

[Tapping cymbals, the sounds of a crowd, and the crunch of footsteps over a sandy road.]

ALMELEM (Dani Martineck): I've got this. I've got this. John can be—no, wh—[a little cymbal hiss, and the music builds to include some synth and eerie strings.]

YOUNG KID (Marlena Williams): Almelem!

ALMELEM: Hey! Sorry, Zali, I'm late!

YOUNG KID: Do your thing! Good to see you!

ALMELEM: He is the Baptist but soon he will—Right, right, no. They *call* him the Baptist. I hear it, Gestas. They call him the Baptist but soon—yes.

[Intro music sweeps in fully, then fades away on a keening sound, leaving us with the sound of rustling maps and the very, very faint peeping of birds from outside.]

SALOME (Yeauxlanda Kay): This is the road. Our men will have this entire area protected, from the top of the dead sea to Eilat, in this one straight line. [a finger slides across paper.]

MARY MAGDALENE (Charleigh E. Parker): The family will have just this one trade route? [pages are moved]

SALOME: Look at the design. We move two thousand of our men out [more fingers across paper] of these lands in the north and we focus four hundred men on this road. [pages move] We move the rest of the men to the boats.

MARY MAGDALENE: So we don't save money. We still need all the men.

SALOME: But that's better! We don't want to lose our men. Our men, still taking our coin, still loyal. From here, look. [pages shift] To Egypt. But better, straight [fingers across paper] to Satavahana. We need never—

MARY MAGDALENE: We will never [pages shift] deal with the Persians again.

SALOME: Or the Pahlavas. Or the Shakas. Or the Parthians.

MARY MAGDALENE: What about pirates? [cloth rustles as she shifts away from the table]

SALOME: There'll be pirates. There may be pirates.

MARY MAGDALENE: How do we deal with the pirates? [more rustling cloth]

SALOME: Well, Mary, how do you think [a clatter] we deal with them? We fight them! We-we kill them, that's how we deal with pirates. We deal death to them.

MARY MAGDALENE: Let me think on it.

SALOME: [footsteps] We have four hundred men protecting this road from brigands. We'll collect tribute for each encampment.

MARY MAGDALENE: Yes.

SALOME: [an earthenware vessel is lifted, and pours water into a cup] Instead of paying tribute and spending a year moving across this damnable desert, we move directly on our own roads. Ten weeks, on land we own, over water that is free.

MARY MAGDALENE: [footsteps] I understand the theory. Do you think I'm not understanding something?

SALOME: How could this possibly not be a better plan?

MARY MAGDALENE: I'm not saying it's a bad plan. I'm saying if we take this road, then it's our road. [the cup is set on the table] For better or worse, this is a Magdalenic Road. My children will end up with this road.

SALOME: My family too.

MARY MAGDALENE: But my children.

SALOME: That's what you're thinking about?

MARY MAGDALENE: Yes! Yes, I'm thinking about how this will affect my children. Salome, wh-when am I ever not?

SALOME: Well, this could be good for them. This could be their future.

MARY MAGDALENE: Listen, this [creaking] is what gives me pause. Right now, we are nimble. Right now, if we want to start trading east, we send two thousand men to the east. If we suddenly learn that the west has what Jerusalem wants, then we can move our trade routes the way a lion waves her tail. It flips from the east, from spices, to the west, to wheat or glass or gold.

SALOME: Yes, I understand.

MARY MAGDALENE: (sighs) I don't want to say that this is a bad idea. I think this is an elegant idea. I think it's brilliant. But right now, we are just above the world. We move things and the coin comes to us in a small steady stream.

SALOME: It is a small steady stream.

MARY MAGDALENE: And this could be—

SALOME: This could be a thunderstorm of coin.

MARY MAGDALENE: I see it, I understand. Let me [a thunk] think on it. [Lots of rustling paper as maps are put away.]

SALOME: Gestas 'kid is still waiting.

MARY MAGDALENE: Ah. (sigh) Yes, fine.

