The plume of smoke rising from the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem obscured the stars and moon as Rachel Sachar and her younger brother, Yacov, returned to Grandfather’s grave.

There were no tears left to cry. In silence the mourners stood in the garden of the Russian compound outside the ancient walls.

Rachel slid her arm around Yacov’s frail shoulders. Together they recited kaddish. Rachel raised her eyes as the bloodred moon broke through the fumes for an instant and then vanished. It was, she thought, like Warsaw had been during the last days in the Ghetto. Burials had been conducted clandestinely at night because it was against Nazi edicts for anyone to gather together openly.

The Third Reich had surrendered less than three years earlier, and yet Jews in the newly reborn nation of Israel were still burying their dead under cover of darkness.

Savage armies still surrounded the Jewish people, and Arab leaders vowed openly to the world, “We will finish what Hitler began... We will drive the Jews into the sea!”

Would the hatred against the children of Israel never end?

Tonight the red-haired British major, Luke Thomas, warned Jewish civilian refugees in the compound, “Funerals after dark, please. No use risking more killed.”

From across the blacked-out buildings of No Man’s Land came the strident cry of a fighter for the Islamic Jihad, “Allah Akhbar! There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet!”

It was a strange irony, Rachel thought as she heard it, that this declaration, the foundation of Islam, mocked and taunted the ears of Jewish survivors. In the Arabic language Allah was the name of the god of Islam. But when spoken in Hebrew it meant something entirely different. In the writings of Torah the Hebrew word spelled, alef, lamed, heh was also pronounced allah, but it meant, “to curse, to lie, to lament!”
Indeed a terrible lament followed the rabbis, Yeshiva students, women, and children as they fled from their ancestral home in the shadow of the Western Wall.

Arab snipers bloomed thick and fierce on the Old City parapets now that the Jewish population had been driven out. There were no Haganah defenders left to prevent the Jihad Moudades from firing down at will upon civilians in Jewish-held West Jerusalem.

Though mere hours had passed since that tragic defeat, it had dawned upon the people that perhaps they would never again walk the streets of Jerusalem as their ancestors had done. The newest conquerors—men from Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Jordan—declared to their people that Jewish exile from the holy place of El Kuds was permanent and irrevocable.

The grief at this realization was as tangible as death.

Ten-year-old Yacov shuddered and reached up to clasp Rachel's hand.

Rachel's blue eyes clouded as she thought of her father and mother in Poland. She remembered her father standing before his congregation on that last Passover before the fall of Warsaw. What words had he offered to give them courage and hope?

She cleared her throat and began haltingly, "I know what Grandfather would want me to say. Not about him only but for him... So many now... dying all around us for the sake of HaShem. For Eretz-Israel. For the promise and the hope our people have clung to for generations."

She bit her lip and thought of her husband, Moshe, far beneath the mount where the Great Temple of the Lord had once stood. When would she see Moshe again? When would the people of Israel once more stand before the Western Wall and offer their praise to the Almighty? "I won't use my own words. But my father and grandfather—indeed, every Jew I knew as a child growing up—had a saying that gave us hope, even in the darkest time. They died with this hope on their lips." She proclaimed in Hebrew, "Ha lahma anya. . . . This year we are slaves! Next year we will be free! This year we are here... next year, in Jerusalem!"

What day was it? Moshe Sachar wondered as he replaced the scroll in its alabaster container. How long had he and Alfie Halder been beneath the Temple Mount, hidden away in the sacred archives of Israel?

Moshe's watch had long since stopped. He and his companion slept

and awakened, ate from the vast storehouse, bathed in the mikveh, sang, prayed, and remembered the world they had left behind at Grandfather Lebowitz's urging. They studied beneath the arch of the glowing universe painted on the stones of the chamber.

All that and yet they could not tell if it was daylight or dark. And now Moshe was no longer sure of the day or the hour. Was Rachel well? Was Israel still in existence? Who ruled in Jerusalem?

When Rabbi Lebowitz had first showed Moshe the secret tunnels beneath the Temple Mount, he had commanded that Moshe, a former professor turned Haganah defender, must learn to tell the time if he was to survive as guardian of the precious archives. Moshe had failed as a timekeeper.

Alfie, childlike in his acceptance and contentment with the present, declared there was no time here.

Did he mean there was no time left?

Or that time was running out for mankind?

Or had they stepped into the eternal now, which had neither past nor future?

None of that was made clear in the sheaf of instructions the old rabbi had left for Moshe about this cavern.

Inscribed beside the next scroll listed in the order of Moshe's reading was this comment from Grandfather Lebowitz:

Moshe, though you think you know Torah and Tanakh well enough, keep the sacred writings by you as reference so you will better comprehend what is to follow. From before the foundations of the world the order of all things was established. Stay on the path to wisdom. Remember, as you read, that everything means something. In all Scripture not one letter or number is without great significance. Take nothing for granted. Every phrase is a link between heaven and earth. Not one word is misplaced by the Ruach HaKodesh. Every secret is revealed within. Keep the five books of Moses and the writings of the prophets close at hand as you continue your study. Then pray you have years in which to read and delight in the wonder of revelation!

Years?

Moshe longed to see Rachel, to hold her once again. He vowed he would not think about life without her or their children growing up without him.
There was much to accomplish. The reference material was retrieved from the shelves and laid out as the old man suggested. Alfie carried the large jug that contained the third scroll to Moshe at the long reading table. It was a simple clay jar, of the sort used to draw water from a well.

"I'm ready," Alfie sat on the bench and clasped his hands eagerly like a schoolboy.

As was his custom, Moshe examined it carefully before opening the seal. On the neck were the Hebrew words THE LAMB OF MIGDAL EDER. Impressed in the clay was a symbol like a shepherd's crook.

"All right, then," Moshe said, making notes about the age of the jug and details of its label. "Scroll three. That will leave us with sixty-seven yet to read in the first course of study. And seven thousand more, give or take, after that."

"Then hurry," Alfie urged him.

"Well, well," Moshe teased him. "Do I detect impatience in the man who says there is no time in this place?"

"That's right. No time." Alfie reached out to touch the container. "Read. There's things I never knew. And I want to know ... everything!"

"Well, then. Maybe so," Moshe felt a rush of excitement as he carefully cut away the wax seal and removed the plug. Laying the jug on its side, he reached in and touched something soft wrapped around the tightly rolled scroll. He pulled it out. "Sheep fleece. Just a scrap."

"Like a baby's cap almost," Alfie whispered. "Look here. Tied with leather laces."

"An odd memento."

Moshe passed it to Alfie, who rubbed it against his cheek. The big man closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "No time at all. We better get it right." And then, "Look there! Stars!"

Moshe involuntarily raised his eyes to the ceiling ... to the sky painted on the dome. For an instant he thought he saw the glint of a shooting star. Imagination, he inwardly chided. And yet ... . "Yes. Yes! We'd better get it right." Moshe carefully unrolled the first leaf of the document and began to read. . . .

The Sea of Galilee spread out beneath them that spring night late in the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius.

The night was deep, the moon not yet risen. Yet the darkness had no power to frighten the three boys. At least not while they were in the presence of Yeshua of Nazareth.

It was a time of rapidly multiplying wonders, those moments just after Avel's broken heart was mended, Ha-or Tov's eyes were opened, and Emet's ears unblocked.

Yeshua's smile was quick and approving. The Master's care had even extended to the creature who had been the boys' mascot and boon companion. Yeshua had restored to life the feathered carcass of Yediyd . . . their Beloved Friend . . . though Yediyd was merely a common brown sparrow. The tiny bird, lifted on the warm wind of affection, had soared away into the freedom of his new life.

And Emet heard the beat of Yediyd's wings!

The nearly five-year-old orphan had been deaf since birth, yet he heard the crackle of the thorny acacia branch Yeshua tossed into the campfire.

More . . .

Emet noted the rustle of a bat's leathery wings and heard its high-pitched squeak, sounds so tenuous they weren't even remarked by Avel or Ha-or Tov. Yet Emet heard them!

Yeshua caught his eye. The Rabbi nodded, understanding and commending Emet's admiration of the whole startling world of sounds.

The Rabbi fed them broiled fish and fresh loaves of barley bread slathered thick with butter. It was a friendly gesture for which they, each cocooned in a different form of wonder, did not properly thank him.

Emet listened to the imperceptibly sighing wind as it stirred into rustling melody the recently budded leaves of a hilltop terebinth tree.
And he observed that Yeshua, finished with his meal, studied his students by the light of the campfire.

Most particularly, Yeshua seemed to notice the matching clothes they wore. The material was cut from one cloak, striped red and green and tan. This was the uniform of the Company of the Sparrows. Eight-year-old Avel had lately been a link boy bearing torches in Jerusalem. Ten-year-old Ha-or Tov had lived as a blind beggar at a rich man’s gate in Bethany. Emet had been of no use to anyone. He had left Jerusalem with Avel because there was no place else to go.

