

[The sound of cart wheels on a gravel road, the ringing of metal, people talking, and dripping water. Then the creak of the door closing.]

ALMELEM (Dani Martineck): Gestas, Salome is here.

GESTAS (Nat Cassidy): Oh! Salome, you do my home great honor. [footsteps, shuffling cloth and paper]

SALOME (Yeauxlanda Kay): It is an honor to be seen, Gestas.

GESTAS: Please, come in, let me pour you some water.

SALOME: No, thank you, I can only stay briefly.

GESTAS: Of course, of course. [the sound of wet paper being moved from place to place] I'm sorry, until these dry, I have nowhere to sit.

SALOME: It is a cool day and I'm accustomed to standing.

GESTAS: Of course. [more footsteps and wet paper] I beg your pardon, I have to work while we talk. Bear with me, I must hang these in the sun out back or I will run out of paper. [The door opens, and the crowd sounds outside are louder.]

SALOME: I understand. [footsteps, creaking, dripping, and rustling] The Magdalena has an open papyrus room on the roof of the East Wing, where the wind is driest. The map room is just below, so the mapmakers can apply ink and it dries in a single day.

GESTAS: Yeah, well. [footsteps] We can't all be Magdalenas can we. [the door creaks closed, the crowd disappears]

ALMELEM: Salome and The Magdalena went down to the river to meet John The Baptist.

GESTAS: Great! And I trust that Mary was struck by meeting the Messiah?

ALMELEM: Um—

GESTAS: Salome, you should know that anything you wish to say to me, you can say in front of Almelem. Pretend there is a-a bird at the window.

SALOME: Nevertheless.

GESTAS: (groans) Almelem, will you excuse us?

ALMELEM: Of course. [footsteps, the door opens and closes]

GESTAS: What does Mary want?

SALOME: What does she want?

GESTAS: I want her to say that John is the Messiah. What does she want from me?

SALOME: Mary Magdalene wants a secure trade route to the West. Mary Magdalene wants to create a lasting peace with the other three paterfamiliae without marrying off her daughters. Mary Magdalene wants two wives, one to help her with the linens and the bread and another to teach her good son to be strong and her bad son to be smart. But more than all of this, Mary Magdalene wants to see The Messiah and she wants the Jewish country called Israel to rise up from the dust of the retreating Romans.

GESTAS: [beat, shifting cloth] Is that all?

SALOME: I don't believe you have anything that Mary Magdalene wants.

GESTAS: Well, if she's looking to get rid of the bad son, I know a guy.

SALOME: Were you baptized by John The Baptist?

GESTAS: Was I? (laughs, then realizes) Wha-Wait, did Almelem—Oh shit. [clunk]

SALOME: John the Baptist is not the Messiah.

GESTAS: God Dammit. [a drawer slides]

SALOME: I will say this one time: you will not blaspheme in front of me.

GESTAS: You won't be the first person to storm out of here in a huff. ALMELEM! [cloth rustling]

SALOME: I do not storm out. [the ring of a knife being drawn] That is not how I deal with blasphemers. Do not take the Lord's name in vain.

GESTAS: [rustling] You are really terrifying, you know that? [the door opens and closes with a swell of noise from outside] Oh! Almelem! Did you tell them I was baptized? footsteps that stop abruptly]

ALMELEM: I–

GESTAS: You told them I was baptized. (sigh)

ALMELEM: Gestas, if you came down to the river, you would–

GESTAS: Get out of here, Almelem.

ALMELEM: Gestas, I–

GESTAS: Salome, did The Magdalena know that Almelem was lying?

SALOME: Of course.

ALMELEM: Yes, I-I'm sorry, I should–

[Music begins with tapping cymbals, we hear the door open and close again and the sound of the world outside takes over as the music builds]

JEWISH KID (Barnaby Williams): Almelem!

ALMELEM: Not now!

[ALMELEM Theme Intro Music plays, then fades into the sound of the river: a thousand people milling about and talking, the water flowing, birds chirping, and footsteps on the sand.]

JOHN THE BAPTIST (Mac Rogers): Of course you should swim! Enjoy the water! They have tried to take everything from us, but they cannot take the water, they cannot take the sun! These waters are holy, but you can see upstream, [new footsteps, in a hurry] there is new water coming all the time to–

ALMELEM: John.