SALOME: [footsteps] Almelem.

MARY MAGDALENE: Their name?

SALOME: [clunk] Yes. [the door creaks open and we hear Salome speak from the hallway. The birdsong is much louder now.] Come in. The Magdalena will see you.

ALMELEM: [footsteps] Mary Magdalene, it is an honor to speak with you.

MARY MAGDALENE: [footsteps] Almelem, such a joy. Please come in, tell me what's on your mind.

ALMELEM: That is most kind. My master sends his greetings and his love.

MARY MAGDALENE: Yes, of course. Sit, please! We never get to have guests in this room! Sit, be comfortable, talk to me. [creaking]

ALMELEM: I am here on an errand from my master. He has found a great teacher who is living in the woods by the river. He has great faith in this teacher and he believes the man may be the prophet we have been waiting for. [beat] He thinks this man could lead the Jews out of bondage.

MARY MAGDALENE: [beat, creaking] I see.

ALMELEM: Ultimately—Ultimately he thinks—sorry, Gestas thinks this could be the moment when the Roman occupation could end. He will lead us, not with a sword—

MARY MAGDALENE: Wai-uh-uh, who will? Gestas?

ALMELEM: [creaking] No! No, sorry. Sorry. John The Baptist.

SALOME: Yes. Mary, yes, this man, [footsteps] I know about him. They say that hundreds of men and women are coming to the river to be baptized by him.

MARY MAGDALENE: What does this mean, baptized?

SALOME: He's a holy man, a prophet. Men and women lie back in the river and he washes them clean of their sins.

MARY MAGDALENE: A mikveh?

ALMELEM: No

SALOME: (at the same time as Almelem) Yes! YES.

ALMELEM: Sorry, [creaking] yes.

MARY MAGDALENE: In the river?

SALOME: Yes!

MARY MAGDALENE: Hundreds of them?

ALMELEM: Yes, hundreds. They are laying down in the river and when they come out of the water, they are new people. Their sins are gone, and they are re-born to a new purpose, the beginnings of a new Jerusalem.

MARY MAGDALENE: Oh, I'm beginning to understand.

SALOME: The sight.

MARY MAGDALENE: Yes. (sighs)

ALMELEM: The Magdalena will know the Son of God. When she sees him, the Holy Spirit will move her and she will declare him the Messiah.

MARY MAGDALENE: I am aware.

ALMELEM: Of course.

MARY MAGDALENE: Okay, okay. Sweet child. Go to Gestas [creaking] and tell him I've heard his message. I'm traveling down to the foothills of the river tomorrow, I have another teacher to speak with and (deep breath) a man to see about some boats, [rustling cloth] but I will find this John and I'll let Gestas know what I see.

ALMELEM: That's exactly what he said you would say. [rustling cloth] How did he know that?

MARY MAGDALENE: Mm, he's a brilliant man. [creaking, footsteps]

ALMELEM: Uh, Magdalena?

MARY MAGDALENE: Is there something else you wish to say, child?

ALMELEM: John. He is who they say he is.

MARY MAGDALENE: He is?

ALMELEM: John is the Messiah. He is. They are calling him The Baptist, but soon they will call him the Messiah. I am going to the river when the sun passes. You should too.

MARY MAGDALENE: Child, did Gestas see John? [more birds chirping]

ALMELEM: Gestas? He—did. He saw John. He saw John and he was baptized. He says that John is the Messiah and that you will surely know this when you see him. You will see that he is the Messiah.

MARY MAGDALENE: Of course. What a sweet man to remind me of my responsibility and to ask for (chuckles) my assistance. [the door creaks open] Please let him know that I always look for the best in anyone, and I hope that this John the Baptist is as you say he is.

ALMELEM: Thank you. Thank you so much, Magdalena. Thank you. Thank you, Salome. [footsteps and the door closing]

[Mary and Salome bust out laughing.]

MARY MAGDALENE: Oh, it's so stuffy, let's go out on the balcony. [footsteps]

MARY MAGDALENE, CONT'D (from the hallway): Joash! Come in please.