The cloak they had divided among themselves was formerly the property of the martyred prophet Yochanan the Baptist.

Yeshua’s cousin.

Though uttered on a sigh no louder than the faint breeze, Emet thought he heard Yeshua murmur, “Yochanan. Friend. You were the voice crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord. You knew well the kingdom will be made up of little ones such as these. Hearts that trust completely. Yes.” The Master touched the corner of the fabric on the hem of Emet’s robe.

Yeshua’s eyes were so kind, and yet so sad. Had he spoken aloud or had Emet simply overheard his thoughts?

After a time of silence, Avel licked his fingers and finally spoke.

Emet knew Avel’s question wasn’t meant to challenge Yeshua. No. It was asked only out of curiosity.

Avel had been listening to what went on in the Galil before that night. The confrontations, the anger of learned men against Yeshua, Yeshua’s calm and deliberate replies.

And so Avel asked Yeshua: “You told the rabbis if they believed what Moses wrote, they would believe you because Moses wrote about you. Did you mean you, yourself, are written about in Torah? But how can that be? Since Moses lived very long ago? How could Moses have written about you?”

Yeshua smiled kindly at Avel. It was the sort of smile that told him he must be patient; the answer would take much unraveling. Then Yeshua turned his face upward, as if to find a place to begin the explanation.

One night would not be long enough.

“It will take a lifetime to learn all that Moses and the prophets wrote about what was, what is, and what will be. The teachers of Israel were shepherds. The secret meaning of their words are hidden among the lambs of Israel’s flocks. But tonight we’ll let the heavens teach the first lesson. There... above our heads... is the first book.” He gestured toward the sky where streaks of gossamer clouds streamed to the east.

So Yeshua began at the Beginning. The right place for young boys who had never been taught anything.

That night the three were smooth wax tablets, which not even a childish alef-bet had yet mastered.

The stylus of Yeshua’s words impressed itself on their souls. They became his talmidim, students at the academy of Creation of which he was Headmaster.

Emet, who had never before heard a human voice, nor a single word of speech, experienced the Living Word.

Avel, who had never felt joy or known tenderness, was embraced by he who is Love Incarnate.

Yet Avel and Emet were mere observers compared to the wonder that swept over Ha-or Tov, drawing him upward and out of himself. For Ha-or Tov, who was born sightless and had never known the stars, was given a guided tour of the heavens. The scroll of the universe was unrolled for him, its text of miracles read aloud to him by its Author.

The embers burned low on the campfire. The smoke cleared.

“What are those things?” Ha-or Tov inquired. “There and there and... look there!” He gestured toward each of the thousand pinpoints of light garlanding the Galilean sky, at first singly, and then in broad swathes as he tried to take it all in at once. His mop of curly red hair bobbed from vista to vista. “Where did they come from? Who made them?”

Stretching out his hand, Yeshua reached upward. The brightest star in the constellation called Areyeh, the Lion, appeared to balance on the very tip of his index finger.

As Emet observed, Yeshua drew his hand downward and the star seemed to follow, as if obediently coming closer at his summoners. Or perhaps it simply brightened at his touch. Emet was unsure which.

“These are the stars,” Yeshua explained. “Witnesses to everything that has happened since the dawn of time.” When he lowered his hand, the star swung promptly back to its proper place and size. But Yeshua wasn’t finished. “And see this,” he said, creating a circle with his thumb and forefinger and offering it to Ha-or Tov to peer through. Yeshua indicated a patch of sky due south.
The lights in the heavens became distinct, glimmering with unimaginined color through this focus. Emet recognized Ha-or Tov’s protracted exhale as the sound of reverent amazement, though he’d never heard it before. “See the spirals! Like curling loops of... what? Jewels?”

The constellation Yeshua designated portrayed a reclining woman. Between her imagined outstretched arms Emet could see faint smudges, like what resulted when he brushed a brass lamp with his thumb. For an instant Emet couldn’t make out what caused Ha-or Tov to exult so.

Then Yeshua cupped his hand, and Emet rested his chin in the Master’s palm. Suddenly those smudges transformed into shimmering webs, decked with glistening drops of dew! Perhaps Ha-or Tov was right! Jewels! Before Emet’s eyes ropes of gems tightly coiled on the ebony fabric of the night! The touch of the wind made the lights dance and sparkle.

“Each spiral contains more stars than you can imagine,” Yeshua’s voice brushed Emet’s face like a gentle breeze. “Each is so great that this world would be lost inside it. Each is so far away that just to see its light is to peer back in time... some for years, some for ages, and some... back toward the very Beginning. There...” He pointed to a bright blue star and said to Ha-or Tov, “The gleam you’re seeing now left the star a long time ago. At the hour you were born that flash was conceived. Its light has been traveling through space to fill your eyes tonight. Before you were born that star was named for you. Ha-or Tov. ‘The Good Light.’ It’s shining for you.”

Avel and Emet drew nearer, each of them eager to know if they also had a birthday star. Yeshua nodded, then pointed to a jewel named Haver, which means “Friend.” This was Avel’s star. It was as golden as topaz. Constant in light and color, unwavering and true.

And the star named for Emet! Truth. It was a beacon, flashing blue to white and back to blue, calling Emet’s glance to its light again and again.

“And which is your star, Reb Yeshua?” Avel queried.

At that Yeshua strummed the fingers of his right hand across the panorama of the universe. Emet’s eyes widened in amazement as he heard a vast harmony, music emanating from the lights. It was the first song Emet ever heard. Countless voices sang these words:

“You are worthy, O Lord,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for You created all things,
and by Your will they exist and were created!”

Avel and Ha-or Tov chewed their bread noisily. They seemed not to notice the music.

Evidently the ears of his companions could not hear as well as his, Emet reasoned. After all, Emet’s ears were new, created by Yeshua on the spot. Perhaps Ha-or Tov’s recently sighted eyes were also sharper than those of anyone. And maybe Avel experienced joy more keenly because his broken heart had just been healed.

“When was the beginning?” Emet blurted, wanting to know everything!

Yeshua replied, “It is written in the first line of Torah: ‘In the Beginning Elohim created the heavens and the earth.’ Everything was created by his will from nothing: bara, in the Hebrew language. Worlds were framed by the Word of God. Things you see were not made from things that are visible. The Beginning is across a gulf so wide you could never cross it, and yet it’s but a blink to the Father.”

And he told them how the heavens were hung thick with brilliances beyond imagining. The sun, known as Chamnalah, was really only one insignificant star among the host of innumerable stars. And the earth was merely one of several worlds that circled the sun.

Yeshua explained that the seven lights of the menorah were meant to teach men many things. Among the lessons, the order of its branches showed a picture of this tiny corner of creation: the sun, the moon, and the wandering stars, also called planets... the Greater and Lesser Lights that illuminated day and night.

Yeshua explained that there was much more beyond what the human eye could detect, even the keen eyes of Ha-or Tov!

Deftly Yeshua’s hands skimmed the sky, as if to gather swirls of stars in his palms and planets on his fingertips, like the balls of a juggler in the soul.

Above the increased noise of the breeze in the terebinth, once again Emet heard distant voices:

“When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?
For You have made him a little lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.
You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands...”
Yeshua touched Emet’s cheek. Finally he asked Avel, “When you were a mourner, burdened by sadness as real and heavy as a sack of stones on your back, did you ever imagine you could feel joy again?”

Avel laughed and replied, “No, Lord! I didn’t know what joy was! I saw others smile, but I didn’t understand what a smile felt like inside! But now I know!” Avel leaned against Yeshua, who patted him on the shoulder.

“That’s right. Yes.” Yeshua had made his point. “Heaven is like that. You can’t see it. Yet it exists. It’s a real place! As tangible as . . . the stones of Jerusalem. As solid as the hills of the Galil. Things are happening there right now, while you and I sit tonight by the fire. There are moments when you hear a song or see a rainbow or grasp a word of comfort that lifts your soul, and you get a hint of heaven. But that’s merely a drop of water in the great wide ocean! And, sadly, here on earth, you can’t have the total freedom of heaven’s joy because you are bound to the sorrows of what happens in this world. But have faith!”

“What is faith?” Emet asked.

“Faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not yet see.”

“I hope I will see my friend Hayyim again,” Avel said.

Yeshua took the boy’s hand. “I promise you, he’s waiting to welcome you. After that you’ll recognize others. You’ll embrace the loved ones you ached to hold! You’ll gaze into their eyes and laugh again! Then there’ll be no more sorrow or suffering.”

Heaven. Stars and color revealed to the blind!

Heaven. Harmony and instruments heard for the first time by the deaf!

Heaven. Jubilation and peace overflowing the heart of a mourner reunited with his loved ones!

This was Hope, indeed!

