The Providence

The Story of the Rich Young Ruler



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In Yeshua name.
Amen

Free opening selection
Prologue and Chapters 1–7

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This is a work of fiction inspired by the biblical account of the Rich Young Ruler. The author's note identifies the scriptural foundation and the imagined portions of his life.

Selected scriptural dialogue is drawn from the World English Bible Classic, a public domain translation.

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The complete novel includes Chapters 1–20.

Prologue

The meal was over, but the men stayed at the table.

The Governor had invited three old friends to supper: an Oil Merchant, a Landowner, and a Cloth Merchant who had begun with almost nothing.

The bread had been cleared away. They were talking about the next harvest and a neighbor who could no longer repay his debts when the Governor asked a question.

“What do you think would happen if there were no money?”

The Oil Merchant laughed.

“No buying or selling?”

“Suppose you had bread and I had none,” the Governor said. “You would share it. If your roof leaked, neighbors would help mend it. If your harvest failed, we would help feed your family.”

“Who would pay for all that?”

“No one. We would help because someone needed us.”

The Landowner leaned back.

“Some people would stop working. The rest would have to feed them.”

“Even with people waiting for the food?”

“If I work from dawn while another man sleeps, and we both eat just as well, how long before I stay in bed too?”

The Oil Merchant nodded.

“I have children waiting at home. I need to know they will eat tomorrow too.”

The Cloth Merchant set down his cup.

“Wanting more isn’t always wrong. I wanted my children to have a better life than I had. When I saw what other men could give their families, I worked harder. Some mornings, that was what got me out of bed.”

“There is nothing wrong with that,” the Governor said.

“Then you understand.”

“I do.”

The Landowner turned toward him.

“You worked hard for all you have, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You saved. You took risks. When things went wrong, you began again. No one handed you all this.”

“And you still bargain over the price of my oil,” the Oil Merchant added.

They laughed. The Governor smiled with them.

“Shouldn’t a man be paid for his work?” the Landowner asked.

“Of course.”

“And shouldn’t he want his children to have more than he had?”

“Of course.”

“Then what are we disagreeing about?”

The Governor looked around the table. He knew the hours these men worked. He had seen them leave their own meals to help a neighbor.

“I worry about my children too,” he said. “I have more than I once dreamed of, and I still worry.”

The Oil Merchant’s smile faded.

“So do I.”

For a while, no one spoke.

“Your work matters,” the Governor said. “Your children should be cared for. I’m asking what would happen if we cared that much about each other.”

The Oil Merchant looked down at his hands.

“I wish I could believe people would live that way.”

The Governor looked at his friend, then at the others.

“So what do you believe heaven is like?”

The Day He Stayed

(Chapter 1)

Before he became the Young Rich Ruler, Esteban was known for helping neighbors who had little more than he did.

He was seventeen when a cart overturned on the road to Cana, on a morning when he could not afford to be late.

He heard wood crack, then a shout cut short. A donkey lurched sideways in its harness. The cart tipped against the low wall beside the road, spilling tools and sacks of plaster into the ditch.

The man beneath it was trying to pull his leg free.

Esteban dropped the bundle he was carrying and ran.

“Don’t move,” he said.

“I can’t get my leg out.”

The Plasterer was old enough to have taught Esteban’s father his trade. His face had gone pale beneath the dust. Esteban knelt beside him and saw that the edge of the cart lay across his shin.

He put both hands under the wood and lifted. The cart shifted enough to make the man cry out, then fell back.

Esteban stopped.

“Stop,” the Plasterer said through his teeth. “Please.”

Footsteps sounded behind them. Eli appeared at the bend carrying a length of rope and looking irritated, as he usually did when Esteban had left before him.

“What have you done now?”

“Get the donkey loose.”

Eli took in the overturned cart, the trapped man, and Esteban’s frightened face. He set down his rope.

The donkey was pulling against a strap twisted beneath the shaft. Eli went to its head and spoke softly while he worked the buckle loose.

Esteban stayed beside the Plasterer. He wanted to do something, but he was afraid of hurting him again.

A woman came out of the nearest house.

“Bring something to hold the cart up,” Esteban called. “Stones. A block of wood.”

She disappeared inside. Esteban looked along the road for help, then saw a stout fallen branch beneath the wall. He dragged it over.

“Under here,” Eli said, returning from the donkey. “We can lift it from this side.”

Together they worked the branch under the cart. The woman brought a wooden block and called her husband from the yard. Esteban showed him where to brace it.

“Tell us when,” he said to the Plasterer.

The old man closed his eyes.

“Now.”

They leaned their weight on the branch. The cart rose slowly. Esteban could feel the wood bend beneath his hands.

The woman pushed the block into place.

Eli reached down and eased the man’s leg clear. Then they lowered the cart onto the block and stood breathing hard, afraid for a moment to look at what they had done.

The Plasterer opened his eyes.

“Well,” he said. “I suppose the wall will have to wait.”

Esteban laughed with relief before he could stop himself.

The man’s leg was swollen, but there was little blood. They moved him onto a folded cloth in the shade. The woman sent her daughter to fetch his wife. Eli examined the cart while Esteban sat beside the injured man.

“You’re late,” Eli said at last.

Esteban looked toward the rise where the road continued to Cana.

The Olive Grower had hired him for the day. He was to help load the mules, walk with the goods, and return before evening. His mother was

waiting for that money to buy oil and thread. He had promised to bring it home.

“Go,” the Plasterer said. “You have got me out.”

“Your wife hasn’t come.”

“She will be here soon.”

Esteban got to his feet. Beyond the rise, someone was calling to the mules.

The Plasterer tried to sit up. His hands slipped on the folded cloth, and Esteban caught him beneath the shoulders.

“Just until your wife comes,” he said.

He sat down again.

By the time the Plasterer’s wife arrived, the road beyond the rise was empty.

They carried her husband home on a door borrowed from a shed. He complained about the uneven ride until she told him that if he preferred to walk, she would gladly watch him try.

At his house, Esteban helped settle him on a sleeping mat. Eli went to fetch someone who knew more about injured legs than either of them did. The Plasterer’s wife washed the dust from her husband’s face, her hands trembling now that he was safe enough for her to be frightened.

Esteban took the wet cloth from her and held it until she reached for it again.

“You should have gone when he told you,” she said.

“I’ll still find work.”

“I know you needed that pay.”

She took his hand before he could leave and held it between both of hers.

“Thank you.”

Outside, Esteban stood in the sunlight for a moment. Then he hurried toward the Olive Grower’s house.

The courtyard was almost empty. A boy was sweeping leaves from the place where the mules had stood.

“They left,” the boy said.

“I can catch them.”

“They took someone else.”

Esteban looked at the empty yard. He had known this would happen, but hearing it made his stomach tighten.

“Did they say anything?”

“That you weren’t here.”

On the way home, he found the bundle he had dropped beside the overturned cart. It was his midday meal, wrapped in a cloth his mother had mended twice. The food had come loose in the dust.

He picked up the cloth and shook it out. He was hungry now. He folded it so that the dirt was inside.

Eli was waiting at the bend.

“Your face is doing that thing again.”

“What thing?”

“Looking as if someone owes you an explanation.”

Esteban walked past him.

“I don’t need one.”

“Good. I haven’t got one.”

Eli fell into step beside him. For a while, they walked without speaking.

Then Esteban said, “They could have waited.”

“They had goods to deliver.”

“I know.”

“And they didn’t know about the cart.”

“I said I know.”

Eli stopped walking. Esteban took two more steps before stopping too.

“I’m not the man who left without you,” Eli said.

Esteban looked down at the road.

“I am sorry.”

Eli nodded. They began walking again.

People in nearly every house called for Esteban when something needed lifting or mending. Children followed him because he would

stop to play. Older people trusted him because he usually came when he said he would.

Usually was the word his sister preferred.

Hannah was sitting outside their house when he arrived. She had a piece of cloth spread across her knees and a needle between her fingers.

“You’re early,” she said.

“I didn’t go.”

She looked at the dust on his clothes, then at Eli.

“Was it your idea?” she asked her brother.

“For once, no,” Eli answered for him.

