

THE SEVENTH SEASON
EMMANUEL OF SAMARIA

Translated by Kit Hudson



- VENATRIX -

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EMMANUEL OF SAMARIA

Translated by Kit Hudson

With afterword by Rosalind James



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For Eva, forever

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

As the scrolls from which this translation is made have been the subject of so much controversy, I want to say a few words about my methods. While it is perfectly possible to read these tales as good old-fashioned adventure stories, there will inevitably be some who will scour them for evidence supporting their particular theories and beliefs. For this reason, it is important that I state this is a faithful translation, allowing the Aksum Scrolls to be read today as they were by the ancients with only minor concessions made for modern phrasing and common usage.

However, on occasion there are some passages that are likely to be confusing for modern readers, so I have inserted a handful of footnotes. As I know many people find these annoying, I have kept them to a minimum explaining only those phrases that aid an understanding of the narrative. Additional terms and place names are included in a glossary. Most of the footnotes offer only factual information, but there are a few that offer personal comments and I have initialised these so you can disregard what you may feel is unwarranted editorial input.

K.H., Devon 1965

ACT I

ONE – *A sibyl of known repute*

I, Emmanuel of Samaria, formerly known as Johanan, make this record of my own free will. I want the shelves of the Great Library of Alexandria to hold the truth. Let these mighty halls echo with the legends of Delos and the courage of Dido.

My story begins during the Jewish uprising,¹ in the thirteenth year of Nero's savage reign. I was working for an old preacher in Caesarea, a once gleaming city on the shore of Judaea that had been brought low by the brutality of Rome. We had endured a siege all winter, but as spring blossomed our hopes of survival began to recede. The Roman legions had locked the city gates, torched our fields and slaughtered our beasts. Stores of food were nearly empty and death had taken to loitering in the streets. Our followers vowed that the word could not be left to perish with the flesh, and so preparations were made for our escape.

In late April, a message finally came from the rebels – men and women whose names we would never know – that they could smuggle us out. The sun was already low in the sky when the mysterious messenger called at our house, telling us we only had until nightfall to prepare. Andreas dispatched me to buy provisions for our journey and instructed me to find Jacob, for we could not leave without him.

Jacob and I made an unusual pair, but together we served Andreas well. He was an Arabian stallion to my pack mule, but what he had in height I had in imagination, and what he had in strength, I had in words. I was Andreas' translator and scribe – some in Caesarea called me the guardian of the word – and Jacob was his protector, the defender of the word. Our charge was to keep both Andreas and his message alive.

Jacob was a gifted athlete with the ambition and talent to compete at Delphi or Olympia. He could also sing and play the kithara and found endless pleasure from physical pursuits. Where I was clumsy, he showed prowess, where I was unsure, he was steadfast: we were allies rather than friends, but in time I came to appreciate (and, in truth, envy) the ease with which he found satisfaction from food, or sleep, or women, or even labour: it was as if the olive oil he rubbed on his bronzed skin every day gave him protection from any form of melancholy.

I ran through the deserted streets in search of him. The order and ambition of Herod's architects had been undone: grand houses and immaculate gardens – built in living memory for an Emperor who never visited – lay wrecked by thieves and vandals. Only the high city walls, originally conceived to make Caesarea a fortress but now the cause of her imprisonment, withstood the destruction.

The city was slowly dying, emptying itself like a carcass and staining the sand beneath our feet. Some roads seemed gouged out by a great force, as if a river in flood had rushed through them. Entire buildings – houses, shrines, shops – had been torn down by Jews and Greeks who blamed each other for bringing Rome's legions to the city's gates. It had been the longest winter any of us could remember, with starvation and isolation quickening tempers and shortening compassion. When the smell of a soldier's cooking fire wafted down from a watchtower on the high city walls, the torment drove reasonable men to unreasonable acts. Devastation, and the stench of the unburied, assaulted me as I ran.

I looked for Jacob in the taverns and the squares. I ran to the theatre where

¹ AD 67.

members of the resistance often gathered, but it too was abandoned. There were not many places left to look, and I began to wonder what new heartache I would have to report to Andreas. Had Jacob become victim to the brutality? I prayed that he was just hungover and lying in some alley.