On that night, however, the enormity of it, the color and music and joy of it, was beyond what one short lesson could convey.

But it was a beginning. A starting place. An explanation of a reality far larger than this world. A definition of faith. A reason to hope.

The moon peeked over a shoulder of the mountain, casting a streak of silver on the lake.

At the same moment the wind from the west increased its force, as if trying to hold back the light.

Yeshua raised his head, as if scenting the air. He stood, dusting off his hands and smoothing out his robe. “The wind is up,” he said.
"They'll be needing me." Staring out at the water he added, "There: you see?"

Ha-or Tov nodded vigorously. "The boat... your talmidim? They're rowing, but fighting the gale."

By squinting his eyes and scrunching his face, Emet at last made out the object of their concern: a distant black speck disappearing and reappearing against the ripples of shimmering waves.

Breezes on the Galil blew up without warning into dangerous gales; harmless swells turned into life-threatening billows. Open fishing boats caught far out on the Sea of Galilee in such a storm had but two choices, neither of them good. They could struggle forward by rowing into the teeth of the gusts, shipping water over the bow and struggling for inches of progress. Or they could attempt to turn and run before the wind, risking being capsized or swamped.

Lives were lost every year on the lake in storms like this.

Yet Yeshua didn't act anxious for his friends. Matter-of-factly he said to the boys, "I must go to them. Walk with me toward the shore."

How could Yeshua provide any assistance to the endangered talmidim? Emet wondered. Was there another stronger vessel available somewhere?

As they approached the highway that skirted the eastern shore, Yeshua gave a rucksack of barley loaves to Avel, Emet, and Ha-or Tov. "Avel, you are the shepherd of your brothers on this journey. Travel by the light of the moon. Go south. Along the way you'll meet a man you've met before. He'll lead you on a donkey over Jordan. After you cross the river, travel no farther with him. Go straight to Beth-lehem, to Migdal Eder, the Tower of the Flock. There find the shepherd Zadok. The lamb is the key to understanding Torah. Stay with Zadok till I arrive."

"Why?" Emet asked.

"Kings, priests, and prophets have longed to know the secret this old shepherd keeps hidden in his heart."

"But when will we see you again?" Emet's heart began to pound; panic rose in his throat.

"Look for the lamb."

What could Yeshua mean? Emet wondered. The fields were full of lambs this season of the year.

"But how can we prove you sent us?" Avel asked.

Gathering the three boys once more in his embrace, Yeshua said, "Tell Zadok that Immanu'el sent you to him. Tell him Immanu'el is coming. Tell him that mourners are blessed, for they will be comforted.

Don't share this message with anyone else. It's meant for Zadok alone. Be on your guard. There's danger ahead. Wolves dressed in sheep's clothing are traveling the same road you travel... Now I must go." Yeshua set his chin resolutely into the gale.

Go? Emet wondered as he and his friends reluctantly parted from their Rabbi. We have this paved road to follow, but what about him? No boat can sail into this wind.

Beams of moonlight carved an argent path across the water, creating a highway of burnished silver on the surface of the lake. Onto this thoroughfare of light Yeshua confidently stepped, striding out toward the center of the sea as if walking the broad avenue that connected Jerusalem's Temple Mount with the western hill of the Holy City.

Could it be? Avel stooped and dipped his fingers in the water. Cupping his hands he lifted the liquid to show Emet and Ha-or Tov.

They watched Yeshua until he was out of sight. Ha-or Tov continued to report Yeshua's steady progress long after he disappeared from Emet's view. Then the three set out for Beth-lehem.

The wind howled across the Sea of Galilee from west to east. The moon, like a sail unfurled, set its course into the teeth of the storm. It was still more than a week until Passover and already the hills of the Galil were dotted with campfires of pilgrims moving south to Jerusalem.

Nakdimon ben Gurion, wrapped in his cloak, sheltered in the lee of a boulder. There was a voice in this cloudless tempest. It howled a warning in Nakdimon's ears.

Metatron! Metatron! Metatron!

Was Yeshua of Nazareth the manifestation of Elohim's Presence? The Being who moved in and out of the Cloud of Unknowing that surrounded the omnipotent God's throne? Disguised for His visit to earth, the one called the Angel of the Lord promised Abraham a son in his old age and made a blood covenant conveying a blessing on all the earth through Abraham.

He had wrestled Jacob on the riverbank and named him Isra'el.

He had spoken to Moses from the burning bush and led the children of Israel out of bondage through the sea and into the Promised Land.

If Yeshua was that One, someday He would drop his mortal disguise. And then men, seeing the truth of who and what He was in reality, would melt in terror.
Nakdimon himself had felt a sort of terror and awe when he witnessed the miracles and again when he heard Yeshua speak. Here was molten gold confined in the common cauldron of humanity: beautiful, glowing, consuming fire. All that and more in the disguise of a carpenter from Nazareth. Could it be? Could it? A carpenter from Nazareth?

Nakdimon would take the report back to his uncle, the great rabbi Gamaliel bar Simeon. Gamaliel was one of the few who might be capable of unraveling the perilous enigma of Yeshua without getting burned. He might separate the Glory from the kettle and say, _Here is truth!_

One must not be wrong about a matter of such magnitude. If it was true that Yeshua had stepped out from behind a star and descended from the Cloud of Unknowing to bring a gift from Elohim to mankind, then mankind had better not stumble over the gift! And yet that was exactly what the rulers of Israel seemed to be doing. Their plots to discredit Yeshua were legion. False witnesses. Spies. Talk of murder.

Nakdimon shuddered. He was hopeful and yet also terrified at the potential missteps.

The wailing of the wind died suddenly like a whining child commanded to be still. Only the sparking embers illuminated the small band of sleepers. A lull descended, as if no cricket or nightbird dared reply.

Nakdimon sat up and stared at the stars. So many. The air scrubbed clean by the wind. He imagined thrones and corridors, stairways rising up from the darkness into points of exquisite light. Had Yeshua come from some place beyond the edge of all that?

_Pervasive peace. Calm._

_"We had better get it right!"_

_"Peace! Be still! I Am! Be still and know! I Am!"_

Nakdimon's traveling companions did not suspect that the enormous man was a member of the council of seventy elders who ruled Israel. He appeared common enough, more like a drover with ordinary clothes, black beard, broad shoulders, and a bullneck.

It was best they not know his rank, he reasoned. After all, beneath the skin he was no different than they. He had also come far to see and hear Yeshua of Nazareth firsthand.

He had arrived in Galilee a skeptic.

Now he believed.

But what boundaries defined his belief? That Yeshua was a man of extraordinary powers and wisdom couldn't be denied. But Israel's hist-
The wind died as morning approached. Stars dimmed. The surface of the lake became placid, a mirror of reflected pastels.

This was the first dawn in Emet’s new life. It was teeming with unfamiliar murmurings and the clamor of awakenings.

At the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee, the trio of boys stopped to watch the golden blade of morning slice through the darkness.

“Is that heaven, then?” Ha-or Tov cried, turning away from the painful brightness.

Avel replied, “Just the sun. Coming up like it always does.”

“Don’t look at it,” Emet warned. “It will burn your eyes, and you’ll be blind again.”

For hours they had traveled through a monochrome world awash in moonlight. Their shadows had fallen on the road that skirted the eastern shore of the lake. Campfires of other pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem for Passover had dotted the countryside and caused Ha-or Tov to swivel his head at each manifestation of light. Yet only now, as colors intensified, did Ha-or Tov stop in the middle of the road and refuse to continue until he could absorb it.

“This may take a while. We might as well eat.” Avel offered the bag of loaves to Emet.

Emet didn’t reply. He was too busy trying to sort out the resonant hum in the air as the world opened its eyes. Far away a rooster crowed. A dog barked and was answered with the whistle of its master. The bleating of sheep mingled with the sounds of human conversation. And how many different birds called from tree, or vineyard, or brush? Emet couldn’t keep it all in his head. He covered his ears with his hands.

“You’ll get used to it,” Avel consoled him. “After a while you won’t notice it anymore.”

“But I want to hear it!” Emet protested. “All of it! I have to figure out what each thing means!”

“Suit yourself,” Avel retrieved a piece of bread. “It was easier going when you were deaf and Ha-or Tov was blind.”

Emet dipped into the bag. He observed Avel, the mourner. His friend was changed, as if he were not the same boy. Before, Avel’s eyes had been perpetually downcast. It had made it difficult for Emet to read his lips. But now! Avel gazed peacefully at a hawk circling above them. Sun shone on his golden hair. His lips curved in a slight smile.

Then Emet turned his attention to Ha-or Tov. Before last night, Ha-or Tov had shuffled when he walked. When Ha-or Tov was blind, his face had been perpetually turned skyward, wagging back and forth, as if he were sniffing the air for a hint of what might be around him. And before, when Ha-or Tov had sat on the ground, he’d swayed like a sapling in the wind. This morning, Ha-or Tov was focused, perfectly motionless as he drank in visual wonders.

