

MDays of Messiah

The Saga Begins



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Chapter One

Circa 3 A.D.

"Tyrus, wake up. " A bleak voice roused him from sleep as a rough hand patted his shoulder. "Gather your things. It's time to go."

The urgency in his father's voice stirred the confusion already swirling in his groggy mind. "What? Where are we going? Why are we leaving in the middle of the night?"

"Shhh. There's no time for questions, son. Get moving. I need your help getting the family together. We must leave quickly."

The light of his father's lamp faded with his footsteps as he walked out into the large courtyard.

Tyrus rolled out of bed and squinted, willing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Gather his things? What things? He didn't even know where they were going.

He huffed and rubbed his eyes. Blinking hard, he groped around in the darkness for his olive green tunic. His hand met with a cool, smooth fabric. That was it. His parents had given him the Asian silk robe along with his own prayer tallit upon his sixteenth birthday a few months ago. All his friends had been jealous. Reaching under his bed with his other hand, he pulled out his leather satchel. He stuffed his silk tunic and other necessary items inside. What could be wrong? He had just been dreaming about the Priest that was coming from Jerusalem to teach in their synagogue. How exciting it would have been to hear from a man who'd actually lived in the Holy City. Why would father want them to go anywhere at this hour?

Tyrus strapped on his sandals and glanced around the room. The two other beds still held their young sleepers.

"Tavor, wake up." The form in the bed across from his rolled over. " Up, I say. Gather a few of your things and meet us in the courtyard. It's time to go."

"Go?" In a swift movement, the blanket was tossed aside and Tavor fumbled with his sandals. His little brother always wanted to go, he didn't care when or where.

"Pack a few things for Tiltan too," Tyrus said as he bent and scooped up the sleeping form of his littlest brother.

As Tyrus stepped out into the courtyard, His father and mother were just coming out of their room.

"Scandal? Adamiel, what are you talking about? How could we be involved in any scandal?"

"This is Caesar we're talking about, Timnah. It doesn't matter if we're guilty or not. If he feels we have cheated him in any way he will throw our whole family to the arena beasts."

"I knew we shouldn't have agreed to become one of his personal merchants. What a disaster. Now we must leave Rome? Husband, we have nowhere to go."

Their voices quieted when they saw Tyrus crossing the courtyard towards them.

"We'll discuss this later. We need to get moving."

Shifting the weight of the child still sleeping in his arms, Tyrus asked, "Father, where are we going?"

His father's hand clasped his arm and the reflection of the dim flame flickered in his dark eyes. "I'm not sure. Away from here. Somewhere in our homeland. Amongst our own people. Tonight, just do as I say."

Homeland? Israel? Excitement and fear battled in his chest. He had always dreamed of going to the Promised Land one day, but the unknown of what lie ahead vexed him.

Tyrus' mother clutched her husband's arm. "What about the Menorah and the loom? My mother gave it to me on our wedding day."

"Timnah, I will buy you a bronze loom from Egypt if you want it. For now, we must go."

"Can we at least take the Mezuzah off the doorpost? Please, Husband, one thing familiar?" Her soft, golden eyes pleaded with him.

"Fine. Tyrus, there's a wagon waiting in the stall. Lay Tiltan down, keeping him asleep if you can, and fetch the Mezuzah from the doorpost." His father spoke in hushed tones. "Be quick and quiet. We must leave at once."

Now he knew something was dreadfully wrong. They were leaving, and they were leaving for good. Was Caesar after them? Something in his abdomen twisted as he crossed the

courtyard towards the stable. Something must have gone amiss with the trade they'd done at the palace last week.

Tyrus laid his sleeping brother in the wagon that was already lined with blankets and stroked the donkey's nose.

"What are we into this time, eh Pe'er?"

Tavor appeared and piled several bags into the cart. Tyrus slugged his arm. "Go get the Mezuzah off the doorpost. I'm going to check on Tzivyah."

Tyrus hurried across the courtyard just as his sister came down the stairs. He reached for her arm to steady her as she descended carrying the sleeping girl. Her one good eye was groggy, and he wouldn't risk letting them fall.

"What's going on, Tyrus?" Tzivyah mumbled.

"Everything's alright. We're going to visit the Promised Land."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Just get into the wagon and you can cuddle with Topaz and go back to sleep."

He guided the two girls to the cart and lifted them aboard.

"Are all the children here?" Father appeared with Mother right behind him. "Tyrus, Tzivyah, T—T--..." He snapped his fingers several times as if to trigger his memory. "Woman, why did we ever decide to give all our children names that begin with the same letter?"

Mother gave a gentle smile and finished the headcount for him. "Tavor, Tiltan and Topaz. They're all here."

Adamiel pressed his ear against the gate that led to the main street and held a finger to his lips. He nodded at Tyrus, then with a slow and cautious hand, opened the stable door and peered down the street.

"It's clear. Tyrus, take the other side of the donkey, and please children, be quiet."

The soft clip clop of Pe'er's hooves upon the stone street seemed like thunder that would wake the entire neighborhood as they made their way out of the capital.

"Once we get out of the city, we can quicken our pace. Right now stealth is our priority. We'll make our way to Ostia Harbor where one of our ships will take us to Israel."

Adamiel's whisper paused as they passed a Roman guard post. Two were stationed there, but whatever their conversation was must have been more interesting than the cart, because the guards hardly glanced in their direction.

They passed the pagan temple, its lamps casting an eerie flicker of light upon the street. Tyrus peered over his shoulder into the bed of the cart. Most of the children had fallen asleep again, but his mother's golden eyes gleamed with fear, and it pierced his heart.

"It will be alright, Mother. Think of all the opportunity that awaits us in our homeland."

She pursed her lips together in what was probably supposed to be a smile, but said nothing. He knew how she felt. Not having a plan of action was gnawing at him too.

The hair raised on the back of his neck as they approached the gateway of the city. There was a soldier standing staunch on each side of the arch, and another group a few paces away.

"We'll just keep moving. There's no reason for them to stop us." Father's whisper sounded confident, but the tremor of his chin betrayed him.

A knot formed in Tyrus' middle. Couldn't they speed up a little? No, that would look odd. The soldier's conversation quieted. Were they watching? Don't look at them. Just be natural.

