements of Naomi next to him. He knew she would not sleep well, nor would he, but for different reasons. Naomi is frightened at the possibility, he thought; I’m exhilarated. Nothing in all the world including all of my properties and wealth can bring me such joy—but only if it’s true.

Chapter 8

Joseph's preparation for Passover was over. It had always gone well, but changes in personnel made it necessary to double-check things each year. Transporting, feeding, and watering 1000 sheep demanded detailed planning. The distribution, safety, accounting, and exchange of a huge sum of money were always troublesome. He had checked and double-checked; people were counting on him; he could leave nothing to chance. People were in place and trained to handle everything. He relaxed, smiled, and decided to enjoy the balmy trouble-free day in Jerusalem before the crowd clogged the streets. He was confident that, as far as his part was concerned, Passover week operations would go smoothly.

Two days later Enoch burst into his father's workroom and yelled, "You won't believe what just happened at the Temple."

Joseph laid his parchments aside and nodded for Enoch to take a seat.

"Peace be to you," Enoch managed to say after catching his breath.

Joseph of Arimathea

“And to you,” Joseph said. “And what’s so important that causes you to interrupt me during such an otherwise pleasant and beautiful Passover festival?”

“Someone with a whip in hand just chased the animals around the Temple outer court and turned over the tables of the money changers. People were scurrying all over trying to find a place to escape the melee. Money changers were on their hands and knees fighting over the money that had mingled together.” Enoch took a breath. “It was chaotic.”

Joseph raised his voice. “Who would do such a shameful thing?”

“The name I heard called was Jesus of Nazareth.”

This can’t be, Joseph thought. “Did I hear you correctly, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Enoch nodded.

Joseph shook his head and lowered his voice. “Why? Did he offer any explanation?”

“I was told that he said that the Temple was to be a house of prayer and you have made it a den of thieves.”

Joseph stroked his beard.

“So, he doesn’t like business taking place in the Temple area.”

Enoch shrugged.

Joseph’s face tightened. “Where were the Temple guards? Why didn’t they arrest him? He has no authority in the Temple.”

“I didn’t see any guards.”

“Did you see anything else?”

“He went over toward the outer wall where a large number of people were waiting and he started teaching them about the scripture and saying strange things.”

“What kind of strange things?”

Westbrook

“I didn’t hear what he said; I was told that he was saying strange things.”

Joseph stroked his beard and shook his head. In the name of all that’s holy, he thought, what is going on? How can he be the Messiah if he doesn’t understand the simplest of things going on at Passover? These can’t be the acts of the Messiah. The real Messiah would be on my side and this man, Jesus, is trying to pick a fight with me. He felt an ache in his stomach.

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Two days after a summons from Pontius Pilate Joseph sat in a Roman-style chair across a Roman-style table from the governor. Joseph wondered why he had made such a stupid agreement and he prayed that Caiaphas would not find out about it. Joseph noticed that Pilate had gnawed his fingernails to the quick; strange, I don’t know anyone who does that.

“So, why did you decide to trust me?” Joseph said.

Pilate rubbed his bald head. “You have a sophisticated understanding and courage that Caiaphas is lacking. When you reminded me that I have at least two constituents I needed to satisfy, I recognized you as someone inside the Jewish community who was insightful, but most of all honest; I knew you could help me. My job is difficult enough as it is, but if I can gain insight into the Jewish mind, I might make fewer mistakes.”

Joseph leaned forward. “So, what is your first concern?”

“How can I make the Jews like me?”

“I don’t think they can be made to like you. And I don’t think the Jews will ever accept Roman rule as right, just, and final.”

Joseph of Arimathea

Pilate put a finger in his mouth as if to bite on a nail then took it out. “So, it’s hopeless. Are you saying that I shouldn’t try to build better relations?”

“No. I’m saying any attempts at helping us find more justice, economic advance, and friendly relations will make life easier and less threatening for all.”

Pilate leaned back in his chair. “So, tell me about this Jesus of Nazareth who created such a disruption in the Temple. I’ve heard rumors that some think he may be your long-awaited Messiah. What is the Sanhedrin’s position on this Jesus?”

Joseph stroked his beard. “I’m surprised that you are concerned about that.”

“Any disruption in Jerusalem at the Passover concerns me. I can’t afford for a full-fledged riot to break out. Rome likes peace and tranquility.”

Joseph frowned. “I thought that he might be the Messiah.”

“You *hoped* he was the Messiah,” Pilate grinned, “am I right?”

“Hope for the Messiah never dies in the Jewish heart.” Joseph tilted his head. “In any case, I’m convinced at the moment that if he claimed to be the Messiah, he’s a fraud.”

Pilate leaned back, spread his fingers, and placed their tips together across his belly. “Tell me, what does the Sanhedrin think about this man?”

“Let me give you a little history.”

Pilate held his palm out toward Joseph.

“The Sanhedrin heard the same rumors you heard and started a small investigation. They commissioned a group to question John, the son of Zacharias, who, in his preaching, hinted that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.”

Pilate pursed his lips. “So, what have they concluded about Jesus?”

Westbrook

Joseph hesitated. “Caiaphas has already declared John and Jesus to be enemies of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish faith, and traditions.”

“So,” Pilate smiled, “what did John do to raise the ire of Caiaphas?”

Joseph squirmed in the hard, Roman chair. “John and Jesus are both very critical of the Jewish leaders. John called us a brood of vipers.”

Pilate leaned forward. “Picking a fight with the Sanhedrin, it seems to me, would not make sense for someone wanting to be recognized as your Messiah. Am I right about that?”

Joseph nodded. “Yes, that seems so to me.”

“So, has this Jesus declared himself to be the Messiah?”

“No, but he hasn’t denied the claims of John either.”