Emet was likewise absorbed by a mystic harmony drifting over the countryside. It occurred to Emet that somewhere among the bird conversation was the voice of Yediyd the sparrow. Surely the bird was twittering to friends and relatives about how Yeshua of Nazareth made him alive after Kittim, once the leader of the link boys, had crushed him. This was a comforting thought for Emet. That a creature as insignificant as Yediyd had beat the cruelty of the sparrow killer!

“Is the air always like this?” Emet asked.

Avel scratched his chin, as if not comprehending the question. “I like the smell of the country air. Better than Yerushalayim, I think.”

“No. I mean always singing? So . . . full?” Emet asked.

Avel munched the bread. “The noise you mean? Louder in some places. Yerushalayim is much worse. Every smell has a sound.” Avel nudged Ha-or Tov, including him in this discussion. “And every sound has a color. The people! Everyone talking at the same time.”

Then, without explanation, Ha-or Tov gasped and groped for a boulder to steady himself. He began to quiver. “The rebels of bar Abba! All of them with eyes that see! I didn’t know what that meant before! When everything was blank I was safe . . . invisible. But if I can see them, they can see me! From far away . . . they’ll recognize us!”

So the sense of peace they had all felt in the presence of Yeshua came abruptly to an end. Emet was afraid. Ha-or Tov was absolutely correct! Emet eyed Avel, the one who always knew where they were going and what they should do. Yet Avel had no answer to such a problem.

Avel contemplated the southward flight of the hawk. “We’ve got to be careful. If only we had wings!”
Emet asked, “Should we hide? Travel in the dark?”
Avel drew a breath and stuck out his lower lip. “Yeshua said we should go south. Straight to Beth-lehem. Find the man Zadok, he said. The Tower of Migdal Eder. I’m for going ahead. Getting to Beth-lehem quick as we can.”
Ha-or Tov added hopefully, “Maybe Zadok will protect us from bar Abba and the rebels.”
Emet pictured Kittim, the cruel young rebel who had crushed the tiny Yediyd under his foot! Kittim was searching for the three fugitives from the rebel band. And he would kill the boys if he found them. “Can Zadok save us from the sparrow killer?”
Avel said, “Kittim enjoys hurting people. He’ll do what he can to hurt us. So . . . pass the bread.”
They divided the barley loaf in thoughtful silence.
Since Yeshua left them they had traveled several miles along the broad eastern highway and far into the hill country of the ten Greek cities of the Decapolis.
“Even if we hide until sundown we’re not safe anywhere,” Ha-or Tov worried aloud. “Especially not here.”
“But why?” Emet asked.
“The people who live here aren’t Jews,” Avel explained to Emet. “Or if they are Jews, they’re rotten Jews who speak Greek and don’t mind pagan temples and the like.”
Ha-or Tov added gloomily, “The rabbis in Judea say this place . . . the very dust of a heathen country . . . is unclean! Demons live here. People worship gods which aren’t the Lord. They burn babies in the arms of Molech here. Touching the ground defiles you. Like a grave with a putrefied body in it. Pus and oozing guts and the like.” He accidentally dropped a chunk of bread, snapped it up, blew off the dust, and passed it to Emet.
Emet winced at his friend’s unconcern. He considered this information with alarm. It had been better not knowing such facts. Yesterday a walk along the highway east of the Jordan River had merely been a tramp along a dusty road. If he had dropped his bread yesterday, he wouldn’t have worried about it. “Then why do we stay on this side of the river?”
“Because we have to go south to the ford. We can cross into Eretz-Israel there. Then we’ll be in Judea.” Avel gestured toward the blue ribbon of the Jordan flowing through the valley below.

“Can’t we cross now?” Emet pleaded.
Avel expounded. “Not until we go along farther. Crossing over here would be as bad as the Decapolis. That’s Samaria on the other side of the river.”
Ha-or Tov contributed, “Every Samaritan is like Kittim. They hate Jews as much as Romans hate Jews. Maybe more. Samaria really stinks. Defilement and death, the rabbis say.”
“How do you know this?” Emet sniffed.
“Because I begged at the gate of a rich man. I heard the rabbis talking when they came in,” Ha-or Tov mocked them, “‘Quick! Get me water to wash the dust off my feet! I walked through a Samaritan village! The dust from a Roman horse is on my sandal!’” Ha-or Tov shrugged and resumed the lesson. “You pick up a lot of details when you’re blind and nobody thinks you’re listening. What I didn’t understand I asked the gatekeeper and he told me. There’s one single country where a good Jew can walk without worrying. That’s Eretz-Israel, The Land God gave to Israel! And when a good Jew goes outside The Land he can’t even bring heathen dust back to mingle with the dust inside The Land. And when he makes pilgrimage to Yerushalayim, he’d better not carry any dirt from outside the land back into Eretz-Israel on him! The Land of Israel is holy, see? Yerushalayim is more holy. The Temple is the holiest. Understand?”
“No.” Emet wondered if such rules existed or if Ha-or Tov was making them up.
But Avel confirmed these astonishing facts. “He’s right. One speck of dust from outside.” He gave a low whistle. “Really bad. And this place? The Decapolis. Greek. Ten cities built by the followers of Alexander, the Greek general. Crammed with shrines to pagan idols. The worst. It’s polluted.” Avel corroborated the tale in its entirety.
“What will happen?” Emet’s eyes stared. “If we catch pagan dust on us, I mean?”
“Poof! Fire and brimstone!” Ha-or Tov indicated the incineration of the unlucky traveler who carried particles of soil from outside The Land into the Holy City. “That’s why the rabbis are always washing.”
“Then why are we traveling this way?” Emet gawked at his dirt-caked feet. Defilement and contamination! Surely he would end up a pile of ashes!
Avel replied, “Because if you’re on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, like us, you can’t go south to Beth-lehem and Yerushalayim any other
way. You go through Samaria, you’ll get your throat cut. So you go through this part of the Decapolis and cross over Jordan into Judea farther south.”

Since existing borders required travel outside The Land to get from Galil, in the north, to Judea, in the south, this condition of righteousness didn’t seem particularly fair to Emet. His brow furrowed.

Was this why bar Abba’s rebels hated Romans so much? Dust touching Roman toes was changed into evil! And was this why the Jewish religious sorts stamped the dirt from their sandals when a Samaritan or a tax collector in the pay of Rome passed by? This explained the reason no respectable Jew ever entered a building where a Gentile resided!

The world had become a lot more complicated. How many more regulations would he have to learn to be a good talmidim? Emet wondered.

Emet picked at the barley bread and stared at the contaminated brown earth of the Decapolis and a budding almond orchard in a swale nearby. It was a pretty plot of ground, even if it was heathen. He was sorry Yeshua had not taken them with him across the waters. Why hadn’t Yeshua picked them up and carried them back to Galilee on his shoulders? Away from this polluted land! Safe from bar Abba’s rebels and from the reach of Kittim, the sparrow killer! They would have been safe with Yeshua, wouldn’t they? Instead the Master had sent them off on this dangerous journey to Beth-lehem.

What if someone from bar Abba’s band spotted them on the way? Surely even the rebels would be traveling on this road south to Jerusalem for Passover! Kittim, the sparrow killer, had ears! He would hear the boys talking and hunt them down even in a crowd! He would slit their throats with the razor-sharp blade of his knife!

Emet felt alone and scared.

Then Ha-or Tov presented an equally disturbing thought. “Kittim is on this side of the river! I’m sure of it. He’ll see us and kill us.”

“He’ll have to catch us first,” Avel vowed. “And we can run fast now that you can see where you’re going.”

Then, an octave beneath the chatter of fowls and a braying donkey, Emet sensed something frightening. His head snapped erect as the voices of men in angry conversation approached. “Listen,” he hissed.

“I don’t hear anything,” Avel frowned.

“Travelers! Coming this way! I want to go now,” Emet warned, pocketing his breakfast. His heart quickened with terror. “I want to go to Zadok in Beth-lehem, where maybe we’ll be safe! The place Yeshua told us to go! We shouldn’t wait! I don’t want to be outside The Land anymore. It’s not safe!”

Ha-or Tov shushed Avel’s protest that they needn’t be in such a hurry. “Emet’s right. I hear them. Men coming down the highway. Arguing about ... something. They’ll be upon us soon!”

Avel listened a second longer, clearly straining to catch what his companions recognized so plainly. Then Avel’s face blanched. “Is it bar Abba? Or Kittim?”

They wouldn’t wait for the answer. Emet leapt to his feet, and the three boys sprinted down the highway.

Nakdimon ben Gurion shifted his muscled bulk on the hard, unyielding ground and wished he were at home in Jerusalem. Even rest on this journey wasn’t restful.

