

OVERCOMERS



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“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.”

(Rev. 12:11)

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FOREWORD, BY JESUS

This is a book of stories of characters of My Early Church, My first Bride, My faithful believers who became more than conquerors, whether in life or death, by heeding My commandments to love one another, and to make disciples of all nations. These are now at your beck and call, watching over you, and waiting to anoint you with the same grace and power and boldness which they had, and through which they were able to endure the many tests and temptations that they faced—and came through—victoriously.

These are their stories, these are their attempts to reach out to the children of David, that they may realize the price that was paid for their freedom, the freedom of My truth, of My Word, of My gift of life, love and salvation. These are My overcomers, those who overcame the beast of their day by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony, and who loved not their lives to the death. They are the heroes of faith, who lived in faith, and died in faith.

While some of these characters are fictional, the stories told are nonetheless true—stories of power, of protection, of courage, of faith in Me and My power to deliver them from the evils of their day, and to help them stand strong against the gates of Hell, which could not prevail against them, but which crumbled under the force of My power working through these weak vessels. And just as they conquered and overcame the anti-Christ forces of their day,

so shall they come to your aid, that you, having done all, might be able to stand in the days of great tribulation.

And the spirit of My power shall rest upon you, and the whispers of these who have gone before shall guide you. And as the flood of evil once again washes over the world, My Spirit shall rise up within you, and as My children of old stood up against the beasts of their day, so shall you stand up against the anti-Christ forces of these last days, and you too shall find the grace and strength you need to be more than conquerors, and to be My overcomers.

THE EAGLE AND THE PHOENIX

Chapter I – Titus’ Journey

The morning sun had not yet risen, though its rays were just beginning to weave their magic over the foothills rising in the distance. Venus, the morning star, was the only other light in the heavens heralding in the new day.

Cornelius had been woken up at the sound of his elder brother, Titus, leaving the room, and he had gone downstairs to see what was happening. The rest of the house was silent, as all others were still fast asleep. On the kitchen table, Cornelius spotted a curious parchment which he picked up. He lit a lamp and read it carefully. It was a note written by his brother.

Dear Mother,

I am now a man of 19 years. I must leave and find my own destiny. The security of our estate is not fertile enough ground for my quest to discover the true meaning of life. My spirit will only be able to grow in the soil of adversity, adventure, and experience.

Thank you for all your nurturing care and love, and all that you have taught me. By all that is holy and good, I swear I shall never forget you. You are dear to my heart and the source of my existence. Please forgive me. I don't mean to hurt you or cause you anguish of soul, but this is something I must do. I hope you can understand.

Your son, Titus

Cornelius quickly set down the letter, and ran down the dusty road. Within minutes, he had caught up with his older brother.

“Titus, what are you doing? You can't just leave like that! You know that ever since father died at

war, Mother has counted on us to keep the farm going.”

Their father, Publius Octavius, had long been a general in the emperor’s forces. He retired from his station for a time to give place to a younger general who had been appointed as his successor, and he was awarded a large farming estate near to Corinth, and a position in the Senate. But when a new military campaign was taken up against the rebelling Danubian tribes, Publius was once again asked to lead a legion into combat. Though they distinguished themselves valiantly and victoriously on the field, it was Publius’ last command, as he died in battle. He was buried with great honors, and his estate was left to his wife and family. It was the boys that had been managing the day to day affairs of the estate.

Titus ran his hands through his dark curly hair. “I could never be a farmer, Cornelius. My soul is restless, like a man in the desert looking for water.”

“But can you not stay a few more months to bring in the harvest?”

“I must go now or my soul will die. Some force is calling me that I know not of.”

“But you will break Mother’s heart. She loves you dearly and we are all she has left.”

“I would break it more if I stay, for my dreams would die and I would die with them. You can take care of the farm, Cornelius. You have always been a good and practical taskmaster, with a gift for cultivating the land to produce things I didn’t even know could be grown here. You and Mother will do fine without me, though I will miss you both. But don’t you see? I just have to go. I can’t stay here any longer.”

“So there is nothing that I can say to dissuade you?”

“I don’t think so. I have thought about this many times, brother,” Titus replied. “I must leave the comfort of our house. I must begin this journey.”

The brothers wept for the love that they had for each other as they embraced. They both had a certain apprehension for the future, not knowing what it would bring either of them.

“May the gods go with you,” Cornelius called out as his brother turned to continue on his way. Cornelius watched till Titus had disappeared over the last hill. The morning sun was beginning to beckon him to tend to the business of the day. So it was that with a heavy heart, Cornelius returned home. He felt very alone as he realized that the full weight of the responsibility of running the estate with its many servants was now very much on his shoulders.

Titus, on the other hand, felt a tremendous surge of adventure as he turned his back to his past. Although, like a newborn baby, it was painful to leave the warmth of the womb, he had an exhilarating feeling of joy, and as a newborn, he felt like crying out, though his cry would be one of joy and freedom. A cheerful song bubbled forth from his heart, and he sang as he walked along his way:

*“He ho, what will the day bring?
I don’t know so I’ll just sing.
Maybe I’ll be rich and maybe I’ll be poor;
Maybe I’ll find a wife, or maybe four.
Maybe I’ll be sick and maybe I’ll be well;
Maybe I’ll find heaven, or maybe go to hell.
He, ho, what will the day bring?
I don’t know so I’ll just sing.”*

And so the miles went pleasantly by, until the sun began beating down upon him relentlessly. As

the heat intensified, numbing his senses and dulling his thoughts, he sought shelter in the shade of a large old leafy sycamore tree, where he started to munch on some lunch. He refreshed himself with a loaf of bread, a cluster of figs, and some soft cheese that he had brought with him.

It was too hot to travel, so instead he tried to go to sleep. But he could not, for the inner conflict of his thoughts began.

Go back! This whole trip is frivolous nonsense. It's a waste of time. You'll just end up wandering around aimlessly.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Take a chance! Great ships are made to be taken towards new horizons, not to remain tied up in port.

But why take a chance? You could lose everything. Why not stay with your riches and comfort, where you are sure to find a goodly inheritance. Turn back before it is too late, and your life is wasted on this fanciful dream of yours.

But if you never go, you'll never know what could be out there. You have already done the hardest part. You have come this far. Great adventure awaits you over the next hill.

Great adventures? Ha! Beaten up, robbed and left for dead comes to mind. You have heard the stories. Do you want to end up being just another sad tale for some old man to tell?

Somehow, as these thoughts shot back and forth in Titus' mind, he came to the realization of what he was doing. He quickly made up his mind. He was going back.

Perhaps it would be wiser to play it safe and wait a little longer, he decided, as he turned back towards home.

He had not gotten far when he saw an overloaded wagon of hay being pulled by a bedraggled horse

coming towards him. He made a bet with himself. *If the driver offers me a ride, I'll go with him. If he doesn't, I'll know that I was right about going back home.* He walked briskly on with his head down, not daring to say a word to influence the outcome.

"Where are you going so early on a cheery fine day, young man?" the rotund driver called out, as he stopped his wagon for a minute to talk to this interesting looking traveler.