"You there, with the cart, halt."

Tyrus held his breath. Footsteps sounded on the cobblestones as a soldier approached. He turned towards him. The guard looked at the sleeping children in the cart, then at Father.

"Where are you going?"

"We're on our way to visit some relatives," Father answered without hesitation.

"In the middle of the night?"

"The sun will be rising soon. We like to get an early start because of the children." Adamiel thrust a thumb over his shoulder. "They sleep instead of fidget."

The guard's brow wrinkled. "Aren't you afraid of traveling in the dark?"

"On Roman roads? Oh, no. We have complete confidence in the Roman road system and security. Unless you feel there is a risk, in which case we would be happy to have an escort."

The soldier was silent for a moment as he glanced at his comrades. "That won't be necessary. Very well, you may proceed."

Adamiel nodded and tugged on Pe'er's reins.

"Wait."

Tyrus' stomach leapt to his throat. Breathe. He tried to slow his heart rate.

A centurion approached them. He lifted one of the blankets and examined the cart. "You brought very little for traveling with a large family. Where is your destination?"

"We're visiting wealthy relatives near Ostia. If we travel light, they give more gifts." Father winked at the guard. His Jewish tongue always had an answer.

"Really? Who are they? I know Ostia well. I was raised there."

Tyrus' pulse thundered in his ears. Father had done it this time. His salesman tongue had trapped him in a corner.

"You probably wouldn't know them, they're from Cyrene, but they currently live near the port because they do a lot of business there."

"By what name?"

"Malcus Didymus and his son Simeon."

The centurion's eyes narrowed to thin slits. The flicker of torches gleamed on his brass helmet. "Never heard of them."

"I didn't think so. He's not much of a social person." Father again tugged on the reins.

"Wait." The man walked closer to Father and looked down his pointy nose. "Tell Malcus Didymus that the house of Oralieus would like to meet him."

Adamiel waved his hand. "I'll tell him, but I doubt it will make a difference."

"If he is a man of standing in Ostia, he will recognize the name of Oralieus."

Father again waived his hand without looking back as they traipsed down the road towards the Port City. When they were a safe distance away, Tyrus glanced at his father. Their gaze met, and a slow smile spread across his face.

"That was a close one, wasn't it, son?" Adamiel laughed.

"I'm still trying to get my heart out of my throat. I can hear it pounding in my ears."

His father chuckled again. "I just hope this doesn't create any trouble for Malcus."

"Who is Malcus? I've never heard of him before."

"He is the captain of the ship that will transport us to Israel."

The smile vanished from Tyrus' face. "That could be a problem, couldn't it?"

Father shrugged, "That depends on how much influence this Oralieus really has in Ostia."

"Meaning?"

"If Malcus does have to go and meet him, he'll ask about the family that visited him. I told him Malcus was a wealthy relative, if he asks more about us and our name is wanted by Caesar..."

"But if we've escaped, could he hold Malcus responsible?"

"I don't know."

A darkness fell over Father's brow, and he continued on in silence. Tyrus wanted to ask what had gone wrong and why they had to leave Rome so suddenly. He needed to know how much danger they were really in, but he knew by the look on Adamiel's face that he could not ask now. So they plodded on in silence for several hours, scenarios spinning themselves into worry in Tyrus' mind.

The sun rose, and with it a feeling of impending doom. Just when Tyrus thought he would go mad, the port city of Ostia came into sight. The Roman architecture was evident with strong, tall pillars and statues of pagan gods made from precious stones or metals. As they passed through the gate, they were met by large merchant shops, store houses and the great amphitheater. As they neared the forum, the sounds of crowds and commerce grew louder. Even at this early hour, people, carts, oxen and horses bustled through the cobblestone streets.

At last, they reached the marina. Exotic smells drifted from crates that were stacked upon the edge of the docks, making Tyrus' stomach growl. Then there were the boats—no, *ships*—that lined the harbor. Soaring, majestic sails looked like clouds against the morning sky and the creaking of the rigging filled his ears. It sounded like adventure to him, until he noticed all of the Roman guards stationed at close intervals all along the docks. His belly did a somersault.

"Our ship is this way." Adamiel pointed down the dock as he spoke above the noise of the harbor. "Malcus is expecting us."

It was slow progress to maneuver the cart down the dock. Workers were in constant motion, loading and unloading goods from ships and moving things along the edge of the pier. There was hardly room to get the cart through.

At last, a deep holler came from above their heads, "Ahoy. Adamiel. I see you've brought the whole tribe this time."

Looking up, Tyrus saw a stout man leaning over the railing of one of the ships.

"Malcus, good to see you old friend. Get down here and meet my family." Adamiel waved him over to the landing plank.

Before long, Malcus appeared at the top of the lath. The captain pulled off his hat revealing his bald head. His face was tanned from days at sea and a thick golden earring hung from his left ear. His broad hand clapped Adamiel on the back.

"It's about time you come around again, but I see what's been keeping you away." He smiled at Tyrus' mother. "You must be Adamiel's wife."

Mother smiled and bowed her head in greeting.

"Yes, this is my wife, Timnah, and these, my children." Father motioned to each child as he introduced them. "The oldest is Tyrus, Tzivyah, Tavor, Tiltan and my youngest daughter, Topaz."

The captain's earring flopped as he shook his head. "Why did you name them all alike? I'll never remember all of that. I will have to call them T-one, T-two, T-three, T-four and T-five." He waved his finger at each.

Adamiel chuckled, "You would remember them all if your raise depended on it."

Malcus threw back his head and gave a laugh robust enough to match his size. "That isn't fair, it isn't fair. Now come, all aboard our fine vessel."

The vessel was fine indeed. As Tyrus looked around his abdomen fluttered with delight. He couldn't wait to sail out of the harbor onto the sea. His father walked ahead of them with Malcus, chatting about the latest trades and the best markets. A sound in the rigging caused him to turn.

"Tavor! Get down from there this instant."

The captain turned on his heel and stared at the small boy climbing the rigging. He elbowed Adamiel, "A born sailor, don't you think?"

Adamiel frowned. "Tavor, if I catch you climbing the rigging, I'll make you swab the decks all the way to Caesarea. Now get down."