He had completed his mission to the Galil. He had seen the miracles, questioned the Teacher one-on-one, and witnessed that marvelous feeding of an army with a handful of bread and fish.

What summary would he give to the leaders of Israel about Yeshua of Nazareth?

Every detail about the Master would doubtless reach Jerusalem ahead of Nakdimon. The pilgrims traveling to the city to celebrate Passover would spread the news.

What would they say?

Praise was the thing Nakdimon ben Gurion heard from the thousands of pilgrims along the highway that led from Galilee south to Jerusalem.

Praise for teaching! Praise for healing! Praise for bread! Praise for what would be!

 Doubtless they would add ecstatic speculation to their report: Praise for the coming-cout of Romans and half-breed Samaritans! Praise for the slaughter of the profane and the cheaters and the oppressors of the poor! Praise for the restoration of fortunes, land, and freedom! Praise for Yeshua of Nazareth, who could raise a dead little girl in Capernaum. He must now raise an army to march on Yerushalayim!

The Kingdom of God had come. Did Yeshua not say so?

Nakdimon considered again what he had witnessed and heard. What truth could he carry back to Jerusalem for his uncle, the renowned Gamaliel, who sat with Nakdimon in the chamber of the Sanhedrin, the council of seventy elders of the Jews? How would the re-
igious leaders take the news that the people flocked to hear a lowly carpenter from Nazareth who was manifestly more than that description encompassed?

Nakdimon surmised that whatever their reaction, it would not be favorable to Yeshua. The holy man, like his cousin Yochanan the Baptist, would be in danger if he came to Jerusalem.

Yesterday at the beach Nakdimon had warned Yeshua’s talmidim to keep their Master far from the crowds, far from the Temple, far from Jerusalem and Judea until Passover was over and the mobs returned home. Thousands of lambs would be slaughtered for the seder. Nakdimon didn’t want the blood of Yeshua mingled with the blood of the flock! There would come a time in the future when the gentle Rabbi could enter the city, but emotions were too hot and high for him to come now!

There was, of course, the unresolved conflict brewing over the use of Temple funds to pay for Governor Pilate’s aqueduct. The issue of Korban money supplying Roman stones to rise across the fields of Beth-lehem would surely lead to riots in Jerusalem this year. People had bled and died for the sake of much less significant religious violations than Roman canals built with sacred coins.

Nakdimon stood slowly. His back ached. He cleared his throat and scanned the hundreds of travelers near smoldering campfires all around him. There were rebels among the pilgrims, he knew. There were possibly hundreds of swords waiting for the cry to battle. And the Romans would swoop down. Jewish heads would fall like unripe melons on the stones of the Temple Court unless the crowds could be kept calm.

This much he was certain of: Yeshua would not be the one to call down judgment and slaughter. But his presence would certainly be used to rally the foolishly eager.

Nakdimon hoped Yeshua’s talmidim had the brains to convince the Rabbi that his attendance would simply add fuel to the embers of resentment already smoldering against the high priest and the Roman authorities!

And what had Nakdimon personally taken away from his encounter with Yeshua?

How long had he been knocking at Hadassah’s grave? Wishing she would come back to him and the children? Angry at her for leaving him alone with six young girls and one infant son to raise alone? Mourning her death a hundred times a day?

Yeshua had given him hope that he would see her again, hold her again. One hundred years would pass, and all of them would be reunited in tangible form. They would smile and talk and touch one another’s hands and say, “So this is what it means...”

For Nakdimon that hope of a life to come was more important than the bread or the healing or the possibility of Yeshua as King over Israel.

The future. Yes. Someday, perhaps, that would be reality.

But for now there was life to live. Insurrections to quell. Government to preserve. Peace to cling to. For the sake of his children Nakdimon accepted that Gamaliel and the rulers of Israel must consider Yeshua in the context of what was expedient. The Sanhedrin and the high priest might be unsavory and corrupt, but they were also responsible for the survival of Israel in an uncertain political reality. Yeshua could tip the balance toward revolution against Rome. If the people proclaimed him king it could mean the ultimate destruction of Israel and Jerusalem.

For this reason Nakdimon hoped Yeshua would stay far away from Jerusalem during Passover.

Roman centurion Marcus Longinus and his commandant, Tribune Dio Felix, had ridden all night. By so doing they had managed to reach Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast just as dawn was breaking. Long before the salt tang in the air alerted Marcus that their journey was nearly finished, Felix had already issued orders: “No ceremony this time! No stopping to bathe or for dress uniforms! Governor Pilate must hear the report on Yeshua of Nazareth without delay!”

As travel-worn as Felix was, the enforced haste was worse for Marcus. The centurion had not changed clothes since his previous appearance before Pilate. His beard itched, the rough cloth of his homespun tunic stuck to him, and his eyes and ears were plastered with the chalky dust of the wind-whipped Galil. In every respect Marcus looked more like one of the rebels he’d been assigned to pursue than a Roman officer; more like a Jewish brigand than one of the masters of the universe.

But considerations about his appearance and reputation were of secondary importance. His thoughts remained back in Galilee, concentrated on Miryam of Magdala, once Marcus’ lover. Now she was in the inner circle of Rabbi Yeshua’s talmidim.

Marcus also devoted much of the hurried travel to thinking about the mysterious Reb Yeshua. He was confused about the Galilean Teacher.
Marcus had personally seen the man perform unaccountable acts of healing, not the least of which involved Marcus' young servant, Carta. The centurion had likewise witnessed an amazing transformation wrought by Yeshua in the once-tormented soul of Miryam.

Thousands, including Marcus, heard Yeshua's teaching; they knew of a certainty that the Rabbi was a good man, a kind man, a wise man, a worthy man, and something beyond an ordinary mortal man.

Not long before this, Rome had little reason to take official notice of a country preacher, even if he was reportedly able to work miracles. Yeshua preached peace, not confrontation. Rome did not acknowledge that devotion to the Hebrew deity had any special virtue, or that love and mercy possessed any power.

Power, insofar as Rome was concerned, existed at the point of a javelin or short sword. Such power increased with the disciplined ruthlessness of a century of legionaries, then multiplied many times over till it dominated the world at the command of a Caesar to his legions.

And so it had. From the Pillars of Hercules to the great river Euphrates, from Gaul to the Nile, Rome held sway over the nations. It was a time of enforced peace, punctuated by border skirmishes and brief, brutally crushed revolts. As long as Yeshua spoke no treason, organized no armies, encouraged no rebellion, he could go about his business.

But all that had changed on a wild-flower-strewn hillside the afternoon before. There, in front of Marcus' eyes, something extraordinary had occurred. Yeshua had fed his entire famished audience of thousands from a handful of bread and dried fish. Unaccountable? Yes. Unbelievable? Indeed.

Ordinarily, rational, practical, pragmatic Rome winked at magic. The emperor Tiberius himself practiced divination, reading into the signs the messages he already expected to receive. It was a political tool to blame policy on the gods, to excuse failures and justify excesses.

Where was the harm in free bread, even if produced by something unexplained? The problem was this: Yeshua had fed an army of followers. Five thousand men. An army! As many soldiers as owed allegiance to Rome in the whole Jewish province, and four times that many women and children too!

Compounding this novelty into a crime against the state had been the response of those legions of listeners. Yeshua for king! they cried. Yeshua should be king of the Jews. Since that acclaim was offered without Rome's approval, it was not an acceptable sentiment.

And the proof of how objectionable it was to official Rome? Tribune Felix's insistence on the strenuous all-night gallop to deliver his account to the governor.

Could anyone seriously believe that a Jewish rabble on a Galilean hillside was of any political or military consequence? When compared to the might symbolized by the city that lay just ahead, it didn't appear likely.

If the lands bordering the Great Sea of Middle Earth were the tiara encircling the brow of the Roman empire, then Caesarea Maritima was the jewel on its eastern rim. Constructed as a wholly fresh, purpose-built showplace by Rome's friend King Herod the Great, Caesarea was a marvel. From the hilltop approach to the city its acres of snowy limestone made a gleaming display. Monumental structures, from a colossal amphitheater for gladiatorial combat to an ostentatious temple dedicated to Emperor Augustus, dotted the seaside. There was perhaps no place in the empire that better combined grandeur with natural beauty.

It was thoroughly Roman in its conveniences: wide, regular streets, perfect right-angle intersections, ample public promenades, and an efficient sewer system.

Nor did temples or sewers exhaust the architectural wonders of the metropolis. Caesarea possessed one of the best artificial harbors in the world: reputedly the safest mooring between Piraeus in Greece and Alexandria in Egypt. Constructed of massive stone blocks sunk in two hundred feet of water, the entire Roman war fleet could have sheltered within the embrace of its outstretched limbs. From the seaward-most point on the breakwater a gigantic lighthouse beckoned navigators. It was said that a cargo galley leaving Alexandria two hundred fifty miles away could pick up the beacon of Caesarea before half the journey was completed.