"I was in fact headed for Corinth, but as you can see I'm going in the opposite direction."

"Yes, I can see that. So what made you change your mind?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm afraid of robbers," Titus answered. "I've heard many stories, and I don't want to end up being another one. Besides, I don't even really know what I would do in Corinth."

"Afraid, are you? Well, why don't you come ride with me? Then you'll have no reason to worry, I tell you." With this remark, the stranger pulled an old sword out of the hay and brandished it about bravely. "I have ridden these roads for many years, and those scoundrels haven't bothered me yet. Come, hop on!"

"But, I..."

"Think nothing of it, young man. Besides, I'd be glad for some company ... someone to tell my stories to. And no robber would want to take on the two of us now, would he?" With that he reached out his hand and helped Titus into the wagon. And so Titus was again on his way towards Corinth.

True to his word, the burly driver, who introduced himself as Brutus Clavius, was full of stories, proverbs, and anecdotes. And with a captive audience, he spared no detail in telling them. Titus didn't mind, sometimes listening and sometimes only half listening as the cart jostled to and fro over

each rock that it hit. The stories seem to make the jolts less uncomfortable.

"You want to hear a riddle?" Clavius offered.

"Sure! Why not?"

"When are sheep not sheep?"

"When they are goats?" Titus ventured.

"When they are a fold," Clavius replied with a gleam in his eye.

"Sorry, I don't get it."

"Well, you know what a fold is right? A flock of sheep. See, when you get a bunch of sheep together in one flock, they are no longer just a bunch of sheep, but a single fold."

"Oh, I see."

"I made up this riddle on one of my trips to Palestine, after hearing a great teacher."

"What was his name?"

"He was called many things, but His name was Jesus. He said He was the Good Shepherd, and that if we believe in God, we are His sheep. He said that He was gathering them into one fold."

"Where did you say this was?"

"Palestine. I went there on one of my trips as a sailor. In my younger and more adventuresome days, I used to be a sailor, and my voyages brought me to Palestine more than once. But I never forgot this teacher. I've always loved a good story, and this man was full of stories—stories of mustard seeds, of fishermen, of thieves and kings and beggars and all kinds of things. I still remember some of them..."

The miles passed quickly as Clavius shared yet more of the stories that he had heard during what Titus now perceived must have been a very colorful and adventure-filled life.

The sound of the horses' hooves trudging steadily along the road lulled Titus' mind into a dream-like

state. His attention was jolted back to reality when, as Clavius reached the end of another intriguing story, the horse neighed profusely as if he were agreeing with the story's conclusion. Clavius and Titus looked at each other and laughed.

"Your horse seems to appreciate your stories," Titus remarked.

"Yes, I have trained him well. He has grown accustomed to my stories on our long journeys."

Seeming to have run out of tales for the moment, Clavius turned his attention to his young passenger, asking Titus many questions, trying to learn more about his life, and what he was doing. Titus, in turn, asked many questions of his interesting companion—questions about life that had long been on his mind, and which he hoped a man of Clavius' age and experience would perhaps have some answers to. Clavius appeared to have a story for all Titus' questions, although Titus did not always understand what the meaning of the story had to do with his question.

As they came over the crest of the next hill, they suddenly heard a rustling in some bushes off to the side of the road. Clavius brought the wagon to a halt, thinking perhaps some animal would dart out of the bushes, but neither Clavius nor Titus could see anything. When they turned back to look at the road in front of them, they were startled to see a man standing in the middle of the road, blocking their way. He wore a bandage over his eye that wrapped around his head, appearing as if he had been wounded in a fight. His straggly beard looked like it hadn't been combed in a month.

As Titus looked at Clavius and wondered what he would do, another man, and then two more, sprang out of the bushes. Soon the cart was surrounded by ruffians.

"You, old man!" the first figure shouted. "Get down, if you value your life. And your friend gets down the other way."

As they both climbed off the wagon, Titus asked nervously, "What is it that you want?"

"Gold, of course; but silver will do," said one of the men, whose curiously strange smile did little to hide the teeth that he was missing.

"I'm sorry, good man," Clavius replied calmly. This remark in itself took the first robber by surprise. No one had called him a "good man" in a long, long time. "We have neither gold nor silver, but you are welcome to help yourself to all the hay you want."

This brought a laugh from all the robbers—all, that is, except for the first man, who appeared to be the leader of the band.

"You must have something worth stealing, or you would not have a guard travelling with you," the leader said, pointing to Titus.

"I do have a few drachmas that you are welcome to," Clavius said as he handed the robber his purse with a smile. The other robbers had already relieved Titus of his money bag. "Perhaps you can buy a round of drinks for your men," Clavius continued. "Robbing innocent passersby can be a pretty hot and thirsty business."

The robbers laughed again as they looked up from their business of searching through the hay on the cart for any hidden treasure.

"But actually I have something of much greater worth than gold and silver," Clavius said with a smile.

"So you are carrying jewels?"

"I have a treasure that never gets old, that neither moth nor rust can corrupt, and it is hidden where thieves cannot break through and steal."

"Stop talking in riddles, old man! Show me this treasure or lose your life," the leader said. By this time the robbers had finished their search. They looked at their leader and shook their heads. All they had found was the rusty sword that was hidden in the hay, and a bag containing some cheese and a skin of wine, which they were already greedily consuming, and fighting over amongst themselves.

"To have this treasure that I speak of, you must first open your heart. But if you kill me now, I shall not be able to tell you about it."

"I am a fair man," the leader answered, disregarding the rowdy dispute over the food going on among his own men, and concentrating on his hapless prey. "I always listen to my victim's pleas for mercy before I leave them bleeding and naked in the road. Hurry up, man, and tell me what you want to tell me. I have other people to rob, you know. I'm a busy man."

"As I said, I have many stories to tell you. But I cannot do them justice standing by the side of the road with a sword pointed at me. It quenches the inspiration, if you know what I mean."

"Stories you say," one of the men shouted, having gotten his share of the food, and returning at this moment. "We could use some good entertainment tonight, couldn't we, men?" All at once the men stopped their squabbling, and nodded their heads in agreement.

"Very well," the leader agreed. "You shall tell us your stories tonight around our campfire. If we like your stories, we may just let you live."

Again the robbers let out a round of hearty laughter, but Titus could tell by the stern look on the leader's face that he was serious. And so they were both bound hand and foot, and the robbers took great pleasure in hiding them underneath the hay.

Then the wagon began to move, and by the heavy jostles and bumps, they could tell it was not along any main roads. For over an hour the hay itched their faces and every other patch of uncovered skin on their bodies, as the wagon made its bumpy way they knew not where.

At length the wagon stopped, and Clavius and Titus were glad to be pulled out of their soft prison, finding themselves in the middle of an enclosed forest, and alone with three of the robbers to guard them. Neither of them knew what would await them next, but one thing Titus did know—his adventure had begun.

Chapter II - The Story

Only once darkness began to fall were Titus and Clavius and their three guards joined by the leader of this band of robbers again. They had learned, from the conversations of their guards, that this man was called Jason. They were then blindfolded, and for close to an hour they were led through the forest, stumbling as they went over rocks and fallen logs.