JOASH (Barnaby Williams): [footsteps] Yes, Magdalena?

MARY MAGDALENE: Bring the top linen from my eastern cabinet. White and Blue. Meet me upstairs in our rooms. [footsteps]

SALOME: You're seeing a man about a boat?

MARY MAGDALENE: Yes. (laughing) Yes.

SALOME: Oh, Mary, this will be so good for the family.

MARY MAGDALENE: You've convinced me. What we lose in flexibility—

SALOME: We'll gain back tenfold in coin.

MARY MAGDALENE: Well—It's possible. [creaking, and Mary's voice retreats like she's left the room] Let's see the boats. Maybe I'll take Aaron and Matthew with me.

SALOME: Both of them?

MARY MAGDALENE (from the other room): (laughs) No, probably just Matthew. [creaking, a door opening and closing] Aaron will find some kind of trouble. Oy, it's colder than I thought it'd be.

SALOME: Come here. [cloth sliding] You worry too much about them. They're your sons, they'll be fine.

MARY MAGDALENE: You give me too much credit. I'm waiting to see what they do when something happens that I haven't planned for. [more cloth sliding] More importantly we'll have to see what the Romans think when we take the road to Eilat.

SALOME: Mary, if our Family secures the road, the Romans will be able to use it as well. This is God's promise, a new world.

MARY MAGDALENE: Could you talk to them?

SALOME: Who? The Romans?

MARY MAGDALENE: Of course!

JOASH: [creaking] Magdalena.

MARY MAGDALENE: Thank you, Joash. [the door closes] I'll talk to the Sanhedrin and I'll set up a meeting with Pilate.

SALOME: He hates Jews. What if he—

MARY MAGDALENE: He hates Jewish *men*. [cloth unfolding] Trust me. Here. (laughing) Wear this.

SALOME: You're joking.

MARY MAGDALENE: No.

SALOME: I'll freeze.

MARY MAGDALENE: You won't freeze. [cloth rustling] But you'll be cold. You'll be just cold enough. They say I have the sight, [clinking, like chains of jewelry] that I know men the moment I lay eyes on them. I don't know if this is true, but I know this: I have met Pilate three times and the first two he barely spoke to me, he didn't even see me. The last time, I had one nipple pushing through my tunic, just here, just this one right here. He gave me access to the Cha'Karath Olive groves. You could say I squeezed a hundred silver denariae with the strength of this one nipple. (laughs)

SALOME: So, [cloth slides] both nipples?

MARY MAGDALENE: (gasps) We're not trying to overthrow the Roman Occupation.

SALOME: We're not? I thought we were.

MARY MAGDALENE: This John the Baptist is not the man we're waiting for.

SALOME: [Cloth slides] Gestas seems pretty sure.

MARY MAGDALENE: You think so?

SALOME: I've seen him. I went to the river.

MARY MAGDALENE: Oh, Sal—

SALOME: I thought—I don't know if it's him, but the people believe. [birds chirp] I wanted to get in the river with them. I wanted to feel the water.

MARY MAGDALENE: But you didn't?

SALOME: I was waiting for you.

MARY MAGDALENE: Well, I hope not to disappoint.

SALOME: Never. [beat] So, you're saying you don't trust Gestas?

MARY MAGDALENE: (laughing) Do I trust *Gestas*? (Salome laughs with her.) That doesn't matter. Every word Almelem said—"He believes this man could *possibly* be the man, to *maybe* lead us out of occupation. He could *try* to help establish a possible new country, *maybe* called Israel."

SALOME: (laughing) It wasn't quite that bad.

MARY MAGDALENE: And then the poor child says that Gestas is now a follower of John's—

SALOME: The child lies? To you?

MARY MAGDALENE: If Gestas was truly baptized by this John The Baptist then I'll go to the Pharisees and demand a full scale revolution. And I'll wear nothing but silken veils.

SALOME: I wouldn't recommend it. [cloth slides] But you will visit the river?