Perhaps Tribune Felix would be struck by the same comparison as Marcus. Perhaps Marcus' friend and superior officer would have cooled down when he compared the Roman superiority on display in Caesarea with the rural scenes of Galilee.

Felix and Marcus reined up in front of the marble palace that had once belonged to Herod, but was now the official residence of the prefect of the Roman province of Judea.

Currently title and mansion belonged to Governor Pontius Pilate. A squad of eager legionaries recently recruited from Cyprus confronted the two arriving officers with crossed spearpoints to bar their
entry. The decurion, captain of the ten men on sentry duty, recognized Felix but remained doubtful when the disreputable-looking Marcus was introduced.

"But in any case, you can't see the governor," the young captain said when Felix demanded admission.

"We're under orders from the governor himself and the matter is urgent," Felix retorted. "Let us pass!"

"I'm sorry, Tribune," returned the other, "but you misunderstood me. You can't see Governor Pilate because he isn't here."

"Where then?" Felix insisted. "Out of the city?"

The decurion shook his head.

It was a little past the second hour of the morning. Very early for a lover-of-ease like Pilate to be abroad.

Marcus saw a flush of angry frustration overcome Felix.

"Then where is he?" Felix bellowed at the flustered captain.

"Sir, he went to the temple of the divine Augustus for the morning sacrifice. The new coins honoring Emperor Tiberius have been minted and the governor . . ."

Felix didn't stay to hear the rest of the explanation. Flinging back a pledge to flog young officers in order to make their tongues move faster, Felix remounted his horse. He applied his riding crop with vigor, administering a lashing to the mount as a substitute for the decurion.

Marcus had hoped Felix might have calmed down since the Galil, lost the urgency to denounce Yeshua.

Now that illusion was gone.

YA'ASEH

Before Emet, Avel, and Ha-or Tov had even left the confines of the Galil the trickle of Passover pilgrims flowing south toward Jerusalem had become a river. A stream of Jewish worshippers from Nazareth and Cana poured across the pass from the Valley of Jezreel. Descending toward the river valley, they met up with more wayfarers coming from Magdala and Genneseret.

Spitting piously in the direction of the Gentile town of Scythopolis as they passed it, the pilgrims crossed over the Jordan, thus avoiding the defiling dust of Samaria.

Once east of the river they encountered more believers coming from the region of Caesarea Philippi.

And the streams coalesced into a torrent.

The mood along the route was upbeat. It was a time of family reunions, when clans gathered to catch up on gossip and merrymaking. The cold of winter was past, the latter rains ending, and the barley harvest comfortably far enough off to allow a holiday.

Everywhere the travelers were cheerful and optimistic . . . except for three small boys.

Ha-or Tov hissed for the third time in a half mile of walking, "Look at us! I never saw these striped robes before yesterday, and even I can tell how much we stand out! People stare at us."

It was true. The identical uniforms made from thirds of the Baptist's cloak did attract attention.

Avel saw a young girl watching them from an oxcart packed with sisters and brothers. Soon eight siblings, together with father, mother, uncles, aunts, and cousins, commented on the three children traveling unaccompanied and dressed in identical garb.

It was not, Avel realized, solely because they matched. Many families shared cloth from the same loom, dyed from the same lot, cut according to the same pattern. Sometimes whole villages preferred ma-
terial stained walnut brown, while other regions were distinctive in their sunflower yellow.

It was the stripes, Avel decided. Red, green, and tan were unique, and the quality of the workmanship remained apparent even when cut down to fit children.

As soon as the uniforms were noticed, other questions followed: what family were these boys with? Where were their parents? Why were they traveling alone?

Avel tried to make light of the problem. “What are the chances of us running into Kittim or bar Abba?”

Ha-or Tov argued, “Do we know how many rebels are around us? Do we? Some rebel is bound to recognize us before we do him. He’ll tell Kittim and bar Abba! Then good-bye throats!”

Avel considered taking off the robes, stashing them in a ditch somewhere. Then he quickly dismissed the thought. He had possessed an uncanny sense of importance since donning the Baptist’s mantle. Hadn’t Yeshua touched the fabric fondly as he remembered the man for whom it had been woven? Surely it was significant to wear the cloak of a prophet.

Emet, age five, was not very strong. There had been a lot of travel in the past weeks with little time for recovery, and they were on the road again. It was especially hard for one with feet and legs so small.

The warm, sheltering robes had to remain. “I’ve got an idea,” Avel asserted reluctantly. “We split up. If Kittim’s hunting for us at all—which I doubt, but if he is—he’ll be looking for the three of us to be together.” Avel noticed that Emet’s eyes turned downward and his chin drooped at this, but he was so certain he was correct that he kept on. “Anyone by himself will be just another servant traipsing along after one family or another.”

Ha-or Tov ventured bravely, “You’re right. Anyone alone won’t stand out so much.”

Avel noticed Emet’s protruding lower lip. The little boy clearly didn’t want to be left unaccompanied. So Avel finally added, “Ha-or Tov, keep Emet with you.”

Emet brightened a bit at this compromise. Avel reasoned that the biggest danger to them was from Kittim. Avel, who had been well known to Kittim as a Sparrow in the Jerusalem quarry, was the one Kittim most easily recognized and certainly most thoroughly hated. This was a difficult decision, but Avel remembered the charge Yeshua had given him to care for Emet. Traveling separately seemed the best way to protect his friends.

“It’s settled then,” Avel said. “I’ll keep away from you, but where I can see you. That way if you run into trouble I can help.” As he said this, Avel realized there wasn’t much he could actually do. How could he oppose rebels with knives? How could he run to total strangers and ask for their assistance against bar Abba’s men? “Go on,” he said. “We’ll meet up again after sunset.”

Avel stepped away from his friends into the shade of an overhanging willow branch and immediately regretted his decision to part from them. Had he let Ha-or Tov fret him into breaking up the group? He was just getting used to the idea of the new name given him by Reb Yeshua: Haver, “Friend to the brokenhearted.”

Alone again he could sense Avel . . . the mourner . . . creeping back into his heart, stealing his courage.

Peeping out of the branches, Avel watched Ha-or Tov and Emet attach themselves to the rear of a family group. When they were a hundred yards ahead Avel could still recognize them by the robes, but he judged the distance between them was enough. So Avel merged with the throng once again.

Prominently displayed on a man-made knoll in the center of Caesarea was the Temple of Caesar Augustus. It had been commissioned by Herod the Great as the centerpiece of his new city. From the front terrace of the rotunda there was a splendid view over the harbor, which meant the structure was the first thing noticed by a seafaring visitor upon his arrival in port.

The sanctuary was also placed so the main avenues of town crossed immediately before its base. Thus foot travelers couldn’t avoid noting its significance either. It had suited Herod the Great to make certain the whole empire recognized his devotion to Augustus.

Though Augustus had been dead and gone this decade and a half, his adopted heir, Tiberius, found it suited the Imperial dignity to be the son of god. It was not Roman policy to interfere in matters of local religion if the local populace understood clearly that in the scope of things, all gods were not created equal.

It was one of the ironies of life in the Jewish province, Marcus reflected. Herod, the former king of the Jews, had not been a Jew by either
birth or piety. Had he not been a brutal murderer he might have gained a reputation as a famous compromiser. He spent lavish sums to promote Augustus to godhood, then poured out money like water, renovating and expanding the Jerusalem temple to the unnamable Hebrew deity.

This sort of duality was perfectly acceptable in a world that saw the heavens as crowded with godlings. Being recently promoted, like Augustus, or of longer standing, like Zeus, made little difference... anywhere except Judea. Alone in the empire, only the Jews insisted there was one true God. They also taught that He could only be properly worshipped in Jerusalem, and that one of His cherished commandments involved repudiating every other god.

Despite the early morning hour, a crowd of dignitaries gathered on the slope below the temple. There were visitors from every other province of the empire... and no Jews. At least there were no Jews recognizable as such, and certainly no Pharisees, Levites, or priests.

The time was near for the Jewish Festival of Passover, and no religious Jew wanted to risk ceremonial uncleanness at such a time. It was impossible to enter Caesarea without being defiled. To a pious son of Abraham the entire city was an abomination.

As Marcus and Felix arrived below the temple, Governor Pilate appeared in the center of the crowd on the terrace. Pilate stepped upon a raised dais so he could be seen by all. In his hand he held a *simpulum*, the saucer-like clay container used for pouring out libations to the gods. A minute later he spoke to the assembly while wine that flashed red in the sunlight drizzled from the *simpulum* over a marble altar. The stone was emblazoned with the carvings of bulls garlanded with flowers and the name of Augustus.