"We are almost there," Jason barked as they approached the camp. Once there, the robbers tied their prisoners in a sitting position to a tree, and made preparations for the meal. There was a sound of music and dancing, riotous drinking, loud joking, and women laughing. After a short while, the prisoners were untied, and their blindfolds removed. They blinked a few times, but their eyes quickly adjusted to the glowing circle of faces surrounding the campfire a short distance in front of them. Then they were given a meager portion of the meal, which they quickly devoured.

A blast from a ram's horn broke the noise and confusion.

"Quiet down!" Jason shouted. "Our storyteller will now begin. Please give him a fair hearing, as his life depends on how well he tells his story!"

Clavius was then led to a small opening that had formed on one side of the campfire.

"Can my friend come too?" Clavius asked, as he motioned to Titus who was again being tied up at the tree.

"What for?"

"He is part of my show—I need him to act out the story as I tell it."

"Ah, a street-play," Jason remarked aloud. "Why not?"

Quickly, Titus was let loose, and led to his new-found friend's side. The idea of acting out the story had taken Titus by surprise. "But Clavius, I..."

"Don't worry," Clavius whispered reassuringly, "it's the same story I told you on the road here. You'll do fine."

As Clavius and Titus moved to the front of the campfire, it was the first time that they could clearly make out their audience, who were waiting with eager expectation. Their features were hard and haggard. Their clothes were disheveled and torn. Some of the faces had been disfigured, either from disease or from injuries that never healed well. Their rough appearance startled Titus at first, as the flickering light of the fire only seemed to emphasize their imperfections.

There was a moment of silence as Clavius surveyed his audience, and it was then that he saw their innermost selves. Clavius could tell that beneath their rough exteriors, there was a hunger for something more than the life that they were leading. After all, what did men like these have to look forward to but prison, or a violent death. He would try to reach their hearts, and not just their ears, through his story, as a Teacher, long ago, had reached his heart.

And so he prayed to the Master Storyteller that he would be able to choose the right words, just as a painter would choose the right shades and hues to paint his masterpiece. Much was at stake—his own life, and that of his newfound friend.

Then Clavius' strong voice broke the silence.

"Creon was the younger son of a wealthy landowner. One day, after a long morning of laboring in the fields, he sat down for a rest under the shade of a tree."

Clavius motioned to Titus, who took up the cue and began acting out the story, returning to the

tree where he had been bound, and sitting down wearily, something he did not find hard to express. Clavius continued,

"He wiped the sweat off his brow and tried to cool himself down with his wine bag that he had been keeping cold in a nearby brook. As there was no one else around, he decided to talk to his dog, Rexus, who was dozing at his feet. As Creon began to share his feelings, the dog's ears perked up for a moment, and he lifted his eyes to look sympathetically at his master, before resting his head back on the ground and staring listlessly in front of himself."

There was hardly an end to the laughing as Titus acted out both the boy and the dog. "My father is rich,' the young man said to himself, 'and has many servants who could do this kind of hard manual labor. Why does he insist that I work in the fields like they do? I am hardly 17 years of age, but if I keep working like this, I am going to die before my time with a crooked back and hunched over like... like...' he searched for a good simile before his eyes rested on Rexus, his best friend... 'like a dog. No offense to you, old boy,'" Clavius laughed, as he directed his comment towards Titus, who was still hunched over in his impersonation of the dog.

"None taken," Titus replied, prompting another round of laughter from the circle of robbers before Clavius continued with his story:



"There must be a better way to make a living. Even if I were rich like father, what good would it do me? I couldn't enjoy it. No, Rexus, farming is not the life for me!"

Creon began to daydream and then hit on an idea. His sudden burst of enthusiasm caught Rexus' attention for a moment.

"I know ... I could be a moneylender. Now, that's an easy job. I wouldn't have to work at all! Farming is too risky, with all the bugs, droughts, famines and raiding parties going around. Taxes keep getting higher every year. Yes, that's what I'll be—a moneylender! It seems easy enough. All I have to do is lend money to people, and then have them pay me back more than I lent them! Use money to make money! I'll be a money farmer!"

That night after dinner, Creon approached his father, tenderly putting his hand on his father's shoulder.

"Father, I no longer wish to be a farmer. It's too hard, and the crops too unpredictable. We have money enough laid up now, and I wish to travel, enjoy life and seek adventure."

"Yes, my son, it is true. We do have some money laid up, but if we wish to keep our farm, we must work hard. We must think about the future—about the family that you and your brother will some day have."

"But that is years away, Father. Tomorrow will take care of itself. I want to find my happiness now. Life is passing me by. Give me my portion of the inheritance, and let me start my own business. I want to be a moneylender."

"A moneylender? But you are too young, and you know nothing of such a complicated profession. You don't have the manner of a moneylender, and people will only end up taking advantage of you."

"I cannot be dissuaded, Father! I have made up my mind."

"Very well then," his father sighed. "If you are so determined about it, I shall not stand in your way. You shall have your share of the inheritance, and you can do with it what seems good to you."

"You cannot be serious, Father!" the older

brother, who was listening on in disbelief, now exclaimed. "You are not really going to let him squander our money on some crazy lending scheme like that, are you?"

"Son," the father replied somberly, "your brother has become a man. And like you, he is free to make his own decisions—be they for better or for worse."

A few days later, Creon was ready. With a bag of gold under his cloak, and some supplies and belongings strapped to his horse, he was ready to depart.

"Thank you, Father," he said as he embraced his father one last time. "You'll see—I shall not disappoint you. I hope you understand that this is something I have to do."

His father nodded, the tears beginning to well up in his kind eyes. "Take this, my son," he then added emotionally, as he placed a thick silver chain around his son's neck. "This chain has been in our family for many generations, and my son, it is part of your birthright, and therefore your inheritance. I bequeath this to you as a gift from the past to the future. Cherish it well, and know that the jewels that bedeck this amulet will be your link back to us, a reminder of your true home and calling."

"Thank you, Father," Creon said. He had been feeling quite rich already, but now he felt like a king.

As the final preparations were made, Creon bid everyone a tearful goodbye—everyone, that is, except his older brother, who was watching on angrily from his window. "And goodbye to you, too, Brother," Creon called out merrily, spotting his elder brother. But only silence and an icy stare answered him back. Even Rexus, the farm dog, was more listless than he normally was. Creon knelt down to pet him affectionately before mounting up to begin

his journey. And so Creon left his home, beset by mixed feelings of excitement and anxiety.



By this time, the robbers were so thoroughly engrossed in the story, that none noticed how Titus, his limited creativity having run out, had already quietly taken back his seat by the tree. He sat there, forgetting for the moment his own precarious situation as he listened intently to this story of a young man who sounded so very much like himself.



After riding a full day, Creon arrived at the nearest city. He wasted no time, and instantly inquired where the moneylenders did business. The second man he asked was gray-haired, and walked with a slight limp.

"I take it you're not from around here," was the man's first answer.

"No. I have come from a small country village a day's journey from here."

The gray-haired man looked pleased with that comment.