Their mother came to the doorway. Miriam listened while Esteban told her about the cart. He told her about the cart. When he reached the empty courtyard, he began picking dust from his sleeve.

When he finished, she looked toward the place where he had left his sandals.

“One strap is loose.”

“I’ll mend it.”

“You will pull it tight and hope it lasts. Bring it here.”

Esteban brought her the sandal. She sat beside Hannah and examined the strap.

He remained standing.

“I was counting on that pay,” he said.

“So was I.”

“I could have gone after we got him out.”

Miriam looked up.

“Who would have brought him home?”

He thought of the Plasterer’s wife trying to hold the wet cloth steady.

“I don’t know.”

His mother reached for a length of cord.

“We’ll manage today.”

He wished she had not needed to say it so often.

Their father had died years earlier. Miriam found work where she could, and Hannah was becoming quick and careful with a needle.

Esteban took whatever labor came his way. Some weeks they had enough. Other weeks, something had to wait.

He did not mind being tired. He minded watching his mother decide which need could be postponed without telling the rest of them.

Eli cleared his throat.

“My mother has work.”

Esteban looked at him.

“Since when?”

“Since always. I try not to remind her.”

Ruth worked beneath a patched shelter behind her house. Shelves along the wall held vessels still drying in the shade. She had a load ready to carry to a buyer nearby. Esteban and Eli took it together, making two careful journeys instead of one reckless one. Ruth watched them lift the first basket.

“Both hands,” she told Esteban.

Esteban shifted his grip. A pot knocked against its neighbor, and Ruth steadied the basket before letting him go.

When they returned, she paid him a small amount for the work. He tried to refuse part of it.

Ruth closed his fingers over the coins.

“That is what I pay for two journeys. Take it.”

He thanked her and tucked the money away.

As they left, she called Eli back to examine a leak in the shelter roof. He looked at the loose reed covering, then at Esteban.

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

“You said that yesterday.”

“Yesterday I thought I would be tired today.”

“And now?”

“Now I am tired today.”

“Bring the ladder early,” Ruth said. “I have a buyer coming.”

They went before she could find work they might do that evening.

Near evening, the Plasterer’s wife came to Esteban’s house. She said her husband would recover, provided he rested his leg, a command he considered deeply unfair.

She had brought onions from their garden and a promise that her husband would repair the damaged step outside Miriam’s doorway when he could work again.

“He says he still owes your father for a day’s help,” she explained.

Miriam shook her head, smiling.

“He has been paying that day back for years.”

After their visitor left, Hannah noticed Esteban staring at the coins Ruth had paid him.

“You can put them down,” she said. “They’re not going anywhere.”

He slid them toward his mother. She counted them once. There was enough for oil, but the thread would have to wait.

Hannah held up her sewing. One sleeve hung open where the thread had run out.

“I told her she could collect it tonight.”

“I’ll explain,” Esteban said.

“She gave the work to me.”

He stopped reaching for the garment. Hannah folded it, keeping the loose seam inside, and went to tell the woman herself.

Hannah was quiet when she came back. At their meal, Miriam gave thanks. Esteban prayed for the Plasterer’s recovery, then passed his sister the onions. She took one and pushed the dish back toward him.

Later, while he repaired the latch on the yard gate, Eli appeared in the road.

“There are soldiers near the village,” he said.

Esteban straightened.

“How many?”

“Enough that my mother has found several things for me to do indoors.”

“Are they staying?”

“Only tonight, I think. Nathan is with them.”

Esteban had known Nathan for years, but usually as the man who repaired his own roof badly and then argued with anyone who offered to help. Once, long ago, he had been a soldier.

Eli was already turning toward the road.

“Are you coming?”

Esteban tested the latch. It held.

He set down his tools and followed Eli. At the bend, he glanced back. Hannah had taken up another piece of sewing. There was still enough light for a little work.

A Horse Without a Rider

(Chapter 2)

By the time Esteban and Eli reached the soldiers, most of the work of making camp was finished. Pack animals stood along the edge of a field. A man was brushing dried mud from his sandals. Two others argued over a place to sleep as if the earth belonged to one of them.

Esteban had expected more noise.

Nathan saw him and raised a hand.

“Over here, Esteban.”

He was sitting on a low stone beside a pile of equipment. Esteban stopped in front of him and tried to look as though he visited military camps every evening.

Nathan moved a bundle aside to make room for them.

The soldiers had been escorting travelers along the road. They would turn north in the morning. Esteban watched one of them tighten the binding on a pack. The man did it without looking down, his attention on a companion who was telling a story about a mule.

“Is there regular pay for this work?” Esteban asked.

“Yes. Not much to begin with, but you know when it is coming.”

“How is the Plasterer?” Nathan asked.

“Angry about his leg.”

“I’ll go and see him tomorrow.”

Esteban relaxed a little.

An older soldier passed behind Nathan and struck him lightly on the shoulder. Nathan rose to greet him. For a few moments, they spoke with the ease of men who did not need to explain where they had been together. They asked about families and people Esteban did not know. When the Soldier moved on, Nathan remained standing, watching him go.

"You miss it," Esteban said.

Nathan sat down again. "I miss the men."

Eli had found a broken strap near his feet. He asked whose it was. A soldier claimed it, and Eli offered to repair the fastening if someone could find an awl. Soon he was bent over the leather, quite at home.

Esteban continued watching the road beyond the animals.

"Did you always want to be a soldier?"

Nathan smiled.

"At your age, I mostly wanted a horse."

"And they gave you one?"

"Eventually. The first one I took without asking."

Esteban turned toward him.

"My Captain owned a beautiful horse," Nathan said. "I had been in his company only a little while. One afternoon, I decided the people in the nearby village ought to see me riding it. They saw me, all right. Then a dog frightened it, and it threw me into a ditch."

Eli looked up from the strap.

"The horse ran off. I had hurt my ankle, but I went after it. Each time someone pointed along a road, I followed. By evening, I could hardly walk. I finally went back. On the way, I decided to say the horse had been stolen. I practiced it until I could almost believe I was the unfortunate person in the story."

"The Captain was outside his tent when I arrived. He saw the mud on my clothes and came toward me. I told him about the terrible theft before he could ask a question. He took me to the place where the horses were kept."

"His horse was eating."

Eli bent over the strap, laughing. Esteban tried to imagine Nathan standing there with his injured ankle and his carefully prepared lie.

"The Captain said the Stablekeeper had seen me ride out. There was nothing left to hide behind. I waited for him to tell me to collect my things."

Nathan rubbed his thumb over an old mark on his hand.

“Instead, he pulled a stool over and told me to sit. He asked where I was hurt. I said it was nothing. He looked at my ankle and said that was quite enough lying for one day.”

“He knelt to loosen my sandal. I tried to do it myself, but my fingers were shaking. I had wanted that man to think well of me. I couldn’t bear him doing something kind while I sat there knowing what I had done. I told him while he washed the mud off. Taking the horse. Wanting to be admired. Being afraid to come back. I cried, which made me want to stop talking, but he waited until I finished.”

Nathan glanced toward the animals at the edge of the field.

“He told me I would apologize to the Stablekeeper and take over his morning work until the Captain was satisfied. I would have to earn the right to ride again. Then he tied a clean cloth around my ankle.”

“Were you allowed to stay?”

“I was. But there was something I still didn’t understand. He kept looking toward the road. I asked whether he was expecting someone.”

Nathan shifted on the stone, making room for a soldier to pass behind him.

“He said, ‘The two men I sent to find you.’

“I asked him when he had sent them. Hours before. The horse had returned with no rider, and he had sent them straight out.

“‘But the Stablekeeper told you I took it,’ I said.

“‘Yes.’

“‘Then why did you send them?’

“He looked up from my ankle.

“‘The horse had come home. You hadn’t.’”

For a little while, no one spoke. Eli drew the repaired strap between his hands, testing the fastening. A soldier called for someone to help him move a pack.

“Did you ever see the sea?” Esteban asked.

“Yes.” Nathan smiled at the eagerness in his voice. “The first time, I forgot what I was supposed to be doing.”