Though Marcus was too far away to hear Pilate's words, he could guess at the meaning: invoking the blessing of Augustus on Emperor Tiberius, on the province of Judea, and on Pilate himself as the humble servant of the empire.

Beside the tall, thin-lipped governor stood another notable dressed like him. Both wore the *toga praetexta*, the long, substantial, multi-pleated robe of state. Their official clothes were bordered with the dark crimson stripe referred to as "purple," denoting the emperor's representatives.

Marcus recognized the second man. He was shorter and squatter than Pilate, more tanned from more years in the region, with a permanent squint from campaigning against the Parthians in the desert. This

chief guest was Prefect Vitellius, governor of Syria and Pilate's superior officer in the diplomatic corps of Rome. Marcus understood Vitellius had wintered in Rome. His recent return from there had to account for the timing of this ceremony: Pilate wanted Vitellius to see how well he was performing as a junior governor.

Felix visibly fidgeted, wanting to approach Pilate with his news, but forced by propriety to delay until the ceremony ended. Marcus observed the two Roman dignitaries receiving the congratulations of the leading citizens of Caesarea. Pilate's smile looked fixed, even forced, to Marcus' way of thinking. As each participant passed in the receiving line, Pilate dipped his hand into a leather pouch and handed something over.

It had to be a commemorative distribution of the newly minted coins. Pilate's motive was clear: he wanted to cement his close connection to the emperor in the minds of the populace. At the same time it didn't hurt Pilate's standing to display a respectful crowd of well-wishers, eager for a fleeting touch of the gubernatorial palm.

It was all so calm and organized. A century of legionaries kept the common people away. No rabble, no potential rebels would be allowed to disturb the dignity of the service.

Marcus recognized the sharp contrast to the Purim disturbance a month earlier. On that occasion Jerusalem had nearly been plunged into full-scale rioting. The tetrarch of the Galil, Herod Antipas, had decided to celebrate his birthday by flinging bread and money to the masses. People had been killed, and further insurrection had been prevented only by the timely arrival of Marcus and his men.

Pilate was taking no such chances today. Rome had no qualms about breaking whatever heads needed to be broken, but political unrest was bad for commerce. Keeping taxes and trade flowing in an orderly manner was a governor's highest priority.

The rite concluded, the crowd began to drift away. Pilate and Vitellius retreated into the cool interior of the temple, followed by a squadron of troopers.

Felix identified himself to the captain of the guard but was told he would have to wait yet again for the two officials to complete their private devotions.

As Marcus' eyes grew accustomed to the dim interior, he made out the thrice-life-sized statues. Augustus, portrayed as Olympian Zeus, sat enthroned, complete with an upraised arm holding an eagle-headed staff. The unmoving icon of Corinthian bronze extended its burnished left foot for three mortals to kiss. Seated beside Augustus was the less
threatening but still colossal figure of Roma, or Mother Rome, dressed as the goddess Hera.

Kneeling before Augustus was Pilate. Vitellius was down on one knee in front of Roma.

The two men, supposedly locked in their prayers, were instead enmeshed in discussion. From the particulars it was no doubt supposed to be confidential. But Vitellius had probably lost part of his hearing to the desert winds, and his voice, combined with the acoustics of the domed building, conveyed every word to Marcus.

“The coin’s a good gesture,” Vitellius said to Pilate, “but simply a start. You have a lot of ground to make up with Tiberius.”

“Really?” Pilate’s jocular reply was meant to sound confident, but a higher-than-normal pitch betrayed his anxiety. “Then I’d better send him more of those white Judean dates with the juice like honey. That should soothe him.” Tiberius’ sweet tooth was well known. Such trifles truly did please the man who commanded the wealth of the empire.

Vitellius mocked, “Dates! You saw the letter. If ink were brimstone, his comments to you would have scorched the fingers of the scribe! Did you think he forgot what happened two years ago? Putting up the standards was stupid enough, but then capitulating to a mob . . . and a Jewish mob at that! Tiberius was unable to control his fury when news came of what happened in Jerusalem at Herod Antipas’ birthday last month.”

Pilate murmured a protest that the Purim riot had not been his fault, but Vitellius cut his words short. “You’re the governor! Anything that goes wrong here is your fault! Believe it! If you can’t control the province any better than that, Tiberius will replace you with someone who can!”

No wonder Pilate’s smile had resembled the rictus of a corpse. Word of the disturbances had reached Rome before Vitellius’ departure, in time for the emperor to vent his displeasure.

“It took all of Sejanus’ wheedling to placate the emperor. Otherwise it would have been a notice of recall!” Vitellius concluded.

To Marcus’ eye, Pilate’s back was as stiff as a pilum shaft. Sejanus was the prefect of the Imperial Praetorian guard and chief advisor to Tiberius. Pilate was his protégé and owed his appointment to Sejanus.

“And don’t try to honey-coat your reply,” Vitellius warned. “Tiberius wants the truth.”

Pilate’s uneasy chuckle crossed the dome more in betrayal of nervoussness than lightness of spirit. “What is truth?” he queried mockingly. “Isn’t it in the ear of the beholder?”

Vitellius, evidently not amused by Pilate’s attempts to improve the mood, snorted. “I know what Sejanus whispered to you when you looked at the hem of his robes. He said Tiberius is feeble, losing his grip; that every day Tiberius relinquishes more of the government to his favorite, Sejanus. Remember: Sejanus is not as secure as all that!”

Felix cleared his throat loudly.

Vitellius and Pilate jerked their heads around while Marcus ducked his in amusement. Felix, as the senior military officer present, had decided the maferial being overheard was too sensitive and elected to warn the politicians.

Religious duty instantly forgotten, Pilate and Vitellius rose and turned their backs on Augustus and Roma.

“Tribune,” Pilate acknowledged Felix. “You have a message?” The governor peered disdainfully down his long, pinched nose at Marcus, offering him no greeting. “Prefect Vitellius, you know Dio Felix, my young commander of the Galil?”

“Yes,” Vitellius agreed, “and his family. Your father is well, Tribune. He sends his greetings.”

This bit of politeness was more than it appeared. Felix’s clan possessed influence in Rome and he was better-born socially than Pilate. It was a reminder to Pilate that Sejanus was not the sole power broker in the empire. The allusion was meant to further remind Pilate how precarious his position was.

“Thank you, sir,” Felix said. “I apologize for my appearance—”

Perhaps fearful that Felix would blurt out more bad news in front of Vitellius, Pilate hastily interrupted. “The tribune is just back from a routine inspection. We won’t bore you with the details.”

“Routine, of course,” Vitellius echoed skeptically, eyeing Marcus. “And Centurion Marcus Longinus often masquerades as an Idumean horse thief . . . but never mind. I’ll leave you to it. I must get on the road.” Drawing Pilate aside, but still able to be overheard, he continued, “No more mistakes, understand?”

“The new aqueduct will please all Jerusalem,” Pilate promised.

“There will be good reports going to Rome very soon.”

“Control!” Vitellius emphasized. “Tiberius doesn’t care if you use bribes or daggers, so long as you stay in control. Keep that in mind.” Then, with a flourish, the governor of Syria swept up his entourage and
exited the temple to begin the overland part of his journey back to his capital in Damascus.

Pilate directed Felix and Marcus into an antechamber of the shrine where they could continue their discussion without other witnesses.

"Yeshua of Nazareth," Pilate snapped when the three were secluded.

"Is he leading a revolt? Yes or no?"

Marcus struggled against crying out a protest. A simple affirmative by Felix would cause Yeshua’s arrest and crucifixion. Men had already been executed for much lesser offenses.

Slowly, carefully, Felix framed his response. "He ... is not."

Marcus’ shoulders sagged with the release of tension.

"During our return from the Galil I pondered what I saw," Felix continued. "He fed a hungry crowd."

"Fed?" Pilate demanded.

"I don’t know exactly what I witnessed," Felix admitted. "He seemed to take a handful of bread and turn it into enough for everyone. Then the crowd wanted to make him king."

Marcus’ eyes took in the frozen frozen on Pilate’s brow. The danger to Yeshua was not yet over.

"And did this magician agree?" Pilate asked.

Marcus couldn’t control himself any longer. "Your pardon, excellency, but the answer is no," he reported. "I stayed long enough to see. In fact, Yeshua was anxious to avoid the issue. He did not acknowledge the cheers of the mob."

Pilate folded the thin, perfumed fingers of his right hand and rested his chin on them in thought. Rousing himself at last, he said, "Left when it sounded treasonous. That must have disappointed the rabble! He’s afraid ... and rightly so!"

"But the crowd," Felix added. "That’s the worry. They’ll be searching for another leader. Someone who won’t draw back. Many of them, fresh from shouting for a king, will be in Jerusalem for Passover."

Now that the focus had shifted away from Yeshua, Marcus could admit Felix was correct. "Jerusalem is the key," he concurred.