I eventually found the handsome youth outside a sibyl's house. The queue was notable both for its length and variety – Syrians, Persians, Greeks, even an Israelite – all of whom sought advice on their prospects for the future. I had not seen such a gathering of people for many weeks.

'You don't have time for this,' I said with urgency. 'We have received word.'

Jacob beckoned to me. His carefree smile told me he did not understand my meaning, but I was unwilling to reveal our plan within earshot of people I did not know.

'You must come with me now.'

As ever, his response to my anxiety was mockery.

'Relax, my friend, this woman is good and quick. Whatever it is that is so urgent can surely wait a few more minutes?'

'We have tasks to attend to,' I said, perhaps a little earnestly. 'Andreas is expecting us.'

'Then we will not let Andreas down.'

His hand clasped on my shoulder, telling me I should chew on a root and enjoy the last of the afternoon sun. At 23, he was four years older than me, and he thought this gave him licence to treat me as a child. It was impossible not to compare myself to him as he leant against a stone wall and caught the golden rays of the descending sun. I was shorter, thinner, paler, angrier: my looks were not so bad that I suffered ridicule or pity, but next to Jacob I was clearly inferior to the eye. His strong nose only reminded me how flat my own was, pressed against my face by an unseen finger.

I have learnt many truths over the years, and here is the first certainty I can offer you: in times of conflict sane men will pay insane money to be told their future. There was mighty profit in prophecy that day and the sibyl worked quickly despatching traders, farmers and clerks with the same advice: pay homage to Neptune, sew a laurel leaf into the hem of every garment and beware of strangers' smiles, easy money and false hope.

I had been with Jacob to many such houses. The Jewish faith of our childhoods saw fortune-telling as a form of heresy, and he conveniently found in Andreas' teachings an open-mindedness that suited him. Jacob often asked me to interpret the prophecies, obscured as they were inside riddles and rhymes. Consequently, I had heard the predictions of countless soothsayers, seers, shamanesses and swindlers and had determined that their primary power was seeing what their customers could not – namely that they are fools.

However, this woman, allegedly from Dacia and yet somehow heiress to Pharaonic blood, was held in serious regard and was said to have a genuine gift of divination. She claimed she was spoken to by a power without a name, which lent her a genuine air of mysticism, and quintupled her market at a stroke. None of her customers had apparently questioned why she did not have sufficient foresight to flee.

Jacob insisted his interest in these fortune-tellers was rational rather than spiritual, and said his real fascination lay in comparison as most of them – curiously, he thought – said much the same thing. I came to the conclusion that fortune-telling was just another form of flattery for Jacob, as all who met such a handsome, companionable man would naturally be inclined to predict good fortune, adventure

and great love. It did not matter whether Jacob's fate was predicted by entrails, smoke curls, crystal balls or chiromancy, his future always looked favourable. Perhaps it was because my looks did not elicit such gilded promises, but I did not share Jacob's curiosity about the ethereal reach of the prophets. Despite the nature of my employment, my faith was reserved for things that could be seen and touched.

The Dacian sibyl called us inside. She took one look at Jacob and stopped him dead by raising her hand, like Zeus throwing a thunderbolt. Jacob looked at me as if there was some mistake, but her eyes shut and her mouth opened and sounds and words poured out like a spring – all babble and froth – and neither of us were asked to sit. The effect was both compelling and frightening.

Her convulsive display gave me time to locate the source of the smell that filled her house: all around us were dead beasts, presumably stuffed with sawdust and some preservation mix of cassia and cinnamon replacing entrails long since lost to sacrifice and futurology. Rats, buzzards, mountain goats, cats and lizards, all dead, all inhabiting a spectrum of decelerated decay, stared at us unblinkingly as we waited for the sibyl to recover full consciousness. All around were unadorned clay pots – the kind used by merchants – with labels for spices from around the world: anise from India, marjoram from Babylon, cumin from a place called Java. Either this woman travelled greatly or had wealth, contacts and favours beyond most mortals' means. She would clearly be protected from whatever fate befell Caesarea.

Finally, she ceased her jig and opened her eyes before fixing her glare intently on Jacob's face.