He described a road that wound down from the hills until the land fell away and the sea filled the distance. He told him about fishermen

pulling their boats ashore, a storm that had kept travelers crowded together for two days, and the first time he had heard so many unfamiliar voices in one place that he could not follow a single conversation.

He also told him about a journey when a pack animal had fallen on a steep path and blocked everyone behind it. By the time the men had freed it and divided its load, they were exhausted. They slept wherever they could find space, and Nathan woke to discover that the man beside him had used his leg as a pillow.

“Was he angry when you moved?” Esteban asked.

“He accused me of poor hospitality.”

Eli returned the repaired strap to its owner. The Soldier tested it, thanked him, and asked whether he was looking for work.

“My mother believes I have already found more work than I finish,” Eli said.

On the way home, Esteban could still hear the voices around the camp. He asked Eli whether he had noticed how quickly the Soldier had packed his belongings.

“I noticed that he had broken a strap,” Eli said.

“Would you go?”

“Where?”

“With them.”

Eli looked at him. “I came to see the soldiers, Esteban. You have already joined them in your head.”

“I’m asking.”

“Then I’ll have to think.”

They separated near Ruth’s house. Esteban continued home, then stopped beneath the dark outline of the hills. He tried to imagine the sea beyond the roads he knew.

The next morning, he and Eli repaired the worst of the leak over Ruth’s drying shelves. They had neither the time nor the materials to make a new roof, but they secured the loose covering and replaced a split support. Ruth stood beneath them offering advice that became more frequent whenever she heard a worrying sound.

Nathan passed while they were putting away the tools. Esteban called to him.

“Have they gone?”

“At first light.”

Eli went into the yard. Nathan waited while Esteban climbed down and gathered the tools.

“What does a man need to know before he joins?” Esteban asked.

“You will be tired. You will be told to do things when you would rather rest. Sometimes you will think the order is foolish. Sometimes you will be right.”

Esteban listened.

“Men get hurt. There are people on the roads who would rather take what others carry than work for their own living. Serving a Ruler also means serving under men you would not have chosen for yourself.”

“Were they all like your Captain?”

“No.”

Nathan let the answer stand.

Esteban glanced toward Ruth’s yard. Eli had begun helping his mother move the drying pots away from the repaired corner.

“I want to learn how to help when something goes wrong,” Esteban said. “Yesterday, under that cart, I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“You found people who did.”

“I want to be one of them.”

Nathan nodded slowly.

“And I want to go somewhere,” Esteban admitted. “I want to know what I can do.” He lifted the tools, then hesitated. “Would the pay help my mother?”

“If you sent some home. It would not make her rich.”

“I didn’t ask that.”

“I know.”

Nathan reached for the heavier of the bundles Esteban had lifted. They walked toward the house where the borrowed tools belonged.

“I know of a Captain who takes men for escort work,” Nathan said. “Men I trust have served with him. If you still wish to go in the spring, I can introduce you.”

“Why the spring?”

“You will be eighteen. You will have had time to speak with your mother and make arrangements for the work you leave behind.”

Esteban almost said that he was ready now. Then he thought of Miriam repairing his sandal, Hannah taking another piece of work, and Ruth looking up through a roof that still needed replacing.

Esteban returned the borrowed tools. When he came out, Nathan was still waiting by the gate.

“I will speak to my mother tonight,” Esteban said.

“Tell her I can come by,” Nathan said. “She will have questions.”

Esteban took the empty carrying cloth. Halfway home, he stopped practicing what he would say about the pay. He was trying to remember the color Nathan had called the sea.

What He Could Carry

(Chapter 3)

Miriam listened without interrupting.

That made it harder.

Esteban had expected questions about the pay, the distance, and the work. He had prepared answers to all three. Instead, his mother kept folding the cloth on her lap until he finished speaking.

Then she asked, “How long have you wanted this?”

“A while.”

Hannah sat near the doorway, pretending to mend a seam she had already finished.

Esteban sat down opposite her.

“I have wanted to go somewhere for a long time. I didn’t know where.”

His mother put the cloth aside.

He told her again about the steady pay, the work protecting travelers, and the introduction Nathan could make in the spring.

“You’ve told her everything except whether you’re frightened,” Hannah said.

“I am not a child.”

“I didn’t ask whether you were a child.”

He looked at her. She met his eyes without smiling.

“Yes,” he said at last. “A little.”

Miriam reached for his hand.

“So am I,” she said.

Miriam rubbed the back of his hand. The skin there was rough from carrying stone. She turned it over and touched a split along his thumb.

“Does that hurt?”

“Only when I bend it.”

“Let me put something on it before you sleep.”

“I could help you more,” he said.

“You help me now.”

“Not enough.”

“Esteban.”

He looked down.

“You must not go away believing you have failed us.”

He tried to answer, then stopped. For years, he had thought about what he would do when he earned enough. He would have the roof properly repaired. Hannah would not have to take every task offered to her. His mother would buy what she needed without waiting to see what was left.

He had promised himself those things so often that he felt he owed them to his family.

“I want you to be comfortable,” he said. “I would build you a house where the rain never came through.”

“I would like that,” she said. “Very much.”

“A room of my own?” Hannah asked.

“You can have two.”

“One will do. A door that closes.”

Esteban smiled. He looked at the patch above the doorway, where rain still found its way in during the worst storms.

“Will you pray that I can do it?” he asked his mother.

“Yes. And that you come home.”

“I mean to do both.”

“So I shall pray for both.”

“I want you to stop worrying,” he said.

“I want you home for the harvest,” Miriam said. “Will you be able to come?”

He had not asked Nathan. He had been so eager to hear about going that he had asked nothing about coming back.

“I don’t know yet.”

She kept hold of his hand.

They talked until the light faded. Miriam wanted Nathan to come the following evening. She had questions about the Captain, and about what happened when a man was ill. Esteban could answer neither. He agreed to fetch Nathan himself.

Before they went to sleep, he prayed beside his mat.

He asked God to guide him. He asked for his family to be cared for while he was away. After a while, he stopped asking for things and sat quietly, listening to his mother and sister move about the little house.

He loved that place. He did not know how to explain that he wanted to leave it too.

• • •

During the winter, Esteban worked whenever he could. He helped repair a wall, carried goods to nearby villages, and spent several cold mornings clearing a field with Eli. He set aside what he could without announcing the amount each time.

Nathan kept his word. He spoke with Miriam about the work, the dangers, and the modest pay a new man could expect. When he did not know an answer, he said so.

One afternoon, Eli told him that he intended to speak with Nathan himself.

“About joining?” Esteban set down the stones they had been carrying.

Eli nodded.

Esteban smiled.

“We could go together.”

“Yes. I thought I might decide first.”

Esteban’s smile faded. Eli watched him for a moment, then picked up another stone.

“My mother has enough work to keep two people busy,” he said. “She needs someone who can buy her pots more than she needs me moving them from one shelf to another.”

“You do more than that.”

“I know. I want to see how other potters fire their work. My mother loses too much in a bad firing.”

“Then you would come back and teach her?”

“That would be a dangerous way to put it.” Eli turned a stone in his hands, looking for a place to grip it. “But I would like to learn something she hasn’t already taught me. Someday I would like a kiln of my own.”

Esteban took a stone from the pile.

“Has she agreed?”

“She told me that if I stayed, I would have to stop speaking as though everyone else was keeping me here.”

“That sounds like her.”

“She said a few other things. I’m repeating the kindest.”

They carried the stones to the edge of the field. On the return journey, Esteban asked whether Eli was coming because of him.

Eli stopped.

“I am coming because I want to come.”

“I only meant that you don’t have to.”

“I know.”

Eli picked up a stone too large to carry alone. Esteban went to the other end.

“On three,” Eli said.

They lifted on two, as they always did, and carried it between them.

By spring, Nathan had received word that the Captain would see both of them. The Captain served Herod Antipas and needed men for patrol and escort work. He had made no promise beyond giving them a chance to learn.

Esteban had turned eighteen. His winter savings were smaller than he had hoped, but they would leave his mother with something for the first weeks.

One afternoon, while Esteban packed, Eli stood against the doorframe, covering the cuts they had made there as boys.