"I'm going up to Jerusalem for Passover myself," Pilate noted. "I'm going to receive a delegation of Jews who want to thank me for building the aqueduct. And I've already prepared a little surprise for any rebels who might appear. Tribune Felix, you will remain here and accompany me to Jerusalem."

"And what orders for me?" Marcus inquired.

Pilate sniffed. "In Capernaum you supervised a religious building? Made the Jews happy, didn’t you? Clean yourself up and go to Bethlehem tomorrow. Review the connections between Herod’s old water system and my new one. I want no slipups."

So Marcus was still not regarded as reliable since he had fallen out of favor. His decline had begun when he had placed honor above personal advancement by spurning the patronage of Praetorian Prefect Lucius Sejanus. He had crossed words and swords with another Sejanus protégé, Praetorian Centurion Varus, a man of brute strength and brutal appetites. Marcus’ love for Miryam, a Jewess, had contributed to the decline. Certainly his sympathy for the Jewish populace had speeded it along. And finally his tacit admiration of Yeshua of Nazareth and the God of the Hebrews had made him a pariah in Roman thought.

As a result, instead of being placed back in command of his men, he was to be an engineer in a tiny village away from the action. "By your command," Marcus said, clapping his arm across his chest.

With a dismissive wave Pilate turned to Felix. "Join me in making a sacrifice to Augustus before we conclude," he suggested. The overt friendliness to the tribune was transparently political.

"And Centurion Longinus as well?" Felix asked.

Unaccountably Marcus was reluctant. Slit the throat of a pigeon below the unwavering stare of the emperor’s statue? He had never hesitated before. If the god had any real power, then it was a sensible gesture. If not, what harm did it do? Why was he unwilling now? Sacrificing to the emperor had never bothered him. What had changed? Why did he now sense that worshipping bronze images of men was wrong?

He hoped his lack of enthusiasm didn't show. "The governor will please excuse me," he said, gesturing at his mud-stiffened, dusty clothes.

"I am not in a fit condition."

"Quite right," Governor Pilate stated. "Centurion, you are dismissed."

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Hours passed quickly as Avel traveled on the road to Jerusalem. The boy was cognizant that among the legitimate pilgrims were spies variously in the pay of Pilate, Herod Antipas, and the religious factions of the high priest and the Sanhedrin.

It had always been so since the days of Herod the Great. Large gatherings had been forbidden. Any hint if disloyalty had been dealt with swiftly and viciously. The hesitation to speak openly about important issues was ingrained among the populace of Judea and Jerusalem.
The Galileans, however, were less circumspect.

Conversation between strangers was cautious, avoiding the topics of politics, possible revolt, and especially the distribution of the Korban funds for the new aqueduct. These were matters to be discussed only over the table with close friends and family. There was safety among those who could be trusted.

Still, here and there, between fathers and sons, brothers and members of a clan, such discussions took place in guarded tones.

The one topic discussed candidly by everyone was Yeshua of Nazareth. Who was he? Would he come to Jerusalem for the holy week? What did it mean that he fed the thousands but refused to be proclaimed their king? Yeshua might have been riding south at the head of an army of thousands willing to fight for him.

Instead he had vanished into the hills.

Avel kept himself from telling about the amazing encounter he, Ha-or Tov, and Emet had experienced. How foolish would he be if he drew attention to himself in such a charged atmosphere?

The journey continued like this for a time. Occasionally Avel strained his eyes ahead to pick out Ha-or Tov and Emet, but they were always where they were supposed to be.

His plan was working perfectly.

When the sun stood directly overhead, groups gathered by the roadside for a noon meal. Avel, who plucked at his bread in solitary contemplation, was asked to join a family group. This was a way to honor the Jewish command for hospitality to strangers. In inviting Avel perhaps the family hoped they were entertaining one of the many angels who traveled each year with the pilgrims to Jerusalem.

But Avel was no angel. He was frightened and hungry. He had a twinge about losing sight of his friends as they continued down the slope in front of him. Then he decided they would have to stop sometime, and he would overtake them again.

After bread and fruit had been passed out and shared, a woman asked Avel his name. Where was his family, she continued, and would they be worried about him?

He assured her, “They’re ahead.” It was true as far as it went; Emet and Ha-or Tov were ahead.

This was accepted without further details as Avel split an orange with a younger boy. Dividing the ripe globe, he bit into a plump slice, savored the sweet juice, and tossed the peel toward a squirrel perched on a rock pile.

Like Avel, a passing pilgrim turned his head to watch the rodent dart toward the prize.

Avel gasped and froze as he recognized the familiar face. Dull and haggard, with a grizzled fringe of dirty hair framing his sunburned features... it was one of the rebels Avel had met in bar Abba’s camp!

It was Asher! Asher! Slow of speech but quick with his dagger! The only one who had been kind to the boys when they had been captives.

But the one who walked with Asher struck fear in Avel’s heart! Stalking angrily alongside, with a scowl on his face, was Kittim! At once Avel took in the thin beard, the cruel dark eyes, the hands that once beat Avel, and the feet that joyfully crushed the bones of a tiny bird. Avel’s worst nightmare had come true: Kittim swaggered defiantly among the throngs!

And he would happily slit Avel’s throat for nothing.

Avel’s heart skipped a beat, then began a terrified racing.

Asher seemed more interested in the squirrel than in his fellow pilgrims. Kittim, however, scrutinized everyone, as if sizing them up as either potential enemies or targets for robbery.

Or, in Avel’s case, as a lamb for slaughter.

The orange turned sour in Avel’s mouth and he couldn’t swallow.

“Are you listening, Avel? More bread?” the boy beside Avel inquired loudly.

Avel cringed. Had Kittim heard Avel’s name? Was he caught?

No. Kittim glared down the trail. There was no sign that he recognized Avel.

But Asher’s head swiveled toward the family. Avel tucked his chin and rubbed his forehead in an attempt to conceal himself among the children. He prepared to flee! But where? West of the road was a marsh, impossible for running.

Into the rock piles?

The men’s longer, stronger legs would surely overtake him.

Avel saw and sensed Asher’s eyes sweep over him, past him, back to him. They lingered just an instant... and then Asher passed on without stopping. The brigand’s face snapped forward at a command from Kittim.

Exhaling a sigh of relief, Avel found that the boy was staring at him curiously. The woman also regarded Avel with a puzzled expression.

“Are you unwell?” she asked kindly.

“No. I’m... I’ve never had an orange before.” Avel struggled to respond, his attention focused on the retreating backs of the two rebels. It
had been so close, too close! If Kittim had not been distracted by something up ahead . . .

What was Kittim focused on? The sparrow killer raised his head, as if sniffing the air for prey!

Avel jumped to his feet when Kittim nudged Asher in the ribs. The two hesitated an instant, then resumed, picking up their pace!

The sparrow killer had spotted Emet and Ha-or Tov!

"Sorry," Avel said, thrusting the rest of the orange and the bread back into his companion's lap. "I'm late. Have to catch up!"

He bolted.

Darting onto the first switchback, Avel caught sight of Kittim racing down the trail, cutting across corners in his haste to overtake Emet and Ha-or Tov.

And what could Avel, commanded by Yeshua to care for Emet and Ha-or Tov, do to stop their capture?

Kittim was almost upon Avel's unsuspecting friends. Asher was only a few paces behind.

If Avel called out the warning that there were rebels on the road, would anyone believe him? And how many would be hurt when Kittim and Asher drew their knives?

Too late!

In his second of indecision Avel saw Kittim reach out and grasp Ha-or Tov's collar. Ha-or Tov's curly red hair flung wide from his head as Kittim spun the boy around to face him.

Emet's mouth was open. He was shouting something. Shouting to be left alone! Shouting that they were being attacked by robbers! It was an unlikely scenario: two young boys being robbed. But it was effective nonetheless.

A broad-shouldered, bull-like man reared up from his lunch in the grass and boomed into the dispute with a roar of indignation.

Avel recognized Nakdimon ben Gurion! Dressed in a commoner's clothes, the black-bearded member of the Sanhedrin was taking the part of the two boys!

Asher turned from his path and slunk off, evidently not wanting to encounter a foe as formidable as Nakdimon. Kittim blinked down into the eyes of Ha-or Tov, released his grip, raised his hands in a sort of apology, and backed away.

As abruptly as it began, the encounter was over.

To Avel's surprise Kittim thrust Ha-or Tov aside and yelled back at the big man. Asher, hood over his head, jogged past. Kittim joined him, and the two rebels disappeared in the distance.

What had happened? How had tragedy been averted?

Realizing that rejoining his two companions wouldn't be sensible at the moment, Avel forced himself to calm his heart, his breath, and his pace.

Ha-or Tov and Emet trailed close at the heels of Nakdimon the rest of the journey to the next caravansary.

Avel kept his distance and considered the danger that lay ahead on the road to Beth-lehem.