'You must sit,' she uttered, 'and you must listen with your heart as well as your ears.'

Jacob stepped forward and took her offer of a stool. I remained by the doorway but before she spoke, she met my gaze, and something in her posture, perhaps it was a slight bow of the head, bid me to listen carefully.

'I see a long journey
Without end or honours.
A saviour, though not made
of man, will lead you home
but lead others further.

A thrice-great priest demands
Your duty and your faith.
He will line your path with
flowers and show the way
with words that have no name.

The rhymes that give you grief
will liberate others.
Though the statues will speak
you will not hear their sounds
for love flows from the Nile.

You will tame wild beasts, yet,
You will not quell their hearts.
'All hail him' they shall cry,

But you will not know why.
Other forces guide your fate.

When four horses bring Doom
you will know the worthy
from the righteous, and then,
My Friend, you shall know love
and the true pain of death.

But you will not know truth
itself until Patmos.
There, mysteries will rise,
gods will speak, scales will fall
and eternity rests.'

Even in her stilted Syriac it did not sound much better. Naturally, neither of us knew what to make of such nonsense. Was it poor prophecy or poorer poetry? To my mind she seemed more inspired by Dionysos than Apollo. The sibyl, all straggly hair and ribboned robes, quickly ushered Jacob to her threshold. He reached inside his pouch for silver, but she would not take his money saying we would need every last shekel before we left the city. In my experience, a shamaness who does not take money, in consequence, takes her work most seriously. It would not be long before I did likewise.

Confused and clearly dissatisfied, Jacob nevertheless thanked the woman and tried again to pay her, but she insisted he leave that instant. I turned to follow him, but she reached out and took me by the wrist. Her numb-black eyes held mine and she whispered urgently: 'Are you the one who speaks in every tongue?'

'I... I am a translator. Is that what you mean?'

'You should know that you can also speak with the dead.'

I suppressed the desire to run like Hermes and tried to form some words of thanks for what I am sure she thought was good news; yet each syllable stayed stuck inside me and all I could do was nod. As I stepped nervously back into the sun-smitten street, she told me one last thing: 'Before you leave Caesarea, buy a length of rope and wear it wrapped three times around your waist.'

The look on my face must have asked too many questions.

'Be gone,' she commanded and, happily, I obeyed.

On the way back to Andreas' house, I told Jacob all I knew of the plan for our escape: we were to gather in a house near the market before sundown so as to evade suspicion during the curfew; from there the rebels would collect us and get us through – or under, or over – the city walls.

'Sounds like a trap to me,' he said as we walked through the chaotic streets towards the docks. 'Something the Romans have cooked up to get us all in one place. Shouldn't be surprised if they torch the house with us inside.'

I knew him well enough by now to know he did not mean this in the way it sounded. He was not naturally a cynical or negative man, but he was always trying to show me how clever he was. So whatever argument I constructed, he would always have to counter with an opposing view. He didn't do it with anyone else, but he always picked these little fights with me. I see now it was a sign that – even then – he saw me as a brother. After a silence that let him think I had duly considered his point

of view, I asked what he thought the sibyl had meant.

‘You are the educated one, you tell me.’

‘I was asking you.’

‘Honestly? I think she’s been working too hard. It was nonsense, wasn’t it?’

‘You are the one who seeks out these seers and their predictions.’

I glanced over at him: he really was untroubled by her words, just as he was by the chaos all around us. I likened him to a dog – faithful to his master, always excited to meet new people, but fundamentally more interested in his next meal than anything else. My assessment may be a little harsh, but it is not entirely inaccurate.

‘At least she had the decency not to charge me for her babble. I think that might explain her reputation.’

In truth, her reputation was probably founded on tactics not too dissimilar from our own. She no doubt had her spies and allies in every tavern, brothel and temple – not to mention the queue outside – and therefore knew far more about her customers beyond what she was able to glean from observation alone. However, on this occasion, her words went so deep that I began to wonder if she might genuinely possess some gift. Before I could tell myself that I was a sceptic who put no store in such nonsense, I realised I was also wondering if her rhyme had not been meant for Jacob’s ears, but for mine.