Tavor descended from his zenith, and they continued to the cabin. Once inside, Adamiel turned to Malcus.

"What do you know about the house of Oralieus?"

"He is the Master of Tribute in Ostia." Malcus' eyes narrowed. "Why do you ask?"

Chapter Two

"You told him that?" Malcus leapt from his chair and paced around the room. "This could be bad, Adamiel. It could be bad. You've done it this time."

"I am trying to get my family out of Rome before Caesar executes them all on some whim. How was I supposed to know that some centurion, who happens to be the son of the most powerful man in Ostia, would be standing as sentry?"

"You're under suspicion by Caesar too? Adamiel, you'd better tell me what's going on."

"I will tell you everything, but first we must cast off. The sooner I get my family away from here the better."

"I have to turn in the log with the names of everyone on board before we can sail."

Adamiel pointed to the log. "My name is Quintus of Rome with my family of six, who shall remain unnamed."

The captain's hand hovered over the paper as he looked at Adamiel. "You want me to report fake names?"

"It is for the safety of my family."

"If Caesar issues a decree for your arrest, that sentry related to Oralieus will remember you and inquire of you here. When he sees a family of the same description aboard my ship, there's no telling what they will do."

"Do not forget who owns this ship, Malcus."

"You're right. Allow me to correct myself. When he sees a family of the same description riding as passengers on a merchant ship owned by the man they're searching for, there will be no doubt. There's no telling what they will do to me or the ship."

"How would you know? You were just obeying orders. Romans will understand that. You don't have any reason to believe that Caesar would be after us. You're just transporting us to Caesarea for a visit to our homeland."

"But the fake names..."

"Will make us a little harder to track."

Malcus glared at him for a long moment. At last he sighed and his quill made a scratching sound as he jotted down the name Adamiel had designated. Without another word, he rose and his large frame made a heavy gait upon the wooden floor as he exited the cabin, closing the door behind him.

Tyrus glanced at his father, who still stared at the closed door.

"Alright then, let's get settled in. Then we'll all go and watch the ship embark on our journey to the Promised Land."

Soon, Tyrus stood on the bow of the ship. Sailors ran to and fro on the deck below, raising the anchor, and preparing the vessel for departure.

Clink...Clink...Clink

Tyrus cocked his head. What was that sound? He strained to hear where it came from. Looking around, he noticed a metal grate near the center of the deck. Did the sound come from there? He inched towards it. He leaned forward to peer beneath it, but when he did, the grate opened and one of the sailors came out. The man glared at Tyrus as he closed it.

"Don't go down there, you hear me boy?"

Tyrus nodded, and the sailor resumed his duties.

One step closer, and Tyrus peered through the grate. Men filed past in a single line, their hands and feet shackled, chains dragging against the wooden floor of the hold, a loud 'clink' echoing with each step. Their backs were bare, and Tyrus could see stripes on many of them. They looked like an army of ghosts, so pale and gaunt as if they'd never seen the sun. Even the men that were of the dark skin race looked ghostly.

"Rowers," His father's voice made him jump. Tyrus hadn't heard him approach. "Those are the slaves that propel the ship. With them, our vessel makes much better time, and maneuvers the sea with increased efficiency. We use them for rowing in and out of port, and if the wind is not strong enough to catch the sails. It was expensive, but it's been well worth the investment to have them."

Swallowing the bitter taste in his mouth, Tyrus nodded.

Father placed a hand on his shoulder. "Come, you'll miss the excitement of casting off."

Tyrus watched as the beautiful gardens and baths of Ostia faded out of sight, but even the excitement of sailing the seas for the first time, and the adventure of going to a new land couldn't silence the sounds of men groaning under the strain of the oars below his feet.

Tyrus' eyes searched the main deck. Father disappeared about an hour ago leaving him to study the Torah. Sailors, barrels, crates, clinking beneath his feet, but no sign of father.

In one corner of the main deck, he spotted Tzivyah. She sat with Topaz teaching her a hand game. With a sigh, he plopped down on the deck beside her. "Where's father?"

"He and mother are with the captain in his cabin. They've been in there for some time."

"Probably discussing our situation." Tyrus sighed again and softened his tone into a whisper. "I wish I knew what was going on. But Abba won't say anything to me."

"The same with mother. I've begged her to explain, but she won't." Tzivyah rubbed her bad eye. She always did that when she was frustrated or scared. It was a bad habit. It irritated the eye and made its condition worse. A disease had infected her left eye when she was less than six years old which became worse over time. Now, her left eye was almost blind. The physicians in Rome tried to treat it, but Tyrus suspected they'd only made it worse. After the treatments, the eye had changed color and became hideous to behold, so Tyrus had made her a patch to cover it.

He grabbed her hand and placed it in her lap. "It's going to be okay. Once we get to Israel, everything will be fine."

Tears filled her visible eye and a few slipped out from beneath her patch. He hated seeing her cry. "Tyrus, I'm so afraid. Everything is new and strange."

Tyrus wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "Don't worry. Yahweh will take care of us." He planted a kiss on her hair. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"Land sighted! Caesarea Port dead ahead."

Tyrus jumped up from the barrel he'd been sitting on and ran to the bow of the ship. He squinted through the evening haze to catch a glimpse of their new homeland. The captain appeared beside him and placed one hand on his shoulder, his thick finger pointing with the other.

"There, do you see it? There's a light gleaming through the fog."

"I see it. Where is the light coming from?"

"Caesarea is the only port with a light tower. It stands at the entrance of the port. A fire burns inside at all times to guide the ships into the harbor. That wall-like structure going into the city there, that's an aqueduct. It carries water into the city."

"Incredible."

Malcus laughed, "Yes, it's clever. It's clever." He turned to his crew and cupped his hand beside his mouth as he barked the orders. "Prepare to make port. Order rowers to ready."

Tyrus leaned over the sides of the ship. The oars poked out of the holes in the side of the vessel, ready for action. The sea wind tussled his hair and he took a deep breath of salty air. This new land would be good for him, he knew it would.