“Still taller,” he said.

“You’re wearing sandals.”

Eli took them off. Esteban put down his bundle and went to stand beside him.

Miriam came through carrying a basket. “Move, both of you.”

They moved, still arguing.

The Plasterer came to mend the step outside Miriam’s house. Hannah arranged to share larger sewing tasks with a neighbor, and Ruth found a boy to help with her pots. Esteban kept thinking of small things he had forgotten to do. Someone had usually thought of them before him.

On the afternoon before they left, he and Eli repaired one sagging corner of Ruth’s shelter. Then Ruth called them down and gave each of them food for the journey. When Esteban thanked her, she caught his sleeve.

“Don’t let him pretend he can mend every broken thing himself,” she said quietly.

Eli, who had heard, turned around.

“I am standing here.”

“I know where you are.”

She looked at him for a moment. He stopped smiling.

Then she reached up and brushed a little dried clay from his cheek.

“You missed some,” she said.

He bent his head so she could remove it.

Esteban looked away to give them the small privacy the yard allowed.

At home, Hannah had laid out his clothes. She had repaired a tear beneath one sleeve and strengthened the seams of his carrying cloth.

“You’ve put everything in the wrong place,” he told her.

“Then you will have the pleasure of finding it.”

He sat beside her.

“Thank you.”

She continued folding.

“When you’re gone, I’ll have to do your work as well as mine.”

“You already say that.”

“I was hoping it would discourage you.”

He smiled. Hannah pulled at a knot that did not need tightening.

“Don’t lose this cloth,” she said.

“I won’t.”

“I mean it. It took me all morning.”

He put his arm around her. She pressed her face against his shoulder, still holding the knot.

That night, Miriam sat with him after Hannah had gone to bed.

“I put a little extra food in your bundle,” she said.

“Ruth gave us some.”

“I know.”

“We will have enough.”

“I would like you to have enough.”

He made room in the bundle.

After a while, he asked, “Will you be all right?”

“I will miss you.”

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

“I know what you meant. Hannah will be here. So will Ruth.”

She looked at the packed bundle beside his mat.

“I’ll still miss you.”

He looked at his mother in the lamplight. The roof still needed work. His mother would still wake early, and Hannah would still sew by the doorway. Tomorrow those things would go on without him.

Miriam put her hand over his.

“Send word when you can. We will want to know what you are doing.”

“Even when it is nothing important?”

“Tell me what you eat. Whether you sleep well. I will want to know.”

Before dawn, she helped him fasten his bundle. Hannah stood in the doorway with a cloth around her shoulders. Eli waited outside, looking unusually quiet. Nathan would walk with them as far as the main road.

Esteban embraced his sister. She held him tightly, then pushed him away before either could begin crying again.

His mother smoothed the shoulder of his tunic, though there was nothing wrong with it.

“May God watch over you,” she said.

“And you.”

He held her for a long moment. When he stepped back, her eyes were wet, but she was smiling.

Eli lifted his bundle. Esteban lifted his own.

They walked past Ruth’s house, where she stood waiting to wave once more. Farther on, the Plasterer called something about a wall that would still need repairing when they returned.

Esteban turned and promised to come.

At the last bend, he looked back. His mother and sister were still outside the house. Hannah raised her hand. Miriam kept hers resting against the doorway.

He raised his hand too.

Then the road turned, and he had to look ahead.

The Men on the Road

(Chapter 4)

The Captain asked Esteban to lift a sack.

Esteban had spent the walk preparing answers about courage. He had enough food to get home if the Captain refused him. He had not worked out what he would say to his mother.

“Where do you want it?”

“Beside the others.”

Esteban carried it across the yard. Eli followed with a second sack. When they returned, the Captain pointed to a third.

By the time the work was finished, Esteban was sweating through his tunic.

The Captain stood in the shade with Nathan’s message in his hand. He was a broad man with a closely trimmed beard. He folded Nathan’s message and tucked it into his belt.

“What are your names?”

They told him.

“What work have you done?”

Esteban described carrying goods, helping in fields, and repairing walls. Eli spoke about pottery, animals, and the things he had learned to mend.

“Can you obey an order?”

“Yes,” Esteban said.

Eli hesitated.

The Captain looked at him.

“I would want to understand it,” Eli said.

“Ask while we are making plans. If I give an order on the road, move when I tell you.”

Eli nodded.

“You will learn the work here,” the Captain continued. “If you can do it, you will stay. The first escort leaves in two weeks. Until then, you train with the others and help with the loads.”

Esteban nodded, relieved that they were not being sent home.

A soldier took them to the place where they would sleep. There was less room than Esteban had imagined. Eli put down his bundle and surveyed the crowded floor.

“My mother will be pleased,” he said. “She’s always wanted me to learn to keep my belongings in one place.”

That evening, Esteban turned toward Eli.

“We should get back before...”

He stopped. Men were unrolling their sleeping cloths all around him.

Eli looked at him.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Eli watched him for a moment, then shifted his bundle to make room. Esteban unrolled his sleeping cloth beside him.

The first weeks were harder than either of them admitted in the messages they sent home.

They learned to carry their equipment without stopping to adjust it at every turn. They learned where to stand when a group halted, how to watch the ground ahead while keeping sight of the men beside them, and how easily an animal could make a confident man look foolish.

They practiced with shields and spears until their arms shook. Esteban was strong from years of work, but strong arms did not make him a soldier. A smaller man knocked him off balance three times in one morning.

On the fourth attempt, Esteban grew angry and rushed him.

He landed on his back.

Eli looked down at him.

“I think you’re improving. That was much quicker.”

Esteban would have been angry with him too if he had not laughed first.

The man who tended the company's sick and injured found Esteban washing dirt from his scraped hand. The Attendant carried clean cloths from a shaded room where a soldier lay resting a swollen ankle.

"Let me see."

"It's only a scrape."

"Then it won't take long."

The Attendant rinsed his hand and asked how he had done it.

"Training."

The Attendant covered the rawest part without asking who had won. In the days that followed, Esteban sometimes helped him carry supplies or settle a man who could not move comfortably on his own.

He began setting the clean cloth within the Attendant's reach before he was asked. The Attendant told each man what he was about to do before touching a wound. Once, when a man flinched, the Attendant waited until the hand gripping his sleeve loosened.

Toward the end of the second week, one of the soldiers came down with a fever. The Attendant moved him into the shaded room. That night, Esteban woke to the sound of coughing and went to see whether help was needed.

The Captain sat beside the sick man, holding him up while he tried to drink. Water ran down the man's chin. The Captain wiped it away with the corner of a cloth.

"Get some sleep," he told Esteban. "You are on watch before dawn."

When Esteban rose for his watch, the Soldier was sleeping. The Captain was still beside him, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. His own untouched sleeping cloth lay folded by the door.

The following morning, the Captain assigned the new men to an escort. A small group of traders and other travelers needed to cross a stretch of hill road before turning toward the lower country. There had been thefts along the route, and the travelers had waited until soldiers could accompany them.

Esteban checked his equipment twice. Eli checked the ties on a pack animal that did not belong to him.

"Leave that," Esteban said. "We are ready."

“It isn’t.”

Eli tightened a slipping fastening. The Owner thanked him and asked whether he could look at another one.

By the time they left, Esteban had put down his own pack to help with someone else’s.

The road climbed steadily. The Captain placed experienced men ahead and behind the travelers. Esteban walked near the rear with a woman, her young son, and an older man whose breathing grew labored on the steepest stretches.

At first, Esteban was disappointed. He could see the leading soldiers against the sky and wanted to be with them.

Then the boy began to complain about his sandals. The older man needed to stop. The woman tried to carry part of the man’s load as well as her own.

Esteban took it from her and called ahead for the group to slow.

The leading men waited. The Captain walked back to see what was wrong.

“He can continue after a rest,” Esteban said, hoping he had not already failed his first assignment.

“Then we will rest.”

The Captain sent a man ahead to tell the leading carts to stop. One Driver protested that they were losing the cool part of the morning.

“We are,” the Captain said. “We still have to get him there.”

They continued when the older man could stand.