MARY MAGDALENE: I'll go. If he has hundreds of followers, I should go. If this baptism is magical, I should go. [cloth slides]

SALOME: You'll tell me if you think this man can do it?

MARY MAGDALENE: Come here. [Music starts with a synth choir and soft strings] If not him, then I'll find the man. I'll make this happen, my love, I promise.

SALOME: Can a man really wash away your sins in a river?

MARY MAGDALENE: Only God can wash away your sins. And if he chooses to do it, why not in a river?

[Music swells, adding some percussion and twanging strings, and fades out with some held violin notes. We are left with the sound of many people camped on the riverbank some distance away, and the soft crackling of a campfire. There are crickets and peeping frogs.]

JOHN (Mac Rogers): You must ask me.

ALMELEM: You don't ask me?

JOHN: I know why you've come. I know why all the Jews come.

ALMELEM: I've come for the same reason.

JOHN: Then you must ask me. This can't be my decision, it has to be yours.

ALMELEM: This is how it is meant to be?

JOHN: This is how it is meant to be.

ALMELEM: So many people.

JOHN: Yeah.

ALMELEM: And all of them—

JOHN: Baptized?

ALMELEM: Yes.

JOHN: No. Some are waiting. Many are watching.

ALMELEM: The Romans?

JOHN: They are waiting and watching, both.

ALMELEM: Will they—

JOHN: Will they attack us? I don't—

ALMELEM: No. Will they ask to be baptized?

JOHN: Interesting.

ALMELEM: What if they do?

JOHN: Then God has brought them to us. If a Roman wants to come to us and be a new kind of Jew? Interesting. Will the wolf lie down with the sheep?

ALMELEM: What would you do?

JOHN: What if a Roman—not “The Romans,” but a single Roman, wanted to devote themselves to God, wanted to see the Romans walk out of Jerusalem, wanted to give us Israel?

ALMELEM: What would you do?

JOHN: What would you do?

ALMELEM: I would turn them away.

JOHN: Why?

ALMELEM: Because we can never know. No Roman has ever wanted to give us Israel. This would have to be a Roman unlike any Roman has ever been.

JOHN: A new kind of Roman.

ALMELEM: Yes.

JOHN: Who asks to be a new kind of Jew.

ALMELEM: Hmm. So many people.

JOHN: Yes.

ALMELEM: [beat] How did you know?

JOHN: What do you mean?

ALMELEM: How did you know we had to be baptized.

JOHN: I didn't.

ALMELEM: What do you mean?

JOHN: I didn't. I didn't know what it would do. I prayed but got no answer. I pray all the time, I ask God for guidance, but I never get an answer. I suppose—it seems to me that I'm not the kind of man who is given answers. I have questions but having questions doesn't mean you deserve answers.

ALMELEM: I pray. I ask questions and I get answers.

JOHN: You do?

ALMELEM: Yes. All the time.

JOHN: All the time?

ALMELEM: All the time. Every time. I prayed about Gestas and I was told he could be my mentor. I prayed about my father and mother and I was told I could leave them and never look back. I prayed about the Romans, about the Jews, about Israel—

JOHN: And you got answers.

ALMELEM: Yes.

JOHN: And did you pray about me?

ALMELEM: Yes.

JOHN: What was your answer?

ALMELEM: That you are the beginning. (John scoffs) [rustling as one of them changes position.] That you are the start. Of the revolution.

JOHN: I see.

ALMELEM: Those are the words. So I didn't ask any more questions. I knew what I had to do.

JOHN: And what is that?

ALMELEM: [cloth rustling and rocks sliding as Almelem moves.] That I should drop my bags of coin. [clink, clink] That I should take off my fine cloth and embroidered coat. [a thunk as they hit the ground] That I should give myself to you, [crunching rocks] to lie back in the water as you wash away the old me, to make me new. To lose the person I was born into and to be given a new body, the body I was meant to have.

JOHN: And that is why you are here? To be given a new body?