As they neared the port, the rowers eased them along into the harbor. Tyrus stood in awe as the city of Caesarea loomed closer. Large palace gardens overlooked the sea. There must have been a race in progress at the Circus Maximus, because a large cloud of dust rose from the oval stadium and the faint roar of a distant crowd met his ears.

They pulled in alongside the dock and thrust out the landing plank. Across from them was a great shrine to one of the Roman goddesses, its tall, slender pillars looming in front of him. His chest heaved with each breath as he took in the city.

He watched from the railing as the workers began unloading the goods from their ship. The captain was below negotiating prices with a man.

The city was fascinating, but would they stay here? The gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach reminded him that their family was homeless.

Pushing himself off the railing, he wandered toward the captain's cabin. His parents' voices drifted out of the open door. "Nazareth is one of the closest towns to the port."

"But is it too close, Adamiel? What if Caesar goes so far as to try to find us here?"

"You're right, and it appears that Nazareth is a small town, filled with poor people. We could do very little trade there. We need a larger city. That leaves us with two options, we could go south towards Jerusalem, or we can go east towards Galilee."

Tyrus tapped on the side of the open door. His father glanced up and nodded. They were looking at a map laid out on the table.

"Jerusalem is here," Father said pointing to the spot. "It would afford good trade opportunities."

"The Romans have a strong presence in Jerusalem." Malcus appeared at the doorway. Tyrus stepped back so he could approach the map. "It is a large city, but the situation there is tense. It could be dangerous for a family such as yours."

"Then what would you recommend? You know these cities and their business better than I."

The captain approached the table and laid a thick finger on the map. "Galilee is the center of much trade because of the Sea of Galilee. The area is very nice with more foliage and water than other parts of the country. It is more suitable for raising a family."

"But the region of Galilee is farther from the ports, and from Jerusalem."

"It is, it is. But there are many towns dotting the edge of the Sea of Galilee. We'll do a lot of business in Tiberius, Capernaum, Bethsaida, and the surrounding towns."

Adamiel turned to his wife. "Would you rather raise your children in a quiet town or the Holy City?"

"Galilee seems to be the wiser choice. I wish to be among our own people in a safe town that will accept our family. Jerusalem is a large city with many Romans, and too many strangers."

Father nodded, "Then we go to Galilee."

"It is too late for you to go today. Stay on the ship with me tonight, then you can get an early start in the morning. You should be able to find an inn to occupy until you find suitable housing."

Tyrus was awakened by sounds of feet scampering across the deck above them. The door to the hold where they were sleeping flew open with a crash.

"The Romans. They're coming." The tremble in mother's voice said it all. Every child was awake. Clamoring for whatever belongings were near them.

"Come now. Father is waiting."

Tyrus grabbed Tavor's hand. His eyes darted about as they rushed across the deck toward the landing. There, like hell fire burning, was a single lantern illuminating the ravenous eagle's head on the bow of the Roman ship. It's talons gripped Tyrus' heart. Tavor must have sensed his fear, because he began to whimper.

"Shh! Tavor, be quiet."

"Why are we running?"

Tyrus glanced behind him once more. "We're running away from the eagle."

In a swift motion, he swooped the boy up in his arms and quickened his pace.

Father was at the landing with Pe'er and the cart. "Get in. Quickly."

One by one, they loaded the children. At last mother climbed in. Father jerked the reins and Pe'er trotted down the street. Tyrus and his father keeping pace beside the cart.

"Where will we hide?" Tyrus panted.

Glancing behind him, Father replied in a low tone, "We can't hide. Our only hope is to run."

Chapter Three

Once again, Pe'er's clumsy steps noised through the streets, but they seemed to draw little attention. The port was bustling even in the dead of night. Every so often, Tyrus glanced back towards the sea where he could catch a glimpse of the light from the Roman boat which grew larger and brighter with each passing moment. They were nearing the city gate when the trumpet blew, signaling the ship's docking.

They continued on in silence, praying they would have enough of a start to escape their pursuers.

"Father, what will happen to Malcus? Will the Romans punish him?"

"I don't know, son. It depends on what they want and if they think he really had anything to do with us. The Roman ship that docked may have a completely different objective. Perhaps they aren't looking for us at all." Father was trying to sound hopeful, but Tyrus wasn't fooled.

"If they come looking for us, they will easily spot us on the road."

"Our family is of average size," Father said as he glanced behind him.

"But there are no other families traveling together. Especially at this hour."

"There will be more as we near the other towns."

They walked on in silence for some time as the sun lazily crept out of its sleep. The birds began chirping, the warmth of the sun's rays, as well as the distance that was growing between them and the Romans, lifted Tyrus' spirits.

"I'm hungry." Topaz' voice was still rough from sleep as she rubbed her eyes.

Father sighed, "We left the ship in such a hurry that we didn't have time to gather food. We'll have to purchase some at the nearest town."

Tyrus looked back at his baby sister. Her pudgy lip was poking out, even though her eyes blinked in resolution not to cry. "Yes, Abba. I'll try to wait."

Reaching into his satchel, Tyrus pulled out a hunk of bread he had saved from dinner last night and placed it in her hand. "There. That will hold you over."

Her eyes sparkled like polished treasure as she grinned up at him. "Thank you, Tyrus." With small bites, she savored the bread.

They plodded on for hours, stopping only a few moments to pick fruit from a fig tree that was not far from the road. Tyrus' feet were aching and his energy was drained from the exertion in the sun. His mouth was dry, and dust gritted between his teeth.

Glancing over his shoulder, he met Tzivyah's gaze. "Why don't you ride for a while, Tyrus? You look very tired."

He forced his weary shoulders back. "I'm fine. Rest easy, my sister."

Tzivyah stroked Topaz' hair. "Dusk is approaching. Will you walk all night?"

She always fretted about him too much, almost as if she were the older sister. He knew she meant well, but it irritated him. "Tzivyah, I told you, don't..."

His gaze drifted past his sister to notice something ascending in the distance. He squinted, trying to make out what it was.

Dust?

"Father, look," He pointed at the hazy puff forming on the horizon. "Is that a dust cloud?"

Father whirled around, eyes widening at the sight. "That could only be Romans." His choked voice was barely audible as his dark eyes darted about. "We have to find somewhere to hide."