Pilate leaned his head back and looked up. “If Jesus did declare himself to be the Messiah, what actions would you expect him to take?”

“I’m not sure,” Joseph said. “He might start speaking against the Roman government to create an uprising. He might solicit large sums of money and enlist people with organizational ability and aptitude for governing. But you would know more about these things than I would.”

Pilate glared at Joseph. “It seems to me that you would make an ideal disciple considering your wealth, prominence, and aptitude for organization and business.”

Joseph frowned. “From what I see so far, I would not be interested.”

Still staring at Joseph, Pilate said, “If I were to ask you, would you tell me?”

“Judging from what happened in the Temple with the cattle and money changers, I don’t think he likes me.”

Joseph of Arimathea

Pilate leaned back and smiled. “Did you have a financial interest in those proceedings?”

“Considerable,” Joseph said, “and, at the moment, I don’t like him. I think he’s a fraud.”

A servant entered the room and offered wine to Pilate and to Joseph.

Pilate accepted but Joseph waved him off and the servant left the room.

“You won’t drink wine with me?”

“I don’t mean to offend, but I’m abstaining today.”

“Let me ask you another question.”

“Before that, I’d like to ask you a question.”

“You are here to serve me, I’m not here to serve you,” Pilate snapped. “But, for the sake of **camaraderie**, I’ll allow one question.”

“How was your decision to release the body of the Zealot to me received by your soldiers?”

“It makes no difference. No one can challenge what I say, but I realize, as you would say, ‘I have constituents.’ I need my top leadership to be happy.”

“So?”

“I had some explaining to do. I also handed out a few favors that only I can give out.”

“And...”

“They felt better about it.”

Joseph nodded.

“Back to my question, if someone came along who impressed you as the real Messiah, would you support him?”

Joseph twisted in his chair. “Do I have to answer that?”

“I think I know the answer.”

Westbrook

Joseph leaned forward. “Ninety-nine percent of the population would support the real Messiah and I’m no different.”

Pilate poked his finger toward Joseph. “But your support could be much more substantial.”

Joseph nodded and scrunched his face. “Are you trying to get at something in particular?”

Pilate leaned back. “You have horses on your estate. Correct?”

“Yes, a few.”

Pilate smiled. “Horses would be considered important by any military commander.”

Joseph said, “And I have a metalworking shop that makes agricultural implements. It could be used for making weapons if talented people with the right skills could be found.” Wow, Joseph thought, I should not have mentioned that.

Pilate frowned. “So, are your workmen that talented?”

“I’m afraid not,” Joseph said and took a deep breath. He pondered the wisdom of revealing information about the Damascus artisan and silently prayed for direction. His heart pounded. This smells like a trap. I’ve got to be honest here but not give anything away. All could be lost. “I did have an artisan employed for a brief while to instruct my workers on how to make Damascus steel. I wanted them to learn how to make the cutting edges of wool shears last longer between sharpening. The same skills would apply to all implements we make. But he wanted to make weapons; I didn’t. He left of his own accord after a short time with us. My workmen tried but failed to duplicate his work.”

Pilate leaned back and smirked. “I appreciate you telling me that.” He rubbed his bald head. “But I was already aware of that.”

Joseph of Arimathea

Joseph's face twitched. "How did you know?"

He smiled. "The artisan you spoke of was captured at a metal foundry in the mountains a few days ago; under questioning he told us that you brought him to Israel. He wasn't impressed with your workmen's skill level. And, yes, he was interested in making weapons. I hope you understand that we cannot allow the skill of making high-quality weapons to exist in Judea"

Joseph clenched his teeth. "What did you do with him?"

"He is on a ship bound for Rome, a government slave." Pilate laughed. "He will be making weapons for sure—for us—for the rest of his life. By the way, he was from India. They have advanced knowledge of metals.

"My commanders wanted to raid your estate and destroy all of your metalworking equipment and arrest your workmen. They are set and waiting now for my order to launch the attack. Since you volunteered the information, the raid will not take place. I trust you. An enemy wishing us ill would not have been so forthcoming."

Joseph took a deep breath. "You don't have anything to worry about from me or my estate."

"And you can assure me that I don't have anything to worry about from Jesus of Nazareth?"

"I'm sure that is the case."

But Pilate locked onto the eyes of Joseph for an embarrassingly long time. "You have been on a watch list since I granted the release of the body of the Zealot to you."

Joseph cringed on the inside and hoped Pilate couldn't detect that. "What, does that mean?"

"You know how a cat watches a hole in the wall when a mouse runs into it?"

Joseph nodded.

Westbrook

“That’s the way my men are watching you and your estate.”

“I suppose they can relax a little now.” Joseph smiled.

“I can order that, but once a suspicion is in their minds, it never leaves.”

“I can understand that.”

Pilate leaned his elbow on the arm of his chair. “By the way, let me know if the Sanhedrin changes their opinion about Jesus. If they decide to support him, I want to know immediately, even if I’m not in Jerusalem.”

“I will do that,” Joseph said.

Pilate said, “Can you assure me that no one knows about our meetings other than you?”

“I’ve told my wife, but she will keep it confidential.”

Pilate frowned. “That seems stupid to me, why did you do that?”

“I promised her when we married that I’d tell her everything that I did that might affect her in any way.”

Pilate tilted his head. “I never tell my wife anything; I don’t trust her.”

Joseph cleared his throat. “I’m concerned about your people who know that I’m meeting with you. How can you be sure that they won’t let the word out? If Caiaphas finds out that I’m meeting with you, he will destroy me.”

“I’ve made every servant of mine who might have an opportunity to know about us swear upon penalty of death not to tell anyone.”

“That’s drastic. I hope it works.”

“Let me assure you it will work,” Pilate grinned, “it always has.”