Near the top of the climb, the track narrowed above a shallow ravine. A pack mule put one foot on loose stones and slipped. Its load shifted, pulling it toward the edge.

The Owner shouted and seized the lead rope. The animal jerked its head, dragging him sideways.

Esteban ran forward.

He caught the side of the pack and tried to push it upright, the way he would have steadied a slipping sack in the yard. But the animal moved beneath it. The weight swung toward him, and his feet slid in the loose earth.

“Esteban, back!” the Captain called.

Esteban could feel the animal struggling against him. If he let go, he thought, everything would fall.

He held on.

A Veteran seized the back of his tunic and pulled him away so sharply that he stumbled against the bank.

The Captain had already grasped the rope beside the Owner. Together they pulled the mule’s head toward the uphill side. Eli reached the shifting pack from firmer ground and loosened a binding under the Captain’s direction. Two men supported the load as they removed part of it.

The mule stopped struggling. Its feet found a better purchase, and the Owner led it away from the edge.

Esteban stood against the bank, breathing hard.

The Veteran who had pulled him clear glanced at him.

“You’re heavier than you look.”

“I had it.”

“No, you didn’t.”

The Captain sent him back along the track to keep the other travelers from pressing forward. Esteban obeyed. He stood where he was told and explained the delay to the woman and the older man.

His face burned. The Captain had called him back, and he had refused to listen. He wondered whether he would be sent home.

The little boy asked whether the mule was hurt.

“No.”

The boy looked past him, still trying to see the animal. Esteban moved so that his body blocked the narrow path.

Once the load had been divided, the group continued. They reached broader ground before evening. The travelers settled close together, relieved to have the narrow road behind them.

The Captain called Esteban aside.

“Tomorrow you walk beside the Veteran. When the road narrows, keep the travelers back and let him go ahead.”

“I thought I could hold it.”

“I needed you to move.”

Behind them, the older traveler called for his bundle. The Captain was already turning toward him.

“I’ll find it,” Esteban said.

After the baggage had been sorted, he found the Veteran by the animals.

“Thank you for pulling me away.”

The man nodded without stopping his work. He was checking the bindings on a load.

Esteban stayed.

“What did you see?” he asked.

“When?”

“On the path. Before you pulled me back.”

“Your feet.”

Esteban looked at him.

“Loose stones. Nothing behind you.” The Veteran tugged at a knot. He winced, then tried with his other hand.

“Did I do that?” Esteban asked.

“Finish this for me.”

Esteban took the strap. The Veteran showed him where to stand, clear of the animal’s legs, and told him which end to loosen first.

When he returned to the travelers, Eli moved over to make a place for him.

“The boy asked whether you were our Captain,” Eli said.

“What did you tell him?”

“That we are trying to prevent it.”

Esteban laughed and sat down. He was tired enough to lean against his friend’s shoulder, but Eli pushed him upright.

“Find a tree. I’ve been walking too.”

The next morning, Esteban took his place at the rear. When the track narrowed, he stopped the older traveler and waited. Far ahead, the

Veteran turned to check that the path was clear behind him. Esteban raised a hand.

In the weeks that followed, he learned the work a task at a time. The men began trusting him to check a load or bring the last travelers into camp. He still hated being sent to the back, especially when Eli was allowed to go ahead.

When his first pay came, he counted it several times. After setting aside what he needed, he wrapped a portion for his mother. A dependable carrier who traveled near the village agreed to take it with a message.

Esteban said that he was learning, that Eli was well, and that he hoped the Plasterer had stopped complaining.

“Anything else?” the Carrier asked.

Esteban hesitated.

“Tell my mother I miss them.”

“I will tell her,” the Carrier said. “Exactly that.”

That night, Esteban gave thanks to God beside his sleeping place. He was tired, his shoulders ached, and someone nearby was already snoring. He thought of Miriam receiving the small parcel and of Hannah asking whether he had become wise enough to be unbearable.

Eli stretched out beside him.

“Move your bundle,” he muttered.

“There is room.”

“Then you sleep on it.”

Esteban moved the bundle. Eli settled into the space with a satisfied breath.

Eli was asleep before Esteban found a comfortable place for his arm. He moved the bundle once more, out of his friend’s way, and closed his eyes.

A Place Beside Him

(Chapter 5)

The Oil Merchant caught Esteban by the arm and pointed to a boy.

“Search him,” he said. “He was beside my cart. Now my money is gone.”

Esteban had been a soldier for more than a year. He had grown accustomed to the weight of his equipment and the long hours on the road. People had begun moving aside when they saw him coming.

The boy held a basket against his chest. He was about the age Hannah had been when Esteban left home. Pale clay had dried around his fingernails, and his tunic was torn at the shoulder. Behind him, Magdala’s market crowded the road to the lake.

“I carried his jars,” the boy said.

“And you put your hand where it did not belong.”

Esteban had escorted the Oil Merchant that morning. The man had complained all the way to Magdala. Now he spoke with such certainty that people stopped to stare at the boy.

“Set down the basket,” Esteban told the boy.

“I have to take it back.”

“Set it down.”

The boy obeyed. People crowded closer.

Esteban could feel their attention. The Captain was elsewhere in the market, settling where the carts would stand before the return journey. Esteban had been told to keep the entrance clear and help with trouble. Now trouble stood in front of him, and he wanted to deal with it properly.

“Did you take anything from the cart?” he asked.

“Jars. He told me to.”

“My purse,” the Oil Merchant said. “Ask him about my purse.”

“I heard you.”

Esteban reached for the boy’s wrist when he moved toward the basket.

The boy pulled away.

“Keep still.”

“I was only going to show you.”

Esteban held more tightly. He had no intention of hurting him, but the boy’s face changed.

Then Eli put a hand on Esteban’s arm.

“Come here a moment.”

“I’m speaking to him.”

“I know. Come here.”

Esteban disliked the interruption. He disliked it more because the Oil Merchant was watching. But Eli’s voice was quiet, and something in it made him release the boy.

They moved only a few paces away.

“Did you see him take it?” Eli asked.

“I came after the man called.”

“Then look in the cart.”

“He says he’s looked.”

“You haven’t.”

Esteban glanced at the Oil Merchant, who was telling another man what had happened.

“The boy might run.”

“I’ll stay beside him. Go and look.”

Esteban glanced back. The boy was rubbing his wrist. He had begun to cry without making any sound.

“Stay with him,” he told Eli.

He returned to the cart.

The Oil Merchant objected immediately. He had looked already. He knew where he kept his money. The boy had been the only stranger near it.

“When did you last hold the purse?” Esteban asked.

“At the weighing place.”

“And after that?”

“I came here.”

“Did you pay anyone?”

“For the stall.”

“Show me where you were standing.”

The Oil Merchant sighed loudly enough for the people nearby to hear. But he showed him.

Esteban walked around the cart. The harness had been loosened, and a cloth lay over one shaft to keep it from rubbing the animal’s flank. Beneath the cloth, caught between a strap and the wood, hung a small leather purse.

He lifted it free.

The Oil Merchant reached for it.

“Open it,” Esteban said.

The man counted twice. All his money was there.

Esteban went back to the boy.

“I should have looked before I held you,” he said.

The boy held his sore wrist against his chest. He did not answer.

“I am sorry.”

Behind him, the Oil Merchant muttered that anyone could have made the same mistake.

“Pay him for carrying your jars,” Esteban said.

“I already did.”

The boy shook his head.

The Oil Merchant’s mouth tightened. Then he took a coin from the purse and put it in the boy’s hand.

Eli picked up the basket and gave it back to him. “Where does this go?”

“To the pottery stall.”

“Come on. I’ll help you get through this crowd.”

Esteban watched them leave. He could still feel the boy’s narrow wrist in his hand.

• • •

At midday, a Driver called to Esteban from beside the carts.

“Did you make the thief give it back?”

“There was no thief.”

“The Merchant said a boy took his money.”

The Oil Merchant was close enough to hear. Esteban looked toward him, but the man was busy inspecting a jar.

“His purse was caught in the harness,” Esteban said. “The boy had done nothing wrong.”

“Oh.” The Driver bent to lift another sack. “That isn’t what I heard.”