Tyrus' eyes scanned their surroundings. There was nothing around, no trees, no place to hide. His heart tightened within his chest.

"There. Up ahead," Father pointed down the path. "There's an abandoned house just off the road. Quickly, Tyrus, we'll hide the cart behind it and let the Roman's pass by."

Pe'er made a great fuss, and they could hear the thunder of the hooves approaching as they pulled the cart behind the deserted villa.

"Stay low in the cart, children, and don't make a sound."

Tyrus stroked the donkey's muzzle. "Shhh, be quiet boy. Our lives are depending on it." He picked a handful of grass and fed it to the animal.

The thunder of hooves grew louder, and with it the clinking of armor and swords jolting against the legs of the riders.

The troop had just passed the house when Pe'er's grass ran out. He brayed in complaint. Tyrus shoved another handful of grass into his mouth, and held his breath, listening intently.

Had the riders all gone? Perhaps they didn't hear Pe'er's bray. He ventured a careful peak around the corner of the house. In the silhouette of the setting sun, he could see that one of the riders had stopped. He turned his horse around and rode up to the villa. He ducked his head to look inside one of the windows.

Tyrus pulled back, he wouldn't risk being seen. His mother's eyes, so full of fear, pierced him like a lance. They waited for what seemed like ages. At last they heard the soldier gallop off to join the rest of the detachment. They sat for several moments, until they were sure the soldiers were gone.

Father let out a sigh. "That was close. You stupid animal." He slapped Pe'er on the hindquarters. "You could've had us all killed."

Pe'er turned to him and drooped his ears. Topaz giggled, "Pe'er looks funny."

Tiltan giggled too, and soon the whole family was laughing, from relief if nothing else.

"This looks like a good shelter to me. Let's stop here for tonight," Abba said. "We don't want to attract attention by building a fire, so the shelter from the cold will be welcome."

The villa was small, but consisted of three separate rooms. The boys went in the room to the left, the girls in the room to the right, and Imah and Abba in the middle. Wearied from the journey, they all settled in for a much needed rest.

It became very cold, and the boys huddled together to stay warm. The knot in his abdomen, in addition to the chill, made it difficult to sleep. At last Tyrus dozed off.

He woke several hours later when he rolled over on top of a branch that was lying in the deserted floor of the villa, jabbing him in the back. He tossed the stick aside with a groan and snuggled closer to Tiltan.

It must be getting warmer, he was no longer shivering. Father must have built a fire, because the scent of smoke reached his nostrils. He was glad for that. At last he would be able to sleep comfortably. But what if the Roman's came back? They would notice smoke ascending from an abandoned hut. But Tyrus was too tired to care. He squeezed his eyes shut, burying his face into his arm.

Tyrus bolted upright. Was that a horse whiney? Had he been dreaming? His eyes began to sting, the smell of smoke overpowered him. Flames licked the ceiling on the far side of the room.

A whiney came from outside followed by men's laughter. "That ought to take care of it. Isn't it a tragedy, men? A family burns in their sleep while taking shelter in an abandoned villa." Laughter echoed off the stone walls. "That will teach these rebellious Jews what happens when you try to swindle Caesar."

Tyrus' panic turned to action as the soldiers rode away. He scooped Tiltan up in his arms, covering his mouth and nose with his tunic.

"Tavor, get up!" He nudged him with his foot. "The house is on fire."

Tavor leapt to his feet, his face bewildered.

"We have to get out of the house."

They turned towards the doorway just as a fiery beam fell across it. There's no way they could go through. There was one window on the far side of the room, the flames were inching closer to it. They had to hurry.

"Tavor, through the window. Now!"

The limber boy crawled through without trouble.

"Here, take Tiltan."

Tyrus handed the wailing toddler through the frame, and climbed through himself. Not far from the house was a clump of short acacia trees. Taking Tiltan in his arms, he grabbed Tavor's hand and ran towards them.

"Here." He placed Tiltan again in his brother's arms. "Stay here. Do you hear me, Tavor? Don't move."

His heart pounding in his chest, Tyrus ran back towards the house. His parents stumbled out of the door, coughing and wheezing.

"Oh, Tyrus, you're okay. Where are the children?"

"The boys are by the trees, there. But where is Tzivyah and Topaz?"

Father's head snapped back towards the house. "Timnah, go to the boys."

Shielding his face from the smoke and heat, Adamiel disappeared inside the house. He emerged a moment later, patting out fire on his sleeve.

"The doorway to their room is blocked. I can't get in."

The window. Tyrus ran around the side of the house. *Jehovah, please let there be a window.*

Yes, there it was. "Tzivyah? Tzivyah, where are you?"

"Tyrus? I can't see!"

"Come towards my voice. There is a window on this side of the room. I'll help you get out." He reached inside the window feeling for her hands. "Come on Tzivyah. This way. This way, hurry."

The heat singed the hair on his arms as he waited for her touch. At last he felt her. "Alright, I'm going to pull you up."

Lifting with all his might, he pulled his sister through the window and they scrambled back from the enflamed wall.

"Are you alright, Tzivyah?"

Tears left streaks down her smoke-stained face. "Do you have Topaz?"

Tyrus' heart froze. "Topaz?"

"I can't find her. I looked and looked, but I couldn't see. Please tell me she's out here."

"Tzivyah. Oh thank the Lord." Father ran to her and wrapped her in his arms, kissing her hair.

Tyrus leapt up and ran towards the window.

"Son, what are you doing? Stay away from there."

"Abba, he has to find Topaz," Tzivyah said as she gripped his sleeve.

The frame of the window was ablaze. Tyrus tried to reach inside, but the inferno burned his arm. "Topaz? Topaz, can you hear me? Where are you?"

No voice. Only the sound of crackling wood and bursting clay vessels.

He ripped off his outer tunic and tried to put out the flames around the window so that he could get inside, but the fire was too hot and consumed the silk fabric.

"Topaz!"

"Step back, Tyrus. Let me try." His father pushed him out of the way.

Adrenaline rushed through his veins as Tyrus bolted back to the door of the hut. It too was a ring of fire, but if he could make it through, perhaps he could find her and drag her out.