JOHN THE BAPTIST: Almelem! Go! Swim! Take these waters, they are yours! Let's talk over here.

ALMELEM: Salome is with Gestas.

JOHN THE BAPTIST: Salome. Not Magdalena.

ALMELEM: Are they?

JOHN THE BAPTIST: Shit.

ALMELEM: Maybe it's not what you think?

[The crowd is growing restless, they are grumbling and some are even yelling.]

JOHN THE BAPTIST: No. Magdalena would have come herself. They won't back me. What is my coin even for? What is Gestas even doing for me?

[There are soldiers moving through the crowd now, telling the people to make way. The crowd keeps getting louder.]

ALMELEM: Are we in trouble?

JOHN THE BAPTIST: I've emptied my purse. (laughing) For nothing. For nothing.

ALMELEM: Is that Herod?

JOHN THE BAPTIST: What? Here? [Music begins, anxious and tense with clinking chains] I told Gestas no! I told him we wouldn't— (grunts)

ALMELEM: Wait! John, please!

[Music and fighting sounds swell, then stop suddenly leaving only an eerie echo. We go back to Gestas's home, but the crowd outside the door is a little louder than it was before.]

GESTAS: So, what am I meant to do? I have a Messiah for her, and he will have two thousand people by the spring and it could be five if she says the word.

SALOME: TEN thousand people are nothing in the face of the Romans. Only the Messiah will push the Romans out of Israel. And The Magdalena says she hasn't seen the Messiah yet. It will not be John The Baptist.

GESTAS: This is madness! We-w-will the Messiah have some kind of mark on his forehead?! John will get the mark! Will he-will he be missing a finger on his left hand? John will lose the finger! If you need him

to balance a bowl on his head while reciting the begats from Shem to Abraham? He'll do it! He's a lunatic, but he's good on the Torah.

SALOME: The Magdalena says he is not the Messiah. He needs none of the things you've said, he needs only the word of the Magdalena.

GESTAS: That is complete shit and you know it. That story was started by my uncle when your lady's family asked him for help. The Magdalena wasn't "The Magdalena" then, they were a bunch of farmers who wanted to trade for oil. My uncle invented the story of her "sight".

SALOME: You call it a story. We call it truth.

GESTAS: I thought that was my job.

SALOME: And it is my family now, not just hers.

GESTAS: Yes, I heard you were sisters. Do your husbands approve?

SALOME: Nobody's asked them.

GESTAS: Maybe I should ask one of them if John is The Messiah.

SALOME: Without the word of The Magdalena, he is nothing.

GESTAS: Maybe. Maybe not. We'll see. I think two thousand men shouting the name "Messiah" may down out one woman saying "nah."

SALOME: He is not the Messiah.

GESTAS: The people will say he is. That will make him so.

SALOME: Gestas. The people? [rustling] The people have never made anything happen. Never.

GESTAS: The People have made everything.

SALOME: Hah. You walk out your door. You take one hundred, two hundred steps and you are essentially still in your home. You walk five hundred steps and you are not far, not far at all, but you still know every face, every tree.

GESTAS: Yes.

SALOME: Once you have walked two thousand steps, you have walked a mile. One mile. Now, you see only a few familiar faces. Do you know this measurement? A mile?

GESTAS: I know a mile. I deal in trade over many miles.

SALOME: Ten thousand steps is five miles. Do you see the math?

GESTAS: I can add.

SALOME: Most men never walk more than five miles from where they were born.

GESTAS: How is that—

SALOME: The people are just people. Each a person. A person who has never [creaking] walked more than five miles from the spot where they were born. They can't know what your new plan is. They can't be heard even if they shout from the hilltops next to their hovels. Not a one of these people [creaking] has heard of your Baptist. Because they have never put enough steps together to even walk five miles. You think two thousand people is a lot of people. You think ten thousand people is a lot of people. But if you have ten thousand people, you will still have nothing. They are still just The People. Yelling from hilltops next to hovels. The People have never made anything happen. Ten thousand people can all cry, "Messiah! Messiah!" And unless a leader from one of the families agrees, [creaking and rustling] it will be as if they've said nothing. It has always been thus.

GESTAS: [furniture shifting] I don't disagree with you.