"Then, as a stranger in my town, you must be in need of help."

"Could you direct me to the moneylenders?"

"Why do you ask? Would you need to borrow some money?"

"Oh no. I have lots of money."

"You do?" the gray-haired man asked with a glint in his eye. "Then why do you ask for a moneylender?"

"I want to become a moneylender myself, so I thought I would ask someone with experience how to get started."

"Ahh!" the old man replied with a smile. "The stars of fortune are shining upon you this good

evening, my friend. I have a very reputable cousin, a respected member of the community. He is a moneylender, and a right good one too. If you wish, I could bring you to him."

"Could you? I would be most thankful."

"Your thanks are appreciated—as a small commission for my trouble would also be."

"Will this do?" Creon asked as he slapped a gold coin into the man's hand.

The man looked greedily at the coin, but caught himself and hid his enthusiasm. "It is adequate. Come this way, and follow me closely."

Creon's guide led him down the narrow dirty streets. Creon led his horse for a while, until the street became too narrow for the horse to continue.

"You can tie your horse here," the guide offered.

"But is it safe?"

"Oh, yes. This man is a friend of mine." He motioned to a man who now came out of the shadows, and then whispered something in his ear.

"Shall I pay him now?" Creon asked hesitantly.

"No, that won't be necessary. You can pay him when you come back."

They walked down several zigzag alleys. The foul stench burned his nose and made him squint with disgust.

"Are we almost there?"

"Just around the corner, now."

There was a noise of music and dancing. Soon they passed through a beaded curtain that served as an entrance to a tavern.

"But this looks like a tavern!"

"Yes, and what better place to do business? This is where all the men of reputation meet to conduct their affairs."

The tavern was a noisy place. All the tables were filled with customers drinking or gambling, while

others watched, cheering on and only adding to the din around them.

“This way. My cousin has his own special room.”

The man opened a door, and led Creon down a small hallway where a guard stood in front of another door.

“What are you doing here?” the guard asked brusquely.

“I have come to see my cousin Shanul—we are here on business.”

“Wait here! I’ll see if he can receive you.”

After a few minutes they were ushered into a spacious room. Artistic drapings hung on the wall depicting boar hunts and figures from mythology. The richness of decoration was certainly impressive, though strangely out of place in such a squalid area. A brightly costumed monkey on a silver chain reached for a bunch of grapes from a golden bowl. His corpulent master sat on a throne in the center of the room. At his signal, the monkey responded by bringing the grapes to him and feeding him one grape at a time.

“Cousin, what brings you to my part of town?”

“Good cousin, the goddess of fortune has led this young man to cross my path.”

“And what brings you here?” he repeated impatiently, turning towards young Creon.

Creon pretended not to be nervous, but his stuttering speech gave him away.

“I ... I wish to start a business.”

“A business? What kind of business?” he said with obvious interest.

“Your cousin here tells me you are a successful moneylender. That is what I would like to be. Could you teach me how ... to ... to be one?”

“To become a moneylender requires considerable capital. How much money do you have to start with?”

Hoping it would be enough, Creon leaned forward as he whispered the magic number, “Five thousand denarii¹.”

The moneylender tried to hide his interest.

“A considerable sum. I think we can take that off your hands—that is, put it to good use. But first we’ll have to help you find the right clients. In this kind of business, you have to develop a name, a reputation, such as I have acquired.”

“How does one go about that?”

“Well, you have to find a way to attract the richest customers, and to do that, you’ll have to impress them with your wealth.”

“But why should I try to lend to the rich, if they already have money?” Creon asked.

Shanul laughed at his visitor’s ignorance. “Because it is the rich who will borrow the most, and they are the ones who have the money to pay you back. If you lend to the common folk, they only take longer to pay you back, and their assurances are hardly worth the trouble.”

“Assurances?” Creon asked.

“Yes, you know, the things they give you to assure you that they will repay the loan, and that you can claim as yours when they do not repay on time.”

“Oh, of course, I knew that,” Creon tried to excuse his ignorance. “So how do I go about impressing the rich, without spending all the money I have to lend them?”

“Well,” Shanul answered, “it is not easy, but I think we can manage to find a way.”

“So you will help me?” Creon asked hopefully.

“Well, I am a very busy man. But I suppose I could see what I could do for you.”

¹ *denarii*: the plural form of a *denarius*, a Roman coin, roughly equivalent to a day’s wages.

"Oh, thank you. I'm most grateful."

"Come again tomorrow, and we shall discuss our plans. In the meantime, find yourself a comfortable place to stay."

With that, he was dismissed from Shanul's presence and a guard led him to the door. Creon's gray-haired friend pointed him in the direction where his horse was being kept, and then excused himself.

"You must forgive me, I have some other urgent business to attend to this evening," he said as he scurried off into the darkened streets.

Creon suddenly became a little nervous at the thought of wandering through the dark and deserted streets on his own. Only a few torches placed along the walls lit up his unfamiliar way. Feeling his way along the moist walls, Creon tried to find the stall where he had left his horse and his belongings, and it took him quite some time. When he finally did recognize the place, only silence and emptiness greeted him there. He knocked on several doors, but there was no answer. Then he shouted for someone to come out, but the only answer he heard was his own echo, followed by the footsteps of two Roman guards on patrol coming down the street towards him.

"I believe my horse has been stolen."

"At this hour of the night? My good man, the streets are empty. Who would steal at this hour?"

"I left it in someone's care several hours ago, but now I know not where to find them."

"Who is this 'someone'?"

"I do not know his name," Creon answered impatiently.

"What did he look like?"

"I am not certain. He stood in the shadows."

"So it was a man?"

"I think so, though I could only see his cloak, and hood."

"You do not give us much to work with. What sort of horse had you?"

"Black."

"Oh, that should be easy enough. You've narrowed our search down to only a few thousand black horses in this city. Would this person perhaps have stabled your horse for the night, thinking that you would return for it in the morning?"

"Perhaps. I don't know," Creon answered dejectedly.

"Well there is not much we can do right now. But you can't stand here all night yelling at the moon. You are most surely a stranger in this city. Do you have a place to stay?"

"No, I was going find an inn somewhere, but without my horse, I'm afraid I won't get very far from this dingy place."

"Come with us," one of the guards offered. "We'll take you to an inn nearby where you can find a place for the night."

The soldiers led him back through the alleys to the tavern where he had just come from. The partying was still going on, though it was not as crowded as when he had first entered. Many people had returned to their rooms.

Creon tried to see the moneylender again, to see if he knew anything about the whereabouts of the man who had led him here, and about his horse.

"The master is not in. Try again tomorrow," the innkeeper told him.

Creon paid for a room for six months in advance and was led to a small room on the upper level. Before he went to sleep, he drank a flask of wine, trying to forget his worries about his horse and about

his future. His throbbing headache the next morning kept him in bed longer than usual.

By the time he rose, got himself dressed, and had found something to eat, it was early noon. Creon returned once more to the place where he had left his horse, but as he already halfway suspected, his horse was nowhere in sight. He looked for the man who had stepped out of the shadows the day before, but found no one.