He backed up to get a running start. Deep breath. One step, two steps, three. He was about to make the leap into the house, when the roof collapsed sending sparks and fiery debris in every direction. He fell backwards, his breath leaving him until his father appeared at his side.

"Oh, my son. My son. Are you alright? Please say you're alright." Tears streamed from his father's dark eyes as he bent over him.

Mustering what strength he had left, he tried to sit up and looked towards the burning rubble that had been the villa.

He took in a sharp breath. "She's in there?"

Adamiel placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"I tried, Abba. I was going to get her out." His vision blurred as tears welled in his eyes. "I was going to get her out, Abba."

"There was nothing we could do, son." With a few gentle pats, his father walked away.

After a moment of silence, his mother began to cry out for her baby girl.

With her wails ringing in his ears, Tyrus pulled his knees to his chest and buried his face in his lap. His heart tore inside of him, burning tears streaming down his cheeks, his whole body convulsed by sobs. Topaz was dead, and it was his fault. He would never forgive himself.

Chapter Four

"Topaz!"

Tyrus bolted upright in his bed. He had heard her. She was screaming his name. But her voice faded into crackles of burning flames. The gleam of the moon through the window of their new home gave the room a cold and unfamiliar feel. Running his hand through his hair, he tried to steady his breathing and slow the hammering of his heart. His brothers snored softly, undisturbed by his outburst.

Lying down again, he closed his eyes, willing the tears to disappear. He had failed to protect her, and the Romans had killed her. The guilt haunted him every moment, waking or sleeping.

He rolled over on his side. At least they were far away from the Romans. They had settled in a town on the edge of the Galilee called Capernaum. It was a good sized town for these parts, but smaller than he was accustomed to. The people were mostly fishermen or farmers of some sort, and the town possessed none of the lavish comforts he was used to in Rome. But the Roman occupation and influence in Capernaum was inconsequential, so he didn't care. To be away from Rome, and Romans, was enough.

When they first arrived, they knew no one. But the tradition of Jewish hospitality came to their aid. A tanner by the name of Ezekiel was kind enough to host them until they found a home. Father had acquired this small house after only a few days of staying with the tanner's large family. They had also set up a shop in the small marketplace.

A dog barked somewhere in the street, and Tyrus rose to look out the window. The sun was just beginning to shed its scarlet light on the town, and a few of the people were moving about. The smell of fresh bread wafted from the bakery down the street. They'd spent several weeks in this new town, and everything still seemed very strange.

Slipping into his tunic, he tiptoed out the door toward the stable. Pe'er brayed a soft greeting as he came in.

"Yes, good morning to you too." He patted the donkey's nose and grabbed a bucket and stool from the corner and squarely faced the new milk cow. "Alright, Bozi, you're going to be a good girl and give the milk peaceably today. We had yesterday to get introduced, so we should be friends. Agreed?"

He set the stool down and planted himself on it. He glanced at the cow who was munching hay peacefully and set the bucket under her. So far, so good. He rubbed his hands together to warm them before milking her, but the moment he reached for the udders, she stomped her hoof and glared back at him noising her complaint.

"You stupid cow, we don't feed you for nothing. You'd better give the milk or you'll give your meat instead."

Bozi mooed again and went back to her hay. He reached again for the udders and this time the cow only gave a groan of complaint as he began to harvest the milk. Tyrus was feeling quite proud by the time the pail was two-thirds full. Yesterday she had refused to give milk at all, today he had her in her proper place. *That'll show her.*

He spoke too soon. Just as he was finishing, Bozi again stomped her hoof, this time hitting the bucket and sending its contents splattering all over the stall, and Tyrus.

"Imbecile! See if I don't have you led to the butcher this very morning." Milk streamed down his nose as he bent over to retrieve the bucket. Fortunately, about a fourth of it was salvaged. With a brisk step, he took what remained to the kitchen.

His mother turned around just as he set the pail on the table. A slight smile crossed her lips at the sight of him covered in milk. It was the first time he'd seen her smile since...since the fire. "At least she gave you milk today."

Tyrus plopped down on a nearby stool with an air of agitation. "I don't know where Abba got that ridiculous animal, but it ought to be hauled to the butcher."

"I've heard milk is good for the skin." She dabbed his cheek with a rag. "Give Bozi some time. Moving to a new place can be stressful. Can't it, dear husband?" Mother's golden eyes avoided father's gaze as he entered.

"I suppose it might be, for some, but this cow is of a strong constitution, so she'll adjust quickly." Father peered into the pail. "She's doing better already. In a week's time she'll be as dependable as the heat seems to be in this place."

Father wiped his brow and sat down next to him. "Anyway, I'm glad you're up before the others. Your mother and I wanted to speak to you."

Tyrus' stomach lurched into an uneasy knot. That couldn't be good.

"Since moving to this small village, I'm sure you have noticed the close-knit group this community seems to be. They are a people that know each other well and are all somehow intertwined. They are not very trusting of outsiders, which has made it hard for us to establish a business here. People will not buy from someone they don't know and trust. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Abba, I understand. But what can I do?"

"You are of the age when we should find a suitable match for you. Arranging a marriage to a respected family in this community would be very advantageous for our family and business. The tanner we stayed with when we first arrived here is a respected man and has a daughter of a suitable age."

"Abba, I am not at all prepared to be married. I am sixteen."

"Of course not. Marriage will not be for several years. The girl is only eight years old. You could wait as long as ten years before marrying her."

Mother placed her hands on his shoulders. "Son, just think of all that would come from such a marriage. They are devout Pharisees, as we are, a decent, respectful family. She will make a good wife when she is grown and prepared. She's a pretty little thing as well. Oh, to have a son betrothed! What a pleasure that will be."

"She's half my age."

Mother snorted, "That won't matter in ten years. It is customary that the husband be older than the wife. Why, I've seen marriages with differences as much as thirty years."

"But she's so young, and I hardly know them at all. How will I know if I can love her?"

"Tyrus, the most important thing is finding a woman who will be faithful, good, righteous and is from a respectable family. Aaliyah will be that. She has a good heart. That is what is important. Love, my son, is what leads to family. Besides that, her family is somehow related to almost everyone in this village. So, what do you think of it?"