SALOME: So John The Baptist is not the Messiah. [rattling and rustling]

GESTAS: That I don't agree with.

SALOME: You just said—

GESTAS: I just said, I don't disagree, "it has always been thus," yes. But just because it has always been thus, doesn't mean it always will. [rattling and rustling] People only walk five miles from where they are born *now*. You make the mistake that this is how it will always be.

SALOME: This is how it will always be.

GESTAS: Caesar is one man. But he is also Rome. The Messiah is one man, but he is also Israel. When he comes, all fifty thousand steps from here to the sea will be filled with Jews heralding their king. [the door opens]

ALMELEM: (out of breath) I apologize, I apologize, Gestas, Salome, I'm so sorry.

GESTAS: I told you to get out of here. [the door closes and footsteps cross the floor]

ALMELEM: It's John The Baptist.

GESTAS: What happened?

ALMELEM: I'm so sorry, Gestas. He made a mistake. He made a huge mistake. At the river.

GESTAS: What?

ALMELEM: Herod wanted to see the Messiah, so he went to the river. I just came from there.

GESTAS: Oh no.

ALMELEM: He attacked Herod.

GESTAS: What? How? Wh-where were Herod's men?

ALMELEM: Herod came to the river. He came *into* the river. He was to be baptized.

GESTAS: Wh-really? You're saying King Herod saw John The Baptist and committed himself to baptism? To being a new kind of Jew?

ALMELEM: Well, [scuffing feet] um, yes? There were a thousand people there and Herod saw the people but he didn't see John. It was hard to see. Herod saw the people and spoke to the people. But he waded out into the water, asking for John saying he was the King of Judea, that he needed to be one with his people. John saw him and just, went crazy.

SALOME: In what way?

ALMELEM: Herod's marriage? I don't understand it, something about the queen, or—

GESTAS: Shit! Yes. Ugh, Herod divorced his wife and fucking [cloth rustling] married his brother's wife.

SALOME: What did John the Baptist do to Herod?

GESTAS: De-uh-Almelem, we'll talk about this later.

SALOME: Answer me, child.

ALMELEM: He. He tried to drown him. Herod lay back in the river and John pushed him under. The only thing that saved Herod's life were Herod's men, who dragged them apart. There was almost a war between Herod's men and the baptized.

SALOME: Almost?

ALMELEM: The baptized had only fists and sticks.

SALOME: How many soldiers were with Herod?

ALMELEM: Six.

SALOME: There were six soldiers with Herod [music fades in] and a thousand baptized? John the Baptist is not the Messiah.

[Interstitial music, forbidding and eerie. Fades into street sounds, with crowds, carts, and footsteps on sandy paths.]

GESTAS: Six, seven, eight, nine, and ten. Take this, go back to Amos, make sure they're telling the same story we are. The baptized are waiting for us to make ourselves into a new kind of—[inaudible] y-you know what to say, sell the baptism. The Baptism is the point.

ALMELEM: Of course. [Footsteps]

GESTAS: Wait wait wait wait wait, hold up. Listen. You can't lie. You gotta be done with the lying.

ALMELEM: But—Gestas, I don't understand, you lie all the time.

GESTAS: Wh-no, no. No. Listen to me. There-there is sunrise and sunset and they are two opposite things. You say the sun is coming up when the sun is going down. That's a lie. Instead, say something about where the sun is in the sky and-and put the context around it.



ALMELEM: I don't understand.

GESTAS: Okay, uh—(sighs) well, whe-when you say “the larder is where we have cheese,”

ALMELEM: Mmhmm.

GESTAS: then that's true even if there's no cheese in there. You see? It is where we have cheese, normally.

ALMELEM: But we don't have cheese in there now.

GESTAS: Right, but you're not saying “there *is* cheese in the larder.” That's a lie.

ALMELEM: I understand.

GESTAS: When you say, “all the Jews, like Gestas, are hungry for Baptism,” then you're talking about the sun in the sky. When you say, “Gestas was baptized” then you're saying it's morning when it's about to be the goddamn night.

MARY MAGDALENE (Charleigh E. Parker): Gestas! I'm so glad you're home!

GESTAS: (muttering) Oh for fuck's sake. I spoke to him.

MARY MAGDALENE: [footsteps] Gestas, I hope you don't mind, I need to speak to you.