With nothing else to do, he returned to try and see the moneylender again. This time he met with success. The guard led him in.

“Ah, my friend, you’ve returned. I trust you have had a pleasant night.”

“Somebody stole my horse! Your cousin told me to leave my horse with this man, and now the man and my horse are gone, and I have no idea where to look for them. I think your cousin may be involved in this. Do you know where he is?”

“How unfortunate! Do you have any proof that my cousin was involved?”

“No. But I still need to talk to him. He may be able to provide me with some answers. Where is he?”

“I am so sorry. My cousin has been called away on urgent business to another town, but I can assure you that he rode there on his own horse. I’m afraid there isn’t much we can do about it right now. Shall we get down to the business at hand?”

“But all my belongings...” Creon began.

“Why worry about your belongings? You still have your money, don’t you?”

“Well, yes ... fortunately enough.”

“So what’s all the worry for? Belongings can be replaced if you have the money, and if you heed my advice, you shall soon have plenty more of it.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

Shanul instructed Creon that one of the surest

ways of attracting rich customers was to hold an elaborate party, and he kindly offered the use of his own tavern for the occasion. Creon was excited about the possibilities, and over the next few days kept himself very busy preparing for the party, tending to all the detailed instructions Shanul had given him, such as what dishes to prepare, what wines to serve, and which people to invite.

At last all things were ready. Some one hundred of the wealthiest men in the city had been invited. About half that many came. They feasted on the roasted lamb, fine wine, and exotic dishes. Creon watched on gleefully, imagining all the money he would make through his friendships with these men. As the evening drew to a close, the guests slowly excused themselves, kindly thanking and saluting Creon on their way out.

At the end of the evening, Creon was noticeably disappointed.

“You look crestfallen. What’s wrong?” Shanul asked.

“The party was not as I had expected.”

“What were you expecting?”

“Well, I thought we would be forming partnerships to begin my career in business.”

“Perhaps you are expecting too much for the first meeting. Friendship takes time to nurture. A farmer does not expect his harvest the same day he plants his seeds. He must water his crop patiently and dung it.”

“Yes, but...”

“Don’t worry, I could tell that the guests were impressed. I would say the feast was a true success.”

“Do you think so?”

“Oh, yes. But there could have been a bit more wine, I think.”

“Yes, I thought so too.”

"Yes, the more appealing you make such banquets, the more customers you'll attract."

"So you think there is something we could do better?"

"Perhaps," Shanul answered, and fell thoughtfully silent for a moment.

"Well?" Creon insisted impatiently. "What else would we need?"

"Entertainment. You see these men are accustomed to being entertained by..."

"Yes?" Creon asked, as Shanul again hesitated.

"You know ... all men enjoy some female company."

"But ... but where would I find girls for all these men?"

"Well, I might be able to help you there. You see, I have certain lady friends who wouldn't mind providing some entertainment on such occasions. For a decent price I wager we could provide these men with all the amusement their hearts could desire."

"But the expenses of these parties will eat considerably into the money that I was hoping to use to start my business."

"But you are starting your business. And if you do come short, I will be glad to lend you some money. That is my job—helping people get started in their business."

"That's very kind of you."

"That's what friends are for, and any friend of money is a friend of mine."

"Thank you, Shanul," Creon said gratefully, clasping his arm in a gesture of friendship.

"You remind me so much of when I first started my business many years ago," Shanul said, his eyes taking on a distant look, as if he was remembering his own past. "Just wait and see. Before long, your business will be up and running, and then I'll be

the one borrowing money from you." At this, both men laughed, and then retired for the night.



The next few weeks were a whirl of activity. At the wild parties he hosted, Creon observed and tasted sensual pleasures such as he had never known before. He drank from the cup of pleasure to the full, and encouraged his guests in the same. If entertaining his clients was like watering crops, the plants were by now drenched with water—so much water, in fact, that Creon amusedly thought that by this time they should be well nigh getting root rot from too much water. The parties became one drunken orgy after another. But as his resources began to dwindle, his efforts began to pay off. He had attracted his first customer.

"Creon, you have been a most generous host and friend to us all. So I would like to make you an offer, one that could make you considerably rich. My caravan of traders in the east has discovered a new source of amber in the land of the Persians, which, with your help, we could purchase, and then sell here for a handsome profit. You, of course, would receive a generous share of the profits."

"I am honored that you are asking me. How much money would you need to borrow?"

"Five thousand dinarii."

"Five thousand dinarii?" Creon looked uncomfortable, and the merchant sensed it.

"If that is too much..." he began, but Creon cut him short.

"No, five thousand dinarii is fine. Let's speak of interest. Twenty percent is my normal fee," Creon said, trying to sound as if he was used to doing such business all the time.

"That seems rather high," the merchant ventured. "I propose fifteen percent."

“Seventeen percent is my final offer. You know I am giving you a very good deal.”

“Done,” the merchant said.

“But wait, what do you have to offer in the way of assurances?”

The merchant took Creon to the side of the room, and discreetly pulled the largest pearl that Creon had ever seen from the folds of his robe. The prodigious pearl was as large as a man’s knuckle. He fingered it in his palm.

“Would this suffice?”

Creon took it in his hand with a pleased smile, admiring its brilliance in the light. He nodded in approval and handed the pearl back to its owner.

“Come back here tomorrow, and I’ll have the papers ready,” Creon said. With that, the guest excused himself, and Creon went back to tending to his other guests.

After everyone had left, Creon shooed his female “entertainers” out the door. He frantically grabbed Shanul’s coat.

“I think I have done it! My first customer.”

“And may it be the beginning of many more to come!” Shanul congratulated him as he continued playing with his female “companion.”

“But I need your help.”

“And how may I help you, my friend?”

“You said that if I needed money you would help.”

“How much do you need?”

“You did say that you would help me if I was short, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I said that,” Shanul said impatiently. “So how much do you need?!?”

“Four thousand dinarii.”

“I am a man of my word. I promised to help you if you needed help, and that is what I will do,” Shanul said condescendingly.

“Thank you so much. I’ll never forget your generosity.”

“Although we are friends, I must ask you as a wise businessman if you have any assurances to guarantee this loan?”

“I could have offered you my horse, but as you know...”

“Yes, yes, it was stolen. What a pity. What about that necklace you are wearing?” Shanul’s eyes looked at it greedily.

“Oh, I couldn’t part with that. It is a family heirloom.”

“What else do you have to offer then?”

Creon thought about the pearl that he would soon get. Still, the pearl would be worth much more than four thousand dinarii. Then he hit upon an idea.

“In the event that I cannot repay the loan, I will become your servant for such a time until my debt has been repaid.” He figured that, if the merchant did not return his loan in time, he could still sell the pearl, and then pay back Shanul the four thousand dinarii easily, without having to actually give him the pearl as an assurance.

“I have no need of servants in my household. But as a favor to you, I’ll accept your offer.”

“Then it’s done,” Creon said excitedly.

“I’ll have my scribe make up the necessary papers for both of us. Come back tomorrow morning, and I’ll have the money ready for you.”

The next morning he was handed the contract. After trying to read it for some time, he threw it back on the table.