Thoughts raced through Tyrus' mind. It seemed like such an important decision. Everything they said made logical sense, but to become betrothed to a girl he hardly knew? He straightened the row of jars setting on the table. "May I take some time to pray, and speak to the Rabbi?"

Father seemed a bit taken aback by his response, but nodded his head.

"Thank you." He rose and headed towards the door.

"Don't you want something to eat, Tyrus?"

"No thank you, Mother. An empty belly will help me think clearly."

He passed through the stable where Pe'er stood, munching on straw. The animal extended his nose for a stroke.

"You knew about this didn't you? You should have warned me."

The donkey stomped his foot.

"Yes, well, what do you think I should do? Is it a good match?"

Pe'er snorted as he bounced his head up and down, then he nuzzled Tyrus' hand hoping for a handful of grain.

Tyrus laughed, "What do you know of such things?" He ruffled the donkey's mane and proceeded on his way, though somehow, Pe'er's affirmation made him feel a little better.

Stepping into the street allowed him to breathe easy again. Turning up the lane, he headed for the synagogue; his steps heavy with the weight of this decision. His parents were right, and as much as he had dreaded it, he had reached the proper age of marriage arrangement. It would help his family and their business. It would give him plenty of time to prepare his household, and he wouldn't have to be distracted with finding a wife later on. It must be an honorable thing to do.

The tanner's daughter? He searched his mind for anything he could remember about her. She was a shy girl, hiding behind her father's leg when they'd first arrived. She had run into the house holding a dead bird and, with tears streaming down her pink cheeks, begged her abba to make it come alive again. *I guess that's the good heart Abba was thinking of.*

When he reached the tent that was used for the synagogue, he found the young Rabbi Ben-Simon teaching the Ten Commandments to a group of boys. Tyrus folded his arms and leaned against one of the pillars as he waited for the rabbi to finish.

"Good. The fifth commandment?"

"Honor your father and your mother."

"Right, and why is that important?"

The class answered in unison, "It is the first commandment with promise. He who honors his father and his mother will be blessed with a good, long life."

"That's right, and what Yahweh promises, He does. Mattias, what does it mean to honor?"

One of his young pupils stood to give his answer. "To show respect, to obey, and seek to please them in the will of Yahweh."

"Very good." The rabbi smiled when he noticed Tyrus standing there. "That's it for today. Gather up the scrolls, and you can be on your way."

The students gathered the scrolls and lined up to shake their teacher's hand before filing out. Tyrus marveled at the esteem bestowed upon the young teacher by his pupils, realizing that a similar sentiment had arisen in him since he first met his new friend at Sabbath worship a couple weeks ago. They had become fast friends, and Tyrus was thankful for that.

"Shalom, Tyrus. What can I do for you today?"

He gave his friend a smile. "I've come for two things if you can spare the time."

Ben-Simon clapped him on the shoulder. "I've always got time for a friend."

"Well, first, I need your advice, as a Rabbi. Second, I want your opinion, as a friend."

"Hmm, this must be important."

Tyrus let out a long breath. "It is."

Rabbi Ben-Simon tilted his head. "Come. I know a good place where we can talk."

He followed the rabbi to a nearby orchard of olive trees. They walked along in silence for several minutes. Tyrus picked a branch of leaves from a tree and plucked at it.

"My father and mother wish to arrange a match for me."

His friend nodded knowingly. "That's pretty typical for a young man your age."

"As you know, I've not been here long. Nor do I know many of the people here. My parents have selected a girl from a prominent family, but she's very young, and I don't know her at all. I want to do what is prudent and honorable. What do you think I should do?"

"Marriage is honorable, and it is good to take your parent's advice into consideration when choosing a bride. I'm sure they've seen enough girls to know which ones will be good and which will not be."

"Rabbi, she is eight years old."

They stopped walking and faced each other. "This would be the daughter of Ezekiel the tanner would it not?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"This is a not a very large village. The description you gave me is enough." The rabbi smiled and took him by the arm as they started walking again. "I have known Ezekiel and his family since I was a child. They are good people, and would be an advantageous match for your

family since they are intertwined with the whole of Capernaum. In fact, her uncle owns this orchard and the olive press in town."

"That's what my parents said."

"You asked for my advice as a Rabbi, that is to go ahead with the match."

"How do I know if I will like this girl when she is grown? How do I know I want to spend my whole life with her?"

"Perhaps I should ask this, what do you want to do with your life?"

"I want to become the most prominent merchant in Israel. A respected and honorable citizen. That way no one can question me, as they have my parents. I can then use my assets and influence to help the Messiah when he comes."

Ben-Simon nodded, "Does this marriage fit well with that end?"

He waited a moment as he sifted through his thoughts. "I suppose it does."

A patient smile crossed the rabbi's lips. "You also asked for my opinion as a friend, so I will give it. Aaliyah is a sweet girl and every Sabbath I see her passion for the law of the Lord. You cannot go wrong with her. I will say, with her being so young, I would encourage a long betrothal."

"Do you think ten years is enough?"

Ben-Simon threw back his head with a hearty laugh.

"Rabbi, I'm serious. That's what my parents and I had been thinking."

"My friend, I would say that will definitely be sufficient. That is, if you can get her parents to agree to keeping her in their house for that long. Most girls are married and have a child by eighteen."

"I know, but I want to make sure I am prepared and have a suitable place. Rabbi, I am afraid that I am incapable of protecting a woman."

"That's an odd thing for a boy your age to be concerned about."

"Just before we came here, my youngest sister was killed in a fire. She was in the room with Tzivyah who, with her bad eye, couldn't find her. I should have found her, got her out of the house, but I couldn't. She burned alive that night, and it's my fault. How will God trust me with a family?"

"Tyros, I'm not familiar with the details of your situation, but Yahweh has His reasons for everything that happens in our lives. He alone gives life, or takes it."

He nodded, but the rabbi's words didn't ease the aching of his heart, or the nervousness in his middle. "Thank you for your time, Rabbi. I'm afraid I've taken too much of it already."

"We're friends, you haven't taken my time."

Ben-Simon shook his hand and walked back to the synagogue, leaving Tyros alone in the orchard. He paced back and forth for hours, praying, thinking, and pacing some more. When at last he had nothing more to say in his prayers, he headed for home.