TWO – A journey without end begins

The rebels demanded every shekel we had to spirit us from the city. In exchange for coin, they hauled us and our hastily purchased provisions up inside the aqueduct. We were told to walk north for two miles through its freezing waters until we came to a place where steps led down to the shore. Just as they had promised, we soon found a rowing boat that had been tethered for us. Escape overland would bring us into contact with either bandits in the hills or the legions in the plains, so Jacob rowed us out onto the inky brine.

Much of the food we carried through the aqueduct had been ruined, but as I had neither the legs nor the stomach for sea travel this did not concern me as greatly as our lack of water. We had only one waterskin between us and when we drifted for many hours after the sun came up, our thirst and anxiety grew in equal measure. A cold wind from the south brought waves, which meant constant bailing, and even Andreas (a man as comfortable on the water as a resting gull) was pale with fear. Our tiny rowing boat was only good for coves and inlets, so without sail or tiller, we were soon at the mercy of the thick sea twisting purposefully beneath us.

Rescue had nearly come around noon, but Andreas had sneezed when a ladder had been lowered for us. Sailors are a superstitious lot and so they left us to our fate. Andreas was abject with remorse but after hours of shivering in the wet and cold, neither Jacob nor myself could bear him any ill will.

Under a darkening sky, we were relieved beyond measure to be picked up by a massive merchantman called the Talaris of Mercury (a name that rankled for reasons I will come to shortly). She was a huge vessel better suited to the grain routes on open water, but the change in weather had meant her captain – a bear of a man we knew as Quintus – was keeping her in sight of land.

We offered prayers of thanks, but in truth we may have owed our lives to chance: the Talaris had lost its harbour boat in a storm and was therefore in need of the dory we’d set to sea in. It might also have helped our cause that I had initially addressed the crew in

Latin – a fair assumption for a boat named Talaris. Although I subsequently established they were Greek speakers and concluded negotiations in their mother tongue, the captain knew enough of the Imperial patter to have calculated my value.

‘We’re carrying a Roman General and his wife,’ Quintus had said conspiratorially. ‘A right pair. Bored out of their tiny minds. Your conversation will do us all good. Keep them occupied and we shall be great friends.’

As you may imagine, keeping company with Rome was not my favoured occupation, but I was so grateful to be on Quintus’ boat and not Charon’s, that I was not about to protest. We were told that the Talaris had left Alexandria ten days previously and was bound for Greece. If we wanted – and if we could pay – we could sail with her as far as Corinth. Andreas promised coin as soon as we docked and he was able to visit a treasury.

I was so keen to let my muscles slacken and for the Talaris’ ropes and timbers to carry the strain, that my first few hours onboard were filtered through a type of numb fever. Survival often produces a euphoria, but I was so weak from our escape, and so profoundly grateful for the breath in my chest, that I did not feel quite alive: it was as if I had become a participant in someone else’s dream.

Before supper, Quintus introduced us briefly to the Roman – a General from the legions of the Nile by the name of Aegeates – and his skilful wife Maximilla. He was perhaps forty, twice the age of his consort, and carried himself with a certainty that I found unnerving so I was relieved when they retired promptly to their cabin. While talking to Quintus, I noticed that his clothes were embellished with countless pockets, each containing a tool or a spare part – buckles and whetstones and chinks. He also wore a knife strapped to each calf and his forearms were encased in the vambraces of battle. I learnt that he was from Crete but had earned his citizenship – and his name, of course – through twenty years’ service in the Roman navy. He declared he was now intent on making a reputation for himself as a fearless seaman.

The others onboard were the expected mix of traders, administrators and their various attendants. We could have been in far worse company and so were doubly grateful. Andreas would nudge me from time to time to point out some ‘beautifully fashioned mortise’ or the stitching on the mainsail, telling me that we were on a good ship. He paced its entire length to take its measure – nearly 80 feet – and examined the rudder and the rigging. It was a broad, flat ship with raised decks at either end and a mast in the middle hewn from one the tallest pines on Pelion. Atop the mast was a perch for the look-out, and beneath that, two enormous square sails that cracked like thunder in the wind. Andreas was a sailor at heart – in his youth he had been a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee – and it was apparent from the colour restored to his sun-lined face that the yawning timbers carving through the yawing seas spoke to him in ways I would never understand. I was nevertheless reassured by his confidence in the Talaris’ construction.