“I can’t even read this. It is written in an ancient Latin script!”

“Of course,” Shanul assured him. “All legal documents are written in old Latin. But I can assure you that it is exactly as we agreed upon this afternoon.”

The young man hesitated for a moment and then signed the parchment, sealing it with his signet ring.

“And here is your money. It has been a pleasure doing business with you. I wish you great success in your new business venture. My scribe will now help you make the papers for your business deal. Congratulations on your first loan!”

Five thousand dinarii was given to Creon’s new customer after all the papers were signed. He was given the pearl as a guarantee against the loan. The first thing he did was to go to his room and hide the pearl under a tile in the stone floor.

Within a few days, his customer left for Persia, and the young man waited patiently for his precious investment to return. Soon the weeks turned to months, and the months to a year. Creon lived frugally, with only several hundred dinarii left to survive on. He often returned to room at night to finger the precious pearl in his hands. The parties had ceased, and every day was now spent in eager anticipation of the merchant’s caravan returning, and with it, his fortune.

One morning a knock was heard at Creon’s door. After several loud bangs, Creon got up out of bed and opened the door. In the doorway stood Shanul’s servant with sword drawn.

“My master wishes to speak with you. Come now!”

“But the sun, it has not even risen yet. Why does he call for me so early?”

“It is a matter of grave importance. You must come now!”

“All right! All right! Just let me get dressed.”

Creon tried to get dressed as quickly as he could before stumbling into Shanul’s den. It looked very different from his first visit. The fruit bowl was

empty. The monkey was nowhere to be seen. The rich carpets that had hung on the wall were gone, leaving only the sight of cold bare crumbling stone in their place.

“I must ask you to repay the money I have lent you.” Shanul said brusquely.

“Yes. I shall. I am expecting the caravan soon and...”

“I need the money now, Creon. Your time of payment is overdue. I have had to sell most of my belongings to my creditors. Business has been bad this year, with the rains not having come.” Shanul looked wistfully out the window.

“Very well, then,” Creon answered. “I shall return in an hour with your money.” Creon went back to his room to retrieve his precious pearl. But when he lifted the tile in the floor, the pearl was gone! He looked everywhere, but to no avail. He was sure he had put it back under that tile the last time he had looked at it. Someone must have seen him, and taken it. He was distraught, but there was nothing he could do. He could not accuse Shanul, not without proof. After an uncomfortably long time, he returned to Shanul’s den to plead his case.

“Please be patient with me, Master. The caravan was supposed to arrive last month. I promise you when they return, you shall have your money.”

“And how am I to live in the meantime? I have a tavern to run, and many mouths to feed. I’m afraid I must hold you to your part of our bargain. As of right now you shall be my slave.”

“Have patience! Have mercy! I will find some way to repay you all!”

Shanul shouted something to the guard and Creon was bound fast by a thick rope. Shanul sauntered over to Creon and looked spitefully into his eyes. Then he yanked his precious necklace off.

"You can't take that. It's mine! That was not part of our bargain!" Creon shouted.

"Don't worry, I'll take good care of it for you. You won't be needing it where I'm sending you."

"You're sending me somewhere?" Creon asked incredulously.

Shanul shouted another command at the guard who pushed Creon out of the room and into the streets. Shanul was following closely behind.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To the Roman garrison! The commander there has offered a handsome price for slaves to work in the salt mines of Africa."

"But our agreement said I would work for you until my debt was paid."

Shanul only laughed. "You didn't think I wasn't going to try to make some money off of you in the meantime, did you?"

Despair gripped Creon. He saw his whole life ending in a miserable failure. He had hoped for a life of luxury and ease, now his only thought was of survival.

Just then, a wagon careened through the street close to where Creon stood. A woman carrying two cages of birds suspended on a stick across her shoulders was knocked off balance by the wagon, and the cages fell, snapping their wooden bars and letting the birds take to the sky in freedom. In the confusion of their flapping wings, Creon saw his chance. He knew that if he wanted to escape, he would have to do so now. He would never have another chance once they reached the Roman garrison.



"Maybe that's enough for tonight," Clavius told his enrapt audience around the campfire. "I will finish the story tomorrow. You all must be tired."

"If you stop now, we will make a short end of you," one of the robbers threatened.

"Finish the story, you Roman dog!" another yelled, and the band of robbers erupted into an uproar.

Clavius looked to the outer shadows of the fire. Jason, the leader of the robbers who had been so cold-hearted at their first encounter, was bent over, his head buried in his hands. It looked like he was crying—but then, robbers don't cry.

Chapter III - Jason

“All right, all right. Calm down, if that’s how you feel about it, I’ll continue,” said Clavius.

There was a murmur of approval from the audience, “That’s better.”

“So where was I?” Clavius wondered aloud. “Oh yes, Creon had just broken free from his master’s guards. Shanul, of course, ordered his guards to catch him. Well, Creon was not going to make it easy for them. He dove into a stall that was selling copper pots, and pushed over a large rack of pots. The clattering noise was deafening as the pots landed on top of his pursuers.

“In the confusion, Creon was able to escape down a narrow alley without being seen. He still had his ropes on, but with great difficulty he managed to climb over a wall, where he found some broken pottery that he used to cut his ropes. Having nothing left but his freedom, and the now ragged clothes on his back, he had nothing to do but run. He traveled on, relentlessly, all through the night until he came to a mountain. He began to climb. It was now night and near impossible to see where he was walking. *I had better sleep here tonight*, he thought.

“Creon stayed many days and nights on the mountaintop, until one night he was surprised to see a campfire in the distance. He approached cautiously. There, to his surprise, he saw a fat wagon driver, telling a story to a band of robbers. And so my friends, I will end my story here.”

“What kind of an ending is that?” One robber cried.

Jason got up slowly and walked over to Clavius. It was obvious to everyone that their leader had been affected by the story, and was not ready to take command yet. His right hand man took up the cue

and shouted, "He said his story is over. Now is the time to decide their fate."

"But we can not judge until we hear a better ending than that," one of the robbers shouted.

"The story is good but the ending is lame," another thug added, "so we should beat him and make him lame too!" With that, they all laughed even louder.

The future did not look good for the storyteller and his friend.

But the confusion was interrupted by Jason, who yelled, "Nobody is going to touch him! You want to know the ending? I will tell you the ending. The young man in this story became the head of a degenerate band of robbers like yourselves! I was that man!"

Everyone was shocked at this announcement, except for Clavius who turned to Jason and laid his hand on his shoulders and said, "But the story does not have to end here. I think that you can find a better ending."

"What do you mean? And how did you know so much about my life?"

"There is a God in Heaven, Jason, Who reveals the hidden mysteries of the heart. I only listen and speak what I hear from Him."

"You are a strange old man. What else do you know that you are not telling us? You said I could find a better ending. What do you see in my future?"

"The future, Jason, is in your hands to make of it what you will. You are at a turning point in your life. Only you can decide your fate. But I know your father loves you very much, in spite of all that has happened in the past. He will receive you with open arms if you will go back to him."

"But I have done too many evil deeds: theft, murder and the list goes on."