Esteban helped him put it on the cart. When he looked for the boy, he could not see him among the stalls. The Captain called him over to arrange the returning wagons.

When the caravan started home, the Oil Merchant kept his distance. Esteban was grateful for it.

The road rose out of the town between fields already cut for harvest. Dust settled on their feet. A driver sang the same few lines so often that men began supplying the words whenever he paused.

By late afternoon, one of the younger soldiers was struggling. He had been with them only a few weeks. He kept falling behind, then hurrying to catch up. Esteban remembered doing the same, trying to look stronger than he felt.

Esteban moved beside him.

“Give me your pack.”

“I can carry it.”

“I know. Give it to me for a while.”

The young man hesitated, then slipped it from his shoulders. Esteban took it without calling anyone’s attention to them. They walked together until his breathing settled.

Ahead, Eli had begun arguing with the singing Driver about the words of his song. Neither knew the whole of it. They disagreed with such confidence that even the Captain smiled.

The Young Soldier beside Esteban laughed, and some of the strain left his face.

“Was it like this when you came?” he asked.

“Worse. Eli sang then too.”

“I heard that,” Eli called.

“You were meant to.”

The road bent toward a stand of trees. Beyond them lay the place where they would stop for the night. Esteban felt the extra weight pulling at his shoulders, but he did not hurry the young man.

• • •

Later, while the others settled, Esteban sat beside Eli on a low wall. The evening air was cooler. From somewhere beyond the trees came the sound of bells on a grazing animal.

“You could have said it in front of everyone,” Esteban said.

“Said what?”

“That I was wrong.”

“You might have held on to him.”

Esteban rubbed his hands together.

“I wanted the man to know I could deal with it.”

Eli said nothing.

“You saw the boy’s face,” Esteban said.

“Yes.”

Eli picked at a loose thread on his sleeve. Esteban waited, then leaned back against the stones.

Eli said, “My mother once accused me of breaking six lamps.”

“Did you?”

“Five. I wanted everyone to be very clear about the difference.”

Esteban looked at him.

“She had told me to carry them in two journeys. I thought I could save myself the trouble. The tray caught the doorpost, and five fell. I heard them break before I could even set down the tray.”

“Where was your mother?”

“Near enough. She counted what was left of the order and said I had broken six. I knew only five had fallen. We became so busy arguing about the number that we forgot to pick up the pieces.”

“Who broke the other one?”

“She did. That morning, before I came to help. She had put its pieces under the workbench and forgotten them. When she found them, she came to me in the yard.”

“She said, ‘You told me the truth about the sixth lamp. I should have listened. I am sorry.’

“I had waited all afternoon to hear that. I thought I would feel better. Instead, I told her how unfair she had been until she went back inside.”

Esteban brushed a little dirt from the wall beside him.

“Later, I went to see why she hadn’t finished work. One new lamp stood on the bench. Beside it were five lumps of clay. She was measuring them out.”

“Five,” Esteban said.

“Yes. I asked her about the lamp she had made. She said, ‘That one is mine to replace.’”

Eli held his hands apart, as though there were a piece of clay between them.

“I didn’t know how to make anything fit to sell. I asked whether she would teach me. She said she would, if I would listen.”

“What did you say?”

“‘If you will.’

“She looked at me for a moment. Then she pushed a lump of clay toward me and said, ‘I will.’”

“My first lamp had an uneven rim and a dent near the base where my thumb had gone too far. My mother said it would hold oil, which was the kindest thing she could truthfully say about it. We made four more. By the last one, she hardly needed to touch my hands.”

“Did anyone buy them?”

“Four of them, after they were fired.”

“And the first?”

“She kept it beside her sleeping mat. When I come home late, that’s the light I look for.”

Before lying down, Esteban prayed for the boy from the market. He had not even asked his name. He pictured the basket pressed against the torn tunic, then the boy walking away beside Eli. Afterward, he prayed for his mother and Hannah, as he did every evening, picturing their house until it became clear in his mind.

On their next visit to Magdala, Esteban looked for the boy near the pottery stalls. He found the basket hanging from a peg, but another boy was carrying the jars.

“Where is the one who worked here before?”

The Potter was serving a customer. “Which one?”

“The boy with...” Esteban stopped. He could describe the torn tunic, the clay beneath his nails. He had never asked his name.

The Captain called from the road. Their carts were leaving.

Esteban went to his place beside them.

The Way Home

(Chapter 6)

When Esteban returned to the village at twenty, Hannah met him before he reached the house.

She had been carrying a bundle of washed clothing. She stopped in the road, stared at him, and dropped it.

“You’re late.”

“I know.”

“You said yesterday.”

“The road was slower than we expected.”

She ran to him before he could explain more. He caught her so tightly that she complained, then held on to him with both arms.

Behind her, their mother came out of the house.

For two years he had pictured this homecoming. He would stand straight and let his mother see what he had become. When she appeared in the doorway, he hurried toward her.

Miriam put both hands against his face. She looked at him as though she were checking every part she could see.

“You’re thinner.”

“I’m taller.”

“You can be both.”

He laughed, and she drew him close. Her cheek was warm against his neck. He could feel her crying.

“I’m home,” he said.

“Yes.”

“I’m all right.”

“Yes.”

But she continued to hold him, and he let her.

Hannah gathered the clothing from the road. By the time she had finished, she was wiping her own face with the clean corner of a tunic.

“You see what you have done,” she said. “Now I have to wash everything again.”

Esteban reached for the bundle. She gave him half.

The smell of the hearth reached him as he stepped inside. He had not known he remembered it until he was home. The worn step, the mark near the doorway, the small shelf his father had made years earlier were all still there. His sleeping place had been used for storage.

“We can move those things,” Miriam said.

“There’s no need. I can sleep on the roof.”

“You’ve been gone two years, and already you’re making arrangements without asking.”

Hannah laughed.

Esteban put down his pack. “Where would you like me to sleep?”

His mother pointed.

He began moving the stored bundles.

• • •

Eli came later with Ruth, who had already inspected her son, fed him, and complained that he had learned to fold his clothes badly. She brought a small jar of oil for Miriam. Before Eli could sit, she reminded him that the stack of old timber needed moving.

“He has only just arrived,” Miriam said.

“If I don’t ask now, he’ll spend the whole visit mending everyone else’s roof.”

Eli held up his hands. “I asked what needed doing.”

“And I answered.”

Esteban helped Ruth sit. She kept hold of his hand.

“Did you look after each other?”

“We did,” he said.

“Good. He would tell me he needed no looking after.”

“I’m standing here,” Eli said.

“I know. I have been enjoying it all afternoon.”

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. She brushed a bit of dust from his sleeve, although there was dust on everything he wore.

Nathan arrived near sunset. He stopped a little way from Esteban and studied him, then embraced him and Eli in turn. Later he listened while they described the places they had seen. He asked about the men they served with, what their Captain was like, and whether they were being paid when payment was due. He had served with one man’s father. He wanted to know whether the son had the same terrible cough.

When Esteban spoke of the boy at the market, his mother asked whether the boy had found other work.

“I don’t know,” he said.

She waited, but that was all he could tell her. Eli reached for the dish and passed it to him.

• • •

The next morning, Esteban laid his remaining pay on the table. Most of what he had earned had already been sent home or used for necessities on the road. What remained was small enough to fit beneath his hand, but he had counted it many times while planning what it might do.

He wanted to replace the damaged beam near the back wall. There were repairs to the roof. Hannah needed clothing. His mother’s shoes were worn thin.

Miriam listened to his list, then brought out a folded cloth containing coins of her own.

“Where did those come from?” he asked.

“Work. Some of what you sent. A little Hannah earned.”

“You should have used it.”

“We did use some.”

“Then why did you keep this?”

“Because something might need doing when you came home.”

Miriam began sorting the coins. She moved a small one twice, finding it among the others by touch.

“I wanted to do it for you,” he said.

“You are doing it with us.”

She pushed the two small piles together.

They chose what could be repaired now and what could wait. Hannah joined them and objected to the new clothing. The roof, she said, would be of more use to her when rain came.