‘Let us hope her captain is equally well-made,’ he said.

I still had my doubts about our vessel’s name, however. A talaris, as you will know, is a sandal worn by the Roman gods to imbue them with the power of flight. I had no problem with Quintus, or whoever had named the boat, favouring the old gods: my discomfort was of a more trivial nature. I could not see how Mercury, the messenger of Jove, would only have one sandal! Surely the boat’s proper name should have been the *Talaria* of Mercury? I had long known that few cared quite as much as I about matters of declension and grammar, but I feared that a boat named in carelessness might have other flaws similarly ignored. This added to my nausea.

When the sun neared the horizon, we were given blankets and received a supper from the crew’s rations and by the time the torches were lit, I had just about thawed out. On long voyages, fresh conversation is almost as prized as fair winds and decent food, and so

we were expected to provide the entertainment on that first night onboard.

None of the seventy-or-so passengers and crew had heard of the situation in Caesarea, and many were keen to understand why we had gone to such lengths to flee. A group of traders – whose business it is to possess the freshest knowledge – circled us to learn what they could. When I explained the dire circumstances of those we had left behind, I noticed agreement on their faces when I indicated the blame for our terror lay with Nero: Judaea, it was clear, was not the only province suffering under Roman rule.

It was a complicated history, but one they were happy to hear every word of. I explained that when the peasants of Palestine had refused to pay increased taxes – to fund, a trader from Gaza told us, a new palace in Rome for the Imperial Ogre himself – the Governor of Judaea had demanded tribute from the Temple in Jerusalem. When the Jews had successfully repelled the Roman tax collectors from the Temple gates, the persecution of their race began. Not yet by the Romans, but by the Greek bureaucrats and traders who feared both the heavy hand of Rome, and a Jewish uprising inspired by the Temple triumph. Eventually Rome had been forced to send its legions to suppress the unending violence between the Greeks and the Jews.

The passengers' interest in our story was revealing of their tastes and prejudices. 'What side were you on then?' was the most commonly repeated question, and of course, our answer was not a swift one. 'And these Jews, are they the ones that only have one god?' 'I've heard they have a temple made of gold?' 'What is the source of their wealth?' It was these sorts of enquiries – greased with mistrust and fear – that had compelled Andreas to set his message apart from the traditions of the Jews: he once told me that people do not fear a new god quite so much as an old one.

Our fellow travellers' questions were unending. A pair of Egyptian craftsmen were curious to know about the gruesome nature of injuries we had seen; some bawdy Persian traders seemed more interested in the beauty of Caesarean women, while a young man from Cyprus was perplexed by the mysterious ways of the Judaeans.

'Do you eat pork?' he asked.

'Don't be stupid, it's rabbits they don't eat.'

We explained that we observed no such dietary restrictions, but this only confused them more. Talk of food was the last thing I needed. We had been tossed around so violently in the dory that my seasickness had been indistinguishable from the hurling all around. Now, in a giant vessel, steadied by a cargo of linens, ivory, spices and granite, my nausea rolled around, slumping from one side of my stomach to the other.

Exhausted, unwell and uneasy at the level of interrogation, I asked if I might have leave to take to my bed. This request was met with groans of disappointment, for Andreas only knew a few words of Greek and none of the passengers spoke his native Aramaic. Jacob's Greek was a little better, certainly good enough to join the drinking and gambling games that sailors are so fond of, but it did not stretch to answering queries or expounding detailed histories. So I agreed to tell a few more tales of wickedness in which I painted the Proconsul of Caesarea as dark as tar, but soon left them to their sports.

One of the deckhands told me to get comfortable on the foredeck where they had erected a few shelters from old sails. I could keep my blanket he said, but most passengers had brought bedding and food with them. He also made it quite clear that the porridge we had eaten had been taken from someone else's ration. Not everyone was glad to have us onboard.