"There is One Who will forgive your sins. The man Christ Jesus. He was God's only Son, and He was sent to Earth that He might bear our iniquities for us. He died for us, that through Him, we could find true freedom—not only freedom of the body, but freedom of the spirit, and of the soul."

"But how could a dead holy man do that for me?"

"Because He is not dead. He is alive. After three days, He rose from the dead, walking out of the tomb in which He had been lain, and appearing to His disciples and friends once again."

"So what does any of this have to do with me?" Jason replied, still not understanding what Clavius was trying to say.

"Let me tell you another story," Clavius responded. "There were two thieves crucified with Jesus, one on the right hand and the other on the left. The one on the left cursed and groaned as he mocked Jesus. 'If you really are Christ, save Yourself, and us as well!'"

"The second thief rebuked the first in a weak voice. 'Don't you fear God even a little ... even in your death? Soon we will die for the evil deeds we have done—we deserve what we are getting. But this Man has done nothing wrong!'"

"The man then turned his eyes to look at Jesus. His whole body trembled with pain. Tears streamed from his tormented eyes. With his last ounce of strength he humbly cried out, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' His eyes and his twisted torso strained towards Jesus as if his miserable soul was being drawn by an unseen force.

"Jesus raised His head and spoke. His voice was still strong, still clear, and still gentle. He gazed at the second thief with unearthly compassion. With a smile He comforted him, saying, 'So be it, My friend. This day you shall be with Me in Paradise!'"

“He said that to a thief?” Jason queried. “What is to stop me from thinking that you have merely made up this story to impress me?”

“I tell you this is no fable. It is His story, and it is true. I heard it from those who were with Him, and who saw Him again after He had risen.”

“But that thief was there to see Jesus. I have never seen Him.”

“Just believe in Him, and you will see Him too. Accept His gift of eternal life, and receive forgiveness for all of your sins, which He paid for by His blood shed on the cross for you.”

The words were beginning to stir Jason’s soul, as the Spirit fell upon him. But still he was unsure. “How do I know that this is not just an empty promise. There are so many promises of a better life, like the Elysian Fields¹ spoken of by our own Greek philosophers and thinkers.”

“Pray with me now, and see if it doesn’t change your life.”

“All right. But I shall not pray alone. If I am to have a new life, these men shall have it too, for by Zeus, they need it.”

“Zeus cannot help you, my friend. Nor can any of your other mythological gods, be they Greek, Roman, or of any other origin.”

“Hmm, I see. Nobody but this prophet Jesus, I presume?”

“He is more than just a prophet, Jason,” Clavius answered. “He is God’s Son.”

And so, with Jason’s permission, Clavius continued to tell the men of the words and teachings of Jesus. Many of them were moved by

the Spirit, and accepted Jesus into their hearts and lives. Others sulked in the shadows, determining to leave the camp the next day, to pursue their lives of vice and crime elsewhere.

But among those whose hearts were stirred by the old man’s words was Titus. He felt a curious satisfaction, as if he knew that he had found something that he had started off looking for in his journey. He knew that this would not be the end of his adventure—only a new beginning.

And so it was that the next morning Clavius and Titus were released, given back most of the money that had been taken from them, and allowed to continue their journey towards Corinth.

It was not long after that Jason Creonus, like in the parable of the prodigal son, returned to his father’s estate. His aged father welcomed him back with open arms, just as Clavius had foreseen. Even his older brother received him happily, glad for another hard-working partner to help with the burdens of running the estate.

As for the other members of Jason’s band who had received Jesus, Jason was able to employ some of them as servants and helpers on his father’s estate. Others established a profitable trade as guides and protectors to passing caravans. Being knowledgeable of the terrain and the dangers that travelers could meet, their services were much in demand. They were able to guide hundreds of caravans safely to their destination. Not only that, but they passed on to their fellow travelers many of the stories that Clavius had shared with them. And so the Gospel was preached, and the words and stories of Jesus spread far and wide through the hearts of all those who heard them and believed.



¹ **Elysian Fields:** Also called Elysium. In Greek mythology, a place of paradise to which heroes were sent when the gods chose to award them with immortality, or which one could attain to in death by having lived a righteous life.

Clavius and Titus were on the road again. After all the excitement of the previous days, jostling down a rugged stone road seemed dull. True to his nature, however, Clavius livened the trip up with more stories. And then there were his conversations with his horse that were guaranteed to bring a smile to even the dullest of faces.

As they approached the city of Corinth, the roads became crowded with people bringing produce to the markets, all sorts of cargo from distant lands being transported from the two harbors into the city, and couriers bringing important messages to and from the palace and other buildings.

On the outskirts of the town they came to an impressive temple. Its massive pillars glistened in the morning sunlight. A long flight of stairs led to a sanctuary dedicated to Hermes, the Greek god of good fortune, and protector of travelers.

“Clavius, I want to stop here.”

“What for?”

“I want to offer a sacrifice in thanksgiving for our protection. It was a miracle that we were saved from danger.”

“But Titus, after all you have seen and heard, can you not see the emptiness of such superstitions?”

“It has been my custom since my youth. You have taught me much of your Jesus and his teachings on our journey, and I have come to believe as you do. But what is wrong with continuing to pay homage to the gods of my youth? This way, I can have double protection, and be sure to be blessed.”

“You are still young, Titus. Perhaps with time you will come to see the world around you differently, and come to recognize that there is only one Truth that can set you free. Since I have matters to attend to in the city, I shall carry on. I have been very happy of

your company on this journey. I wish you Godspeed on your quest. If you would like to contact me again, go to the fishmonger* under the aqueduct*, and he will tell you where to find me.”

They embraced each other in farewell.

“You have taught me much,” Titus responded. “This has been a ride I shall never forget—in more ways than one. I have learned much truth from you, old man. But I shall have to find my own way to live this truth.”

“Our Lord has promised that if you will seek Him, you shall find Him, and you will find that He is the only answer you need. So go, and continue your search, and never give up until you find the truth your soul longs for.”

The wagon took off, and Titus stood for a moment watching it disappear into the throng of the dusty and busy street. Then he turned and climbed the marble stairs that led into the temple.

Flowers and fruit trees bordered the stairs. Nearby fountains made a merry sound as they tumbled into exquisite rock pools with goldfish. Mosaic pictures of the various deeds of Hermes decorated the floor in places. The air inside the temple was thick with heavy clouds of sandalwood offered as incense, making Titus long for fresh air.

Inside, and behind an altar of some sort, stood a gray-haired priest dressed in his ceremonial toga. He took Titus' money and brought a goat from the stables in the back and began the ritual of sacrifice. He spilled some wine as an oblation to the god Hermes and mumbled an incoherent prayer in some ancient Greek dialect. After the ceremony his mood lightened and he tried to start a friendly conversation with his young visitor.

“And what have you offered this sacrifice in honor of? Are you about to embark on a long journey?”

"I am returning from one. One in which I narrowly escaped death."

"Ah, Hermes will surely be pleased with your offering of gratitude, and most surely will smile upon you with his good fortune in the days to come."

"May I ask you a question?"