By midday, the village Builder came to inspect the beam. Esteban remembered him as a quiet boy sent to fetch tools. Now he was broader across the shoulders and knew how to keep their roof from falling.

Hannah stayed beside him longer than the explanation required.

Esteban watched them.

Eli nudged him.

“Let him look at the beam,” Eli murmured.

“I am.”

“You haven’t looked above his shoulders.”

The Builder explained how they would support the wall while replacing the beam. Esteban agreed to work under his direction.

Hannah brought the Builder water. She remembered which of their cups had the cracked rim and gave him the other one.

That evening, he found her sorting the clothing again.

“Your Builder seems a good worker,” he said.

“He is.”

“Do you know his family well?”

“So do you.”

“I only wondered.”

She put down what she was holding.

“Esteban, you can ask whether I like him.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

He had prepared several careful questions. Her answer made them seem foolish.

“Does he know?”

“I hope so. I’ve been fairly clear.”

Esteban laughed. After a moment, she laughed too.

“He is kind,” she said. “You will see.”

“I would like to.”

She reached over and squeezed his hand.

• • •

They repaired Ruth’s kiln shelter after finishing the work at Miriam’s house. Esteban paid for the new timber, and the Builder helped them set the supports. Nathan, Miriam, Hannah, and several neighbors joined them. By the time the shelter was finished, their arms ached. Ruth stood beneath it, looked up, and said she would be able to work in wet weather without moving everything twice.

Esteban pictured her working there after they left, the rain running from the new roof while the clay stayed dry beneath it.

Ruth counted out the cost of the timber and put the coins beside his tools.

“That was meant to be from us,” Esteban said.

“I ordered it last month. Ask the Builder.”

The Builder nodded without looking up from the fastening he was checking.

Esteban left the money where it was. Ruth gathered it and tucked it into the pouch at his belt.

“You can carry the old timber around the back before you go.”

Eli was already lifting one end. Esteban took the other, and Ruth held the gate for them.

• • •

The days passed quickly. Esteban worked, visited people, and slept more deeply than he had in months. Once, during an afternoon conversation, he fell asleep sitting against the wall. Hannah covered his face with a cloth to keep the flies away. When he woke, everyone denied knowing who had done it.

On his final evening, he sat with Miriam outside the house. The village had grown quiet. Somewhere a child was refusing to go to bed.

“Are you happy there?” she asked.

He took time to answer.

“Sometimes I’m tired of being told where to go.”

“You can tell me if you want to leave.”

“I’m learning things. I like the men. They trust me with more now.”

“And the work?”

“Some days.”

She nodded and stayed beside him.

“I miss this,” he said.

“I know.”

“I miss you.”

She rested her head briefly against his shoulder. He remembered being small enough to lean against hers in the same place.

Before sleeping, they prayed together. Miriam thanked God that the two young men had returned safely. Esteban thanked God for the hands that had helped repair the house, for the work his mother and sister had found, and for the days they had been given together.

Hannah was laughing at something Eli had said. Miriam called to them to let the neighbors sleep. Esteban lay beneath the new beam and listened until his mother began laughing too.

In the morning, Miriam helped fasten his pack. Hannah embraced him, then reminded him to send word sooner when his plans changed.

Eli was waiting in the road, listening while Ruth gave him one last instruction.

They waved and began walking. When Esteban turned back, his mother was still beside the doorway. He raised his hand again, and she raised hers.

He caught up with Eli, who was carrying a packet Ruth had made him promise to keep dry. Inside were fragments from a bad firing.

“She wants me to ask another Potter,” Eli said.

“Will you?”

“If I find one who knows.”

Eli shifted the packet to keep it from knocking against his other things. They walked on together.

The Longer Road

(Chapter 7)

At twenty-two, Esteban was given charge of a caravan whose goods were worth more than he had earned in four years.

He checked the animals and the loads, then the men who would guard them. The Captain trusted him with longer journeys now. The Captain had asked him how many guards he needed. It was the first time the number had been his to choose.

That morning, a trader arrived late and insisted that they could make up the time on the road. There was work in the new lakeside city, and men were bringing everything from dressed stone to cloth for the houses.

His name was Ezra. He had two pack animals, a cart, and the worried expression of a man who knew exactly what delay would cost him.

“We can walk faster after the climb,” he said.

“The animals will be tired after the climb,” Esteban replied.

“Then before it.”

“They’ll still have to climb.”

Ezra looked at him, deciding whether he was being mocked.

Esteban showed him where his cart would travel and asked him to keep the animal carrying the lighter load near the rear. Eli came around the cart and pulled a knot tight.

“Why?” Ezra asked.

“If another animal begins to struggle, we can move some of its load onto yours without stopping the whole line.”

Ezra considered the arrangement and agreed.

They left before the sun grew hot. The Captain accompanied them as far as a turning where part of the guard would take another road. Before

leaving Esteban in charge of the smaller escort, the Captain asked where he meant to stop.

“At the stone yard beyond the ridge.”

“If you are late?”

“The lower farm.”

“Use it. The last carts won’t keep up after dark. Stop there even if the traders complain.”

Esteban repeated the stopping places to the men who would ride ahead.

• • •

They were late.

A cart wheel needed work before midday. A driver had tied a load badly, and they had to stop again when it shifted. By the time the caravan reached the lower farm, the sun was nearing the ridge.

Ezra pointed toward the road ahead.

“We still have light.”

“Not enough for everyone,” Esteban said.

“I have men waiting for these goods. The money from them pays the weavers at home.”

Esteban looked at the cloth bundles. He knew what it was to wait for payment.

“We will start at first light.”

Ezra looked back at the carts behind him. A woman was helping her father down from one of them. The older man had insisted all day that his leg did not trouble him. Now he could hardly put weight on it.

Ezra exhaled.

“Very well. But I’ll have to pay for another night.”

Esteban helped arrange the animals inside a low enclosure beside the farm. The carts stood near the entrance. The people slept in a storehouse and beneath a lean shelter, with the soldiers taking turns outside.

The place was familiar to travelers. The family who lived there earned a little by giving them space and selling what they needed.

Esteban spoke with the Farmer about the road ahead. There had been thefts farther up the hills, the man said, though no one could agree on how many men were involved.

“They take the animals too,” he said. “Do not leave any outside the wall.”

Esteban placed the guards where they could see the entrance and the slope above it. He walked the enclosure with Eli before eating.

“There,” Eli said, pointing to a gap in the far wall.

They moved loose stones into it. Then Esteban checked the knots on the animals’ tethers. He was tired, but the small acts steadied him. When everything had a place, he found it easier to rest.

He had barely lain down when a shout came from beyond the storehouse.

Fire had caught in a heap of dry brush near the outer fence.

The Farmer ran toward it with his sons. Several travelers followed. Esteban rose and started after them, then stopped.

The wind was carrying the flames away from the buildings. Someone had chosen that place carefully.

“Stay with the carts,” he told the nearest Soldier. “Keep the people inside.”

He turned toward the animal enclosure.

A man was climbing over its rear wall.

Esteban shouted. The intruder dropped down outside and disappeared. Another man stood inside the enclosure, cutting a tether. At Esteban’s cry, he struck the nearest animal to make it surge toward the entrance.

The sudden movement pulled other animals against their lines. A driver ran forward to save his load. Esteban seized his shoulder and pushed him back as an animal kicked.

“Stay clear.”

Eli reached the enclosure gate from the other side. Together they held it against the frightened animals while a soldier dragged a loose fence panel across the opening.

A stone struck the wall beside Esteban’s head.

He ducked. Above the enclosure, shapes moved between the trees.

“There are more,” Eli said.

“I see them.”

Esteban sent two men to the storehouse and called the travelers away from the exposed yard. Ezra came out carrying a staff.

“Get inside,” Esteban told him.

“My goods are here.”

“So are you. Inside.”

For once, Ezra did not argue.

The man in the enclosure had freed one pack animal. He drove it toward the gap in the rear wall while the men on the slope threw stones to keep the guards back. A soldier tried to reach him and stumbled over a fallen tether.

Esteban hauled the Soldier up. The man who had cut the lines scrambled over the wall. The animal followed through the gap, dragging one of the stones aside.