THREE – *A visitation*

I did not sleep so much as shut myself off. I closed my eyes and ears to the world and withdrew. The exhilaration and guilt of survival had laid me waste, and all I could do was lie down in silence. I had barely slept since we'd left Caesarea, so I had expected slumber would quickly comfort me but it simply would not come. I just lay there, suspended from thought or deed, blank; a living corpse.

I only know that sleep eventually claimed me because I remember waking to the snores of men unused to laying with their wives. The nausea instantly returned, so I clambered over the others and crossed the deck to reach the side of the boat. I let my body fall against the bulwark and waited for the retching to start.

The sails had been furled and anchor lowered: apart from the night watchman and two drunks playing dice, the Talaris was asleep. It was as if the entire turmoil of the ship had been placed inside my stomach. I heaved and heaved and did not stop for many minutes.

'I can help you with that.'

The voice was as warm as it was unexpected. Wiping the spew from my mouth, I turned to see I had been joined by a young woman who covered herself in a dark shroud and clutched a sack of heavy velvet.

'With your sickness,' she continued. 'I can help you.'

I was too stunned to speak. I had not noticed her earlier when we had met the other passengers and it seemed she had appeared from nowhere, like Athena on the battlefield at Troy.

'May I?' She gestured to my hands.

I wiped my fingers on my tunic and nodded my consent. She placed her bag at her feet, pushed the shroud from her head and reached out to hold my arms. She then measured two fingers down from my wrists and pressed her thumbs in with such force that I had to wince. I stared at her in amazement. I had never seen a woman like her. She was slight with small features on a delicate face. She was unmistakably beautiful, but her most striking feature was her hair; or rather her lack of it. I had read about widows in Egypt who shave their heads upon the death of their husbands; only when their hair has passed their shoulders are they considered eligible for re-marriage. I was so absorbed by her appearance that I did not immediately realise my sickness had subsided. Not only did she have the beauty of Aphrodite, but she possessed a touch that sent shivers across my skin.

'You must be a goddess.' I still blush at my childish words.

'I used to suffer as you do, and I do not believe that goddesses are meant to suffer.' She replaced my hands at my sides and smiled awkwardly. I had embarrassed both of us.

'Then you are a healer?' I felt engulfed, perhaps by questions, perhaps by something else.

'I once had a friend who was a gifted healer,' she explained, indulging me. 'She showed me places on the body where the right amount of pressure can alleviate many conditions. Do you feel better now?'

'Greatly.' I actually wanted to tell her I was cured, but resisted sounding quite so struck.

We looked at one another, each hoping the other might speak. When no words came, she observed the stars while I regarded only her. The endless noise of the Talaris – the rising of the waves, the creaking of the timbers, the slapping of the ropes against the mast – filled the space that our conversation skirted round. I was fearful we would be seen together and her honour would be questioned; she did not appear to share my anxiety.

'You are not from Egypt?' I could not quite place her accent. She was a native Greek speaker, but I could not tell from where.

She looked at me quizzically. Had I been too forward? I was about to apologise when she answered.

‘I am from Macedonia but have been living in Egypt for some years.’

‘In Alexandria?’

She nodded.

‘I have heard it is a magnificent city. One day I should like to see it.’

I was so unused to being alone with a woman, especially a widow, that I did not know what was proper to say. Should I enquire about her loss? Should I ask who was accompanying her? Around her neck, I noticed she wore a pendant that caught the crescent moon as her chest rose and fell with each breath. Cast from gold in the Egyptian style, it featured a seated monkey like the baboons that are the symbol of Thoth, the old god of wisdom who, I somehow knew, was the patron of Ptolemy’s Great Library.

‘Do you know the Library?’ I ventured, tentatively.

She turned quickly to face me. I thought her lips were about to say something, but then her features froze: she had changed her mind. ‘The Library?’ she said instead. ‘That is a strange question.’

‘It’s your pendant. Is it not the symbol of Thoth?’

Slowly, she raised her hand and touched the necklace she had clearly forgotten she was wearing. ‘This,’ she stumbled, ‘this was my husband’s.’

Unsure of the civilities in such a situation, I took mention of her loss as a signal that my enquiries were at an end. ‘I am sorry. I do not wish to intrude. Please forgive my manners. It is just that I have heard so many stories... held on to childish dreams, that I should one day like to see it, perhaps even study there...’