ALMELEM: I'll go.

GESTAS: To Amos. And no lies.

MARY MAGDALENE: Gestas, I was thinking—

GESTAS: (interrupting her) I spoke to John, I spoke to Phasaelis, everything is fine. He got carried away but he's all done with that shit. And she's gonna make sure the Baptized know it was her idea to leave Herod. John's going to shut up about the whole thing, there's nothing to worry about.

MARY MAGDALENE: It will be good to bring peace to the baptized, but—

GESTAS: Phasealis will say she left Herod. She's happy to do it, because people hate Herod so much. (chuckling) A-And I'll make sure John knows to lay off.

MARY MAGDALENE: That is wonderful, the Jewish people should be one, but [beat] there's no need. (chuckling) I've seen him.

GESTAS: I know, I know. Salome told me.

MARY MAGDALENE: No, uh, Gestas. You misunderstand me. I have seen Him. I have seen The Messiah.

GESTAS: You saw—[footsteps]

MARY MAGDALENE: The Messiah.

GESTAS: I suppose it's too much to hope that we're talking about the same guy?

MARY MAGDALENE: No.

GESTAS: Well, shit. [cicadas buzz] I guess I'm out of a job.

MARY MAGDALENE: No. You're not. The Messiah has only a handful of followers. He needs John The Baptist.

GESTAS: Wait, who is this man?

MARY MAGDALENE: Jesus, son of Joseph, the Nazarene.

GESTAS: Yeah. Yeah, that—I-I know him. I-I-I mean I know of him. Y-yeah. Yeah, that's a really good choice, actually.

MARY MAGDALENE: I didn't choose him. He's the son of God.

GESTAS: Well! That's great! That makes my job super easy. Y-you don't need me or John, le-let-let's just get God to come down here to tell the King and the Romans that we're gonna need Palestine.

MARY MAGDALENE: You work so hard at being distasteful. Why would you do that?

GESTAS: Are you asking me why I'm distasteful, or why I bother to work so hard?

MARY MAGDALENE: We will call it Israel. Not Palestine. This is the land promised to Abraham.

GESTAS: Okay. Hey, why don't you come inside. We'll figure out what to do.

MARY MAGDALENE: That is very kind, but I have more errands. Will you walk with me?

GESTAS: Of course. [Footsteps pick up as they walk along.]

MARY MAGDALENE: I believe I know what to do. John must baptize Jesus. Do you think you can make this happen?

GESTAS: Well I don't know. John thinks the Messiah gig is all his, he'll be pretty pissed that Jesus wants it.

MARY MAGDALENE: I understand, I do. It will be hard. But he is the wrong man. Right?

GESTAS: He is the right man for me.

MARY MAGDALENE: Ah, because of the coin, yes?

GESTAS: I feel a certain fondness for his claim. [the crowd is growing louder as they move into the busier road.]

MARY MAGDALENE: I don't want to insult you by assuming you can be bought, Gestas, I want you to do what you think is best. If you believe John The Baptist is the Messiah, then—

GESTAS: Mary, I think we should never assume anything. You assume that I'm not interested in coin, I assume that John the Baptist is the Messiah. We might both be making a mistake, right? Maybe we should test both those theories.

MARY MAGDALENE: Will John baptize Jesus?

GESTAS: He will. He's made a mistake, he knows it. He will baptize Jesus, and then we'll figure out the next step. [clinking and rustling] Good God, Mary, don't pull your purse out here!

MARY MAGDALENE: Why ever not?

GESTAS: (laughing) Your life must be simply amazing. You can stand in the middle of the street holding a bag full of coin and worry about nothing.

MARY MAGDALENE: (laughing) I worry about everything. You worry about coin, I worry about everything.

GESTAS: I'm a simple man.

MARY MAGDALENE: [clinking] Alright, then, consider this a gift to allay your worries. You have expenses. Use this coin to further the goals of the state of Israel, in any way you see fit.

GESTAS: Don't give me coin for that, Mary. [clinking] I won't use it for that. [clinking] Shall we? [footsteps resume]

MARY MAGDALENE: I have a question. I don't mean to be insulting but—

GESTAS: Oh, I'll be alright. Go ahead and ask.