Esteban knew where the path beyond the trees joined the road. The loaded animal would move slowly over that ground. With two men, he could reach the turning first. The storehouse walls would shelter the travelers while Eli held the yard.

He called two guards to follow him.

“Keep everyone inside,” he told Eli. “We can still get the load back.”

“They are not inside yet.”

The older traveler had fallen near the storehouse door. His daughter was trying to lift him. The Farmer’s sons were still at the fire.

“Get them in. I’ll leave the other men with you.”

“I need these two as well.” Eli pointed to the slope. “We cannot cover both sides.”

Esteban could hear the stolen animal moving through the brush. Every moment brought it closer to the trees beyond the road. He thought of the people waiting for Ezra’s payment. Once the cloth was gone, there would be little chance of finding it.

“Only as far as the turning,” he said.

“Help me lift him. She can’t do it.”

Another stone struck the shelter roof. The woman beside her father cried out. Esteban looked from her to the two guards waiting beside him. “Stay here,” he told the guards.

“Keep low,” he called to the soldiers. “Make them come down if they want to reach us.”

He went to the fallen man. With the daughter on one side and Esteban on the other, they got him into the storehouse. Eli brought the last Driver in behind them.

The thieves shouted from the slope, hoping to draw someone out. Esteban kept the guards in place. Eventually the stones stopped. The men withdrew into the trees with the animal they had taken.

No one followed them.

• • •

It took a long time for the yard to become quiet again.

The Farmer’s sons put out the last of the brush fire. The Attendant was not traveling with this party, so Esteban cleaned a cut on the fallen Soldier’s cheek himself, using what he had been taught. The older traveler’s daughter sat beside her father until his breathing eased. People counted their belongings more than once.

Ezra’s stolen animal had carried folded cloth and several small packages of goods. Ezra sat on the edge of his cart with his head lowered.

Esteban went to him.

“I am sorry.”

“How much is an apology worth at the next market?”

Esteban had no answer.

Ezra rubbed his face. Beyond the gate, the Farmer’s sons were carrying away the last of the burned brush.

“It was my best animal,” he said.

Esteban looked at the empty tether. Ezra would have to go home and explain what he had lost. Some of the people waiting there had already done their work.

“Is all your money in what they took?” he asked.

“No.” Ezra looked up. “Enough to hurt. Not enough to finish me.”

“I can have the local watch informed when we reach the next settlement.”

“Do that.”

Ezra began untying the bundles that remained, checking each one against a list. Esteban held the corner of the cloth out of the dust. When they finished, Ezra counted again.

Later, Eli brought stones to help him close the gap in the enclosure wall.

“People at home were depending on that load,” Esteban said.

“I know.”

“Not only Ezra. The people who made the cloth. He has to pay them.”

Eli lowered the stone he was carrying.

“He did not tell me that.”

“He told me.”

For a while they listened to the movement in the storehouse. The older traveler was asking his daughter to stay beside him.

“I would still have kept the men here,” Eli said.

Esteban took the stone and fitted it into the gap. He could no longer hear the stolen animal, even when the travelers fell quiet.

They finished the wall without speaking. Esteban checked the storehouse and returned to take the watch. Eli lay down beside the gate. Esteban watched the slope until the stars began to fade.

• • •

They reached Tiberias the next day. While the missing goods were reported and the travelers found their families, Esteban went to the Captain, who had arrived by the lower road.

The Captain listened to Esteban’s account that afternoon. Esteban described the fire, the gap, and the attempt to draw the guards away. He also described his own decision to pursue the thief and Eli’s intervention.

The Captain called the younger soldiers over while Esteban drew the enclosure in the dust. One man said he could have reached the turning before the loaded animal.

“So could I,” Esteban said.

“Then why...”

Esteban marked the doorway, the fallen traveler, and the place where the woman had been trying to lift him. The Soldier crouched to look. Another man began asking about the fire. They were still arguing when a Driver called for help with the remaining goods.

The Captain kept him in charge for the return journey. Ezra had asked for an account of the missing goods, and Esteban stayed to help him give it. They could describe the animal well. Neither could say whether the thieves had been three men or five.

The return caravan would not leave until midday. Early the next morning, Esteban and Eli went down toward the water. Work continued wherever there was room for a mason to stand. Antipas had named the city for the emperor Tiberius. Men spoke of Antipas as they discussed their houses, their land, and the next payment due.

Eli stopped at a pottery yard where a man was building a kiln.

“We have time to reach the water,” Esteban said.

“Then go. I want to see this.”

Eli asked the Potter why his mother’s jars sometimes split near the base. The man asked about her clay, then the thickness of the walls. Eli answered the first question and hesitated over the second.

“Show me,” the Potter said, giving him a handful of clay.

Eli knelt and began shaping it. When Esteban came closer, he could see the small dent Eli’s thumb had left in the side.

“I want a smaller one beside my mother’s, for my own work,” he said. “Could you show me how to begin?”

The Potter looked at the unfinished wall.

“It would slow my work.”

“What would you charge for the morning?”

They agreed on a price. Eli untied his pouch.

“You said you needed a cloak,” Esteban said quietly.

“I can mend the one I have.”

He counted out the coins and put them in the Potter’s hand. Esteban left them working and went back to see to the loads.

When he returned, Eli was setting stones beneath the Potter’s direction. The man made him lift one and lay it again. Eli bent over it, his hands white with dust. He scarcely looked up when Esteban called his name.

They finished before the carts were ready. Eli washed his hands at the lake, rubbing a thumb along each nail. Pale threads of clay drifted through the water. Esteban stood waiting on the bank, then crouched beside him.

A fishing boat was coming in. As the net rose, fish flashed above the water, so many at once that Esteban put a hand on Eli’s shoulder to make him look. They rose to watch as the boat came near the shore. A wave washed over Eli’s sandals.

He looked down, then at Esteban, who had begun to laugh. Eli splashed him with both hands. Esteban backed away too late. Their hems dripped as they went back up the street.

A child called to them from a doorway.

“There are two rooms in our house.”

Eli stopped to look.

The boy’s mother appeared behind him, smiling at his importance. Her husband was working farther along the street. They had come from a crowded house shared with relatives, she said. Here there was room for the children to sleep without being stepped over.

Esteban looked into the cool, unfinished room. He thought of the patch above his mother’s doorway.

“Did your husband build it?”

“The Ruler gave it to us.” She rested a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “There is work for him here as well.”

As they walked on, Esteban measured the width of the new doorway with his eyes. His mother could have brought a full basket through it without turning sideways.

Near the next turning, an older man sat beside a bundle tied with cord. He asked whether they knew the official who had brought people from the villages.

“He was here this morning,” Esteban said.

“I have been here since morning.”

The man wanted to visit his daughter. She had stayed behind to care for her husband’s mother. He had been told to settle in Tiberias, and now he could not discover who would permit him to leave for a few days.

“You did not choose to come?” Esteban asked.

The man shook his head.

People nearby had begun listening. A woman said there were old graves beneath some of the new buildings. Her husband would not enter them. Another man told her that everyone had heard about the graves, and he was tired of being made to feel unclean for accepting a place to live.

The older man waited until they stopped arguing.

“I only want to see my daughter.”

Esteban took him back to the yard where the Captain was waiting. The Captain knew whom to ask. Esteban stayed long enough to see the man seated in the shade with someone willing to hear him, but they had to leave before an answer came.

The child in the doorway waved as the carts went past. Eli waved back.

“I would have been glad of that house,” Esteban said.

“So would I.”

Esteban looked behind them for the older man. He was still seated in the yard.

Before they reached the road out, Ezra sought him out.

“You gave the watch the number of packages?”

“Everything we could account for.”

“Do they expect to find the animal?”

“They will look. They could not promise me more.”

Ezra looked toward the remaining loads.

“I know where to find you if they need another account.”

Esteban nodded. Ezra returned to his cart.

At the edge of the city, Eli came to ask where he should walk. They looked along the line together. The older traveler was riding again, his daughter beside him. There were fewer animals to carry the goods.

Esteban sent two guards ahead, then walked with Eli to the rear.

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