Chapter Five

Tyrus kicked pebbles in the street as he wrestled with his thoughts. Everything seemed to say this was a good idea, but his heart hadn't yet resigned to it. Getting betrothed was not at all what he'd imagined it being. He'd expected to notice a girl when he reached, maybe eighteen years of age, maybe the daughter of a rabbi, and convince his father to arrange the match. This wasn't quite his ideal.

As he turned down his street, he heard a soft sobbing coming from inside an old empty courtyard. The gate was barely hanging on its hinges, and concerned that someone might be hurt, he poked his head inside. There, sat Aaliyah, the tanner's daughter, with tears trailing down her cheeks. Her little sister sat beside her with a somber expression, patting her hand.

Heat rose to his face. It was a bit awkward, given the irony of meeting the subject of his anxiety, but she looked up at him and her innocent eyes tugged at his heart. "Aaliyah? What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

"It's Olive. My kitten fell into the old cistern, and it's too deep for me to save her. I told her not to play here. Mother said it isn't safe, but she doesn't listen. She isn't a bad kitty, she doesn't deserve to die."

Tyrus edged over to the cistern and looked down. It appeared to be dry, and there was a purring noise coming from the dark hole. "How long has she been down there?"

"Long enough to give up hope," She sniffled. "She was crying for me, but now she just knows that she is going to die and is being brave."

Suppressing a laugh, he looked around for something to gauge the depth of the cistern. He remembered seeing a rope hanging from a tree outside. That would work. He took the rope and tied a stone to one end and began to lower it into the hole.

"What are you doing?" The girl's voice trembled.

“I’m trying to see how deep the cistern is. There, the stone struck the bottom.” Pinching the rope where it met with the top of the hole, he used his other hand to draw the rope back up. “It’s not much deeper than I am tall. Is there a bucket or something close by?”

She rose from her mourning position and rummaged around. “Here’s a basket.”

“Perfect. Bring it to me.”

He tied the rope to the handle of the basket. “Here, hold this.”

Shrugging off his outer coat, he sat down and began lowering himself into the cistern. It was only about three feet wide, so he pressed his arms and legs against the sides and shimmed down the hole. Sure enough, there was the cat. He could see now the reason for its decent into this pit. Four small wiggling balls of fuzz snuggled against its belly as she lay there purring.

“I’ve discovered your problem,” His voice echoed up to her, “Lower the basket, Aaliyah.”

The basket suddenly thumped him on the head. “Ah.” He glared upwards.

A gasp was followed by a tiny reply. “Sorry.”

“Alright, don’t let go of the rope.” As gently as he could, he placed the mama and kittens inside the basket. “Ready. Bring her up.”

The two small girls grunted as they pulled on the rope. When the basket reached the top, there were squeals of delight. Again leveraging the walls of the cistern, he climbed out. By the time he reached the top, both girls had vanished, along with the basket, rope, cat and all.

He shook his head. *How do you like that? Not so much as a ‘thank you’.*

Picking up his coat and tossing it over his arm, he stepped out of the old courtyard and nearly collided with Aaliyah who was breathless from running.

“Oh,” She looked somewhat flustered, and dropped her eyes to the floor. Her chest heaved as she inhaled. “Thank you.” She took his hand and placed in it something small, smooth and cold, then turned around and ran away.

He unfolded his fingers and stared at the object in his palm. It was a small, polished, topaz-colored stone that looked like it had once been a part of a necklace. A topaz stone. Topaz. This had to be a sign, but he didn’t understand it.

Gripping the stone in his fist, he walked home. He found a piece of leather twine and threaded it through the existing hole in the stone. He cut the ends, tied it off, and placed it around his neck. Perhaps this little girl was God giving him another chance to protect his little sister. *Lord, I promise, I won’t fail this time.*

Chapter Six

Tyrus and his father stood outside the gate of the tanner's house. His mind was set, but that didn't stop his stomach from turning in knots as they prepared to arrange his marriage.

"Are you ready, son?"

He managed a nod.

"Here, take this. It's an engagement gift that your mother selected for you. If we come to an agreement with Ezekiel, you will present Aaliyah with this gift. This other package is toys and gifts for her siblings. Again, only if we reach an arrangement."

At least he got to be the gift bearer. That would give him favor with her brothers, and that could prove invaluable.

He took the packages and father rapped on the gate. A servant opened and ushered them in. Soon they were seated with Ezekiel in a private room.

"My son and I have come on a matter of business, Ezekiel. My family has been very blessed to meet you and your family and come to know each of you. Your hospitality and good-heartedness leave us forever in your debt."

The man bowed his head in acceptance of Adamiel's praise.

"We believe that our families complement each other well, and we would like you to consider a marriage arrangement between my eldest son, Tyrus and your eldest daughter."

Ezekiel frowned. "Aaliyah is still quite young."

"Yes, of course, but my son desires a lengthy betrothal. Our family owns three trade ships and we have prospered in our trade, however the move to our homeland has affected our business. He wishes to spend the next several years apprenticing beside me as we reestablish our trade so that he can properly provide for a family. He will, of course, take over the business after me."

The tanner sat back and folded his hands across his middle. For a moment he was silent, then he looked Tyrus in the eye. “Do you wish to marry my daughter?”

Tyrus felt as if the fish he’d eaten for lunch had resurrected and flopped around inside him. He swallowed hard and gave his answer. “Yes sir. Aaliyah has a good heart. She reminds me much of my baby sister.”

Ezekiel nodded, “I believe this arrangement could be advantageous for us both. Now, let us negotiate the dowry.”

After a lengthy debate between the two fathers, at last they shook hands.

His father-in-law-to-be clapped him on the back leaving a tingling sensation. “Well, young man, it looks as if I have another son. I’m sure you will make me proud.”

“I will do my best, sir.”

They joined the rest of the family and Tyrus presented the engagement gift to Aaliyah who stared dumbfounded at the delicate golden bracelet. She didn’t say anything to him, but she kept looking at him as he presented the other gifts to her siblings. At last, they went home, and mother prepared a special meal in his honor.

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The Messiah's Sign

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