ALMELEM: More than that. I know this body is mine. I know the pages and the binding won't change, but I want you to wash away the writing so I can write a new person in the pages.

JOHN: Then ask me.

ALMELEM: Will you baptize me?

JOHN: Of course. [rustling and sliding] Come to the river with me. [footsteps over rocks over the next lines as they walk to the river.]

ALMELEM: Why doesn't God answer your questions?

JOHN: I've not led a holy life.

ALMELEM: I don't believe that.

JOHN: You need to believe that. I wasn't born holy. I wasn't a mystic or a rabbi. I was a bad man, you— (chuckling) you need to know that. Before you do this.

ALMELEM: I can't. How could a bad man do what you do?

JOHN: I-eh-huh-I wanted to change. The world. I wanted the Romans gone, I wanted Israel. I wanted the children of Abraham and Isaac to decide how they want to live. My life was nothing. You have to believe me, it was just one stupid thing after another. It was coin, or boys, or girls, or, uh—I would talk about revolution in the square and then hide from the soldiers, or steal a goat and then blame the Romans. My life was nothing. And I didn't know what to do.

ALMELEM: But you heard a voice tell you to baptize.

JOHN: I didn't hear a voice. You need to hear me Almelem, you need to hear the whole thing. I didn't hear a voice, like I told you before, I don't hear answers. I wanted to rally the people and I thought a ritual would do it and to lay back in the river seemed like a good idea.

ALMELEM: So you are holy.

JOHN: No, Almelem. I offer this up to anyone who wants it. And the first person who believed in it made it a tiny bit true. The second person made it more true. The third, more again, and on and on until— (chuckling in disbelief) Look! A thousand people. And I had no faith before, I prayed and got no answer. But I have faith now. He hasn't answered my prayers, he hasn't spoken to me, but I know that this ritual is a thing that I have to do, and by doing it maybe one day I will earn an answer to my prayers.

ALMELEM: God already answered. You prayed and He sent you a thousand [the music begins, a synth hum] answers. It really is that simple. [splashing as they step into the water, and the music swells into a hopeful melody with strings and keys] Huh. Let's make it one thousand and one.

[the music fades out, leaving us with footsteps on a sandy road, the sound of a crowd, and chirping birds]

MARY MAGDALENE: I want you to see for yourself and if you think I'm wrong, then I'm wrong.

SALOME: You can't be wrong, Mary. You have the sight, how can you be—

MARY MAGDALENE: Stop! Stop! Stop it with The Sight. Please.

TIVONA (Jordana Williams): Magdalena! [a baby cries] Good evening!

MARY MAGDALENE: Hello Tivona! Look at your babies! So fat!

TIVONA: They are a blessing.

MARY MAGDALENE: They are a blessing to all of us!

TIVONA: God be with you! [the crying fades away]

SALOME: I don't know what I'm looking for, you do.

MARY MAGDALENE: It isn't that simple, love. I'm looking for something I've never seen, so how do I know when I still haven't seen it? All I see is every—(deep sigh) every future moment.

SALOME: Then you should know.

MARY MAGDALENE: No, I'm telling you, I don't see the man. I am looking for divinity and—(sighs) Salome, I feel lost. I want to look in a man's eyes and see something I don't see in other men. But I can't and I know I won't. Men are just men, all of us. I want to see divinity and the fact that I don't is blinding me to what this man could be.

SALOME: If you don't see the divine, then—

MARY MAGDALENE: Salome, it's not fair. It's not fair to put that on me.

SALOME: Why?

MARY MAGDALENE: [footsteps pause] All of Jerusalem is waiting for me to find the man, but I can't see him unless you are watching with me. I don't know what I'm seeing, I need to see you seeing him. It's not fair to think I'm going to do this on my own.

SALOME: Well Mary, I don't care that it's not fair.

YUVAL (Bart Fasbender): [uneven footsteps, as if someone is limping or using a crutch] Magdalena! It is such a joy to see you!

MARY MAGDALENE: Hello, Yuval. You are out and recovered!