MARY MAGDALENE: Do you want to see The Romans gone?

GESTAS: That. (sighs) That's a great question.

MARY MAGDALENE: What a graceful way of not answering!

GESTAS: My mother was a whore, you see.

MARY MAGDALENE: Ah. So perhaps your father was Roman.

GESTAS: Oh, do I look Roman to you? This is the face of a Jew. I have the eyes of a Jew, the hair of a Jew. When I eat a rich man's food and my friends laugh at me curled up on the toilets, I know that I have the stomach of a Jew. [the crowd sounds are fading, and we can now hear birds chirping]

MARY MAGDALENE: The way you hope to shock me gives me endless delight.

GESTAS: I know that I'm a Jew, but I've never been able to see how the tablets tally differently when it's another kind of man keeping track. I grew up with Jews, Romans, Nobodies and at the end of the day, they were all just grunting and rolling around in the dirt.

MARY MAGDALENE: All men are sons of Adam. But we are—

GESTAS: See, that's the difference. You were born to a tribe. I was born to nothing. Your jewelry, y-your robes, even your sigil on your ring. Those were passed down from your family. [rustling] These on me?

None of these is my birthright. I smiled and I made up a story and I got a coin. I turned that coin into *coin*. I grew up—I-uh-look, apologies for this—but I grew up watching men fuck these women, my mother and my aunts, and that look that men get on their face? It's all the same. Just before? And right at the end? Uh-eh that look? It's all the same.

MARY MAGDALENE: I know the look.

GESTAS: But you care if the Romans are gone? You want this land? Like, here. This [the swish and brush of sand] right here? You want this?

MARY MAGDALENE: Yes.

GESTAS: Why? Because God promised us?

MARY MAGDALENE: No.

GESTAS: Then why?

MARY MAGDALENE: There is a-a map hanging in the Westernmost bedroom in our house. And there are two rivers that stretch from—okay Gestas, do you actually care why I want Israel?

GESTAS: Yes. Wait. [beat] No. I guess not.

MARY MAGDALENE: Great. Then I'll leave you to it. [The music fades in]

GESTAS: To?

MARY MAGDALENE (pointing to the river) You've got some business to take care of.

[Music swells, the sound of a harp and strings. It fades into the sound of the river, rushing water, people talking, cicadas humming and peeping frogs chirping.]

JOHN THE BAPTIST: Why did you come here? You know why you are here. You know me. What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? [a faint, strange hum] A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who are splendidly clothed and live in luxury are found in royal palaces. I stand before you, with no wine or liquor in me, no bread. No cloth on me but the wool from the camel, no food but what God has given me from the tree and the bush. I stand before you as a lily in a field, free of the jewels and decorations that our so-called leaders cover themselves in. I stand before you as a man, only. [the hum again, louder and longer] A man. A single being, made perfect by the divine love of God I- and made less only by my own failings. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Make ready

the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Every ravine will be filled and every mountain and hill will be brought low. The crooked man will become straight, the hungry will be filled, the pauper will be delivered [the hum again, louder and longer still] and those that man exalts will be brought low. The rough roads —will be smooth and-and-and all flesh will see the salvation of God [the hum is more than just a hum now, it has grown beyond a single sound to many, and continues and builds through the rest of John's speech]—who are you? Who are you that you stand there and stare? Speak! Speak your name or close your eyes, I cannot bear the way you look at me. Look away! I cannot baptize you. I-I can't. I would rather be baptized by you. I cannot baptize you. W-will you not speak? Say it. Say it! Say the words I cannot say. (John begins to cry) BEHOLD, THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SINS OF THE WORLD. This is He, who has a higher rank than I for He existed before me. I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel. I came baptizing with water, but He? He will baptize with the fire of the Holy Spirit. Behold, it is the Messiah and I say to you prepare ye the way of the Lord!

[The water is rushing loudly, then the hum and the river give way to the creaking of a door opening and the sound of dripping water, and footsteps.]

ALMELEM: John the Baptist is dead!

GESTAS: Oh you've gotta be absolutely fucking kidding me.

[ALMELEM Theme Outro music 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, Nat Cassidy, Yeauxlanda Kay, Mac Rogers, and Charleigh E. Parker. 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 Marlana Williams.

[Music ends]

END OF EPISODE THREE