She did not seem to be interested, and my words trailed off into the darkness. We dwelt again in silence until I began some harmless chat about the stars, of Orion and the bear and the scorpion giving endless chase to them both.

‘You seem very knowledgeable,’ she said graciously.

‘My father was a mapmaker,’ I explained. ‘He was fastidious with his charts, with distances, directions and so on. When I was too young to care whether Hydra was in the south or the east, he engaged me with tales of Heracles and her slaying.’

There was a pause filled with more awkwardness and, on my part, anticipation.

‘You talk in the past tense. What does your father do now?’

It was an odd question and I was unsure how to answer. ‘I... I am not sure. I believe my father is dead.’

She seemed surprised. ‘I am so sorry, I thought... Are you not the one who was rescued with his father and brother this afternoon?’

‘No. No, that is Andreas. He is my... employer.’

‘Oh. I see.’

‘I am his amanuensis, he... Jacob is not my brother either, I...’ Yet again my words were swallowed by an embarrassed silence. ‘I did not realise you knew of our rescue.’

‘Oh yes. The girls were quite excited by it.’

‘The girls?’ The only women I had seen onboard were Maximilla, the General’s wife, her handmaid and our captain’s daughter, a wild and hairy thing named Drusilla whom Quintus had evidently raised as a son.

‘There are several of us,’ she said. ‘We are advised to keep below deck. A ship is apparently no place for our kind. It is quite comfortable down there, but I am afraid we are a little bored of each other now. However the men, we are told, are beasts and bound to act as such if we are seen too often.’

Again, I was unsure of my standing, but I tried to return her frankness in kind. ‘Surely not even a sailor would... A widow such as yourself...’

She raised an eyebrow. 'Yes, may be so. Grief has its advantages.'

Was that wit? I really did not know what to make of her candour. I sensed she was playing with me, and I sensed also that I was enjoying it. Had she not been in mourning, I might have flattered myself with thoughts that she enjoyed my company too. 'I should return to my quarters,' she said. 'If the girls realise I have gone, they will come looking.'

I must have looked disappointed.

'They are very attentive; very concerned for me until I am safely met by my brother in Corinth.'

'I understand. If I can assist you while we are travelling together, please do not hesitate to ask for me. It is the least I can do in exchange for my cure. My name is Johanan.'

'Your hands are blistered, Johanan,' she said with a slight nod. 'When I held them I...'
Again there was silence. 'I believe there are provisions in the hold. I will make you a balm.'

'You are very kind.'

'Any activity is very welcome. Goodnight then.'

'Goodnight.'

She turned to go below deck, but as she picked up her velvet bag, the cord snapped and its contents scattered across the timbers.

'Let me help you.' I knelt down, as did she, and together we gathered her things. They were not the usual items one might expect to find in a woman's possession. There were no unguents or potions, but rather tablets and a stylus, a small knife, some sealing wax.

'They were my husband's,' she said by way of explanation as I handed them back to her.

Rolling away from us as the Talaris yawed was a small leather canister, and as my fingers stretched to grab it, I sensed from her gaze that I had touched something I should not have. It was made of fine leather and was the kind of case that scrolls and documents are carried in. As I handed it back to her, I saw that it was embossed with the symbol of Thoth.

'Is this from the Library?' I asked.

She maintained my gaze as she took the canister from me and put it back in her bag. Something in her expression told me my actions had slighted her, and when she did not answer I did not press her.

'It is just a few introductions,' she said, almost too casually.

'It seems your cord has perished,' I ventured. I fingered the rope I had tied at my waist. Jacob had bought before we'd left Caesarea in case it proved useful. When he had suggested I tie it around my waist, I assumed he had heard the sibyl's command and was playing me for a fool. Now I was not so sure. 'Here,' I said as I started to untie it. 'Take this.'

'You are sure? Rope is a most useful item to have onboard a boat.'

'It is yours.'

'Then I am most grateful.'

'It is nothing.'

She nodded her thanks. 'Goodnight Johanan. I hope we shall speak again before we reach land.'

And with that she went below, leaving me to ponder if our meeting had been foreseen by a madwoman in a back street of a provincial city.