YUVAL: With your help, yes. I walk with no pain.

MARY MAGDALENE: As it should be.

YUVAL: Why would they do that to such a man as me! I am no threat!

SALOME: The Romans brutalize you to strike fear [the whine of a cicada] into the families who are a threat, Yuval. And it is up to us to stand together against them.

MARY MAGDALENE: It is up to us to help one another and to seek God's help also, Salome.

YUVAL: Yes, God's help and your help, I walk! Not as fast! But I walk.

MARY MAGDALENE: [the uneven footsteps begin to move away] And I will see you dance at Ivria's wedding next week!

YUVAL: Oh ho! You bless us with your presence at my daughter's wedding!

SALOME: I don't care if it's not fair.

MARY MAGDALENE: I heard you. Why are you so angry?

SALOME: Have you ever had to hold the knife? Have you ever been there when there is no more deal to be made?

MARY MAGDALENE: (beat) No.

SALOME: Have we ever asked you to break a commandment?

MARY MAGDALENE: No. Of course. You are right.

SALOME: [their footsteps resume] We ask for this one thing, that's all. Find the man. I will hold the knife. I will be there when the deal is completed. I will talk to the people you can pretend we don't talk to. Just find the man.

MARY MAGDALENE: Of course, my love. I'm sorry.

SALOME: I don't know what I'm supposed to be looking for.

MARY MAGDALENE: I don't want you looking for anything. I don't see anything when I see him, so I want to see what you see. (John can be heard preaching) I want to watch you as you watch him.

JOHN (a little distance away): So many of you come to me and say, "I'm fine! I'm fine, I need nothing! I don't need the blessing of baptism. [their footsteps pause, and there is the sound of running water, very softly behind the preaching. There are more birds chirping here.] I am the son of Abraham! I am the son of Isaac!" But that is no more than to say you were made by God. OF COURSE YOU WERE MADE BY GOD! Were not olives also? And pigs? Are you no better than a viper's brood, coming to the water? What good will it come to if your snake skin enters the water, without baptism. It is only through God, through your acceptance of God's way, through your devotion to He That Knows All that you can be saved! He doesn't need you! He can make more sons of Abraham. He can turn these stones into sons of Abraham!

SALOME: Ugh.

MARY MAGDALENE: Salome? [footsteps moving quickly away]

JOHN (a little distance away): Those olives? Those olive trees? Even now, *even now*, the axe [music begins with a low drone] is being laid to the base of those trees. They will be felled and they shall go on the fire. Lay aside your cloaks.

MARY MAGDALENE: Salome? [more footsteps as she follows] Salome, wait! What has gotten into you?

SALOME: I've seen enough.

MARY MAGDALENE: (beat) Yes. [footsteps stop]

SALOME: Haven't you?

MARY MAGDALENE: Yes. I'm sorry, but... yes.

JOHN (a little distance away, carrying on as Mary and Salome speak): Lay aside your purse and your paper. Walk into the water and leave your snake skin on the shore! Leave it there to wrinkle and dry and blow away like the ashen leaves rising up from the fire. Come into the water and let God anoint you anew, become the new children of a new country. [music swells] Not sons of Abraham, not sons of Isaac, but the children of a new world here on Earth!

[The Almelem theme plays under the following voiceover.]

VOICEOVER (Jordana Williams): Gideon Media presents ALMELEM by Sean Williams, directed by Jordana Williams. Sound Design by Bart Fasbender. Music by Adam Blau. Produced by Cara Ehlenfeldt. Featuring



Dani Martineck, Yeauxlanda Kay, Charleigh E. Parker, and Mac Rogers. Special thanks to Augustus Alexander, Steve Alexander, Micah Busey, Julie Castle, Dan Kois, Harper Kois, Lyra Kois, Kate Cosma, Will Lowry, Lori Parquet, Stacy Raymond, Alia Smith, Moira Stone, Barnaby Williams, and Marlena Williams.

[The music rises, then ends.]

END OF EPISODE TWO