"What is it?" asked the priest.

"How do you know that Hermes is real? Have you ever had an ... an experience with him?"

"Experience? Oh, yes I have had lots of experience, some thirty years of it."

"I mean, is Hermes real?"

"Real? Well ... I am just a mortal man, to whom the care of this temple has been entrusted. What do I know about these gods? But offering a sacrifice couldn't hurt. Besides, everybody does it, and if you want to get anywhere in this town that matters, well, you could hardly do without showing yourself religious." But the man then caught himself and realized he was digressing from his priestly role. "But you know, this religion is an ancient one that has been handed down from generation to generation..."

"I see no light on your face nor truth in your words, priest," Titus interrupted the priest's words. "Perhaps I should look elsewhere."

"Perhaps," said the priest, "but before you do, I have another offer to make. For an extra offering of a gold coin you can hold a private session with one of our temple priestesses, who can tell fortunes and bring great joy to your life."

In the background Titus could make out shadows moving rhythmically behind thin linen curtains. The soft music hardly muffled the groans of pleasure from the "worshippers."

"Yes, I might find joy for a moment. But my soul is seeking a more lasting happiness—one that will

not fade. This is something that your priestesses can not give."

He turned his back and ran down the steps, stopping by the side of one of the pools to rest, and to try and figure out the emptiness that he felt was beginning to creep upon him again inside. He splashed some of the cool waters onto his arms, refreshing his body, yet his mind was in torment.

Then returning his gaze to the pool, he saw two goldfish weaving through the reeds, and all at once remembered Clavius' last words to him "*If you would like to find me again, go to the fishmonger under the aqueduct and he will tell you where to find me.*"

It was almost dusk by the time he found the fishmonger's stall. It was boarded up and there was no one around to ask. Not knowing what to do, he sat despondently on the street corner. *Maybe I shouldn't have come*, he thought to himself. His thoughts were interrupted by a hand on his shoulder.

"Titus?"

Titus turned. He did not recognize the hooded man who spoke to him in a deep voice, and was surprised that the man had addressed him by name.

"Y ...Yes, who are you?"

"Do you seek Clavius?"

"He told me to come here if I wanted to see him."

"Follow closely."

The stranger took off quickly down the street, and Titus had to run to catch up with him. After making many twists and turns through the maze of streets they walked down a flight of stairs and opened a large brass door that led to a tunnel. There was a lit torch on the wall, and the stranger grabbed it. The light of the torch cast crazy shadows against the wall. Finally they reached a large room that had been cut into the tunnels. Light filled the room, as

did a small crowd of people from all walks of life—rich and poor, servants, aristocrats, noblewomen, and even a Roman soldier. Their antiphonal¹ singing echoed in the tunnel chamber as each note resonated pleasantly through the halls.

Praise the Father, ye pure ones.

Sing to the Mother, ye virgins.

We praise. We, Your chosen, celebrate You.

Be jubilant and drink your wine, ye brides.

For ye have found your Bridegroom—Christ!

Clavius saw him first and walked over to embrace Titus.

“Titus, welcome to our feast of love!”

Everyone turned to see their new visitor and greeted him with a smile as they continued their song.

Titus was embarrassed by the attention, especially when his eyes met with the loving gaze of a girl in her mid twenties wearing a gold headpiece and a purple tunic sitting across from him.

Chapter IV - The Christians

The spirits of the singers soared with the music until it seemed to them that the sky would be filled with their praise. As the last notes faded, a white-bearded man with long, wavy, snow-white hair came to the front. His hands were outstretched as he blessed the people. He was Clement, the visiting and elderly bishop from Rome, and father in the Lord to this small “flock” of Christians. He had led them through many difficult and trying times. His wisdom and letters to them had helped them survive periods of persecution as well as internal conflicts of dissension, and now he had come for a visit, as things in Rome had gotten rather dangerous for him.

As he spoke, everyone eagerly listened, like thirsty souls holding up their cups for a drink of water.

“My dear friends, you ask, ‘How can I overcome the evil world I live in?’ You are the children of light. The whole world lies in darkness. As our Lord said, ‘Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.’ You must be as candles which burn clearly and give light to the whole house, that many may enter into the Kingdom through you. Fear not them which will try to put out your light, for the Heavenly King, Who died and rose again, like the phoenix¹ from the ashes of death, shall protect you until the time that He calls you to Himself to enjoy the glories and pleasures of His Kingdom forever. And today we have a new candle to be lit in our midst.”

He walked over to the girl Titus had noticed earlier, and led her to the center where a small basin of water and cup rested.

¹ See endnote i - the phoenix

“Julia, are you certain you wish to be baptized, forsaking your old life and ways to become a new creature in Christ Jesus—a Christian?”

“I have never been more sure of anything.”

“Do you realize that your whole life will change? You will no longer live just for selfish pleasure. You will be branded an enemy of this world—this Roman world. It could mean the ultimate sacrifice of your life, in honor of Him Who gave His life for you.”

“I realize this. I would willingly suffer for Him Who loved us and gave Himself for us. I also choose to share all my worldly possessions with my new family.”

She took off her gold headdress and placed it in Clement’s palm. The intricate piecework pictured flowers and birds, but once it was placed in Clement’s hand it seemed nothing but a heap of glitter.

Julia’s black Nubian servant, Quientara, was next to her. She had helped her mistress to find this new faith. She placed a box at Clement’s feet which contained ivory broaches, jewels, and vials of costly ointment which had been gifts from her guardian, Titus Flavius Clemens, Emperor Domitian’s cousin. Flavius had been given an appointment as governor of Achaea¹, of which Corinth was the capitol. Julia was Flavius’ ward’, and he treated her as a daughter. She traveled with him wherever he went.

At last she took off her purple pallia’, revealing a simple and coarse white dress. Clement lifted a cup of water over her head and spilled it three times on her. “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” Clement said. The water flowed down Julia’s long hair, sparkling magically in the light of the torches before falling to the ground.

After Clement prayed a fervent prayer for her protection and fruitfulness, joyful shouts of praise filled the room. Each person came up to congratulate her and to embrace her—signifying their love with a holy kiss. Titus thought it somewhat comical when he saw the huge wagon driver Clavius embrace this petite and frail looking young girl.

After the meeting, Clavius invited Titus to his home to spend the night, and Titus gratefully accepted his hospitable offer. It was to be his home for the next few days and weeks, as Titus came to learn more about the Christians, what they believed, and how they lived as Clavius instructed him in the Words of Jesus, and the letters of the apostles that had been copied and preserved by the church here in Corinth. He also continued attending meetings, and had the chance to get better acquainted with a number of other Christians who resided in this house, as well as with Julia. She would come over to Clavius’ house regularly, as he was himself a Roman citizen, and visiting his house would not give rise to the suspicions that visiting the home of a Jew or a Greek would. Julia was becoming increasingly attached to the Christian life and home, and more reluctant to return to her place in the palace, and with the governor.

After several weeks Clement, who stayed in another house, and whom Titus had only seen during the Christian’s weekly meetings, came to Clavius’ house for a few days, to bid farewell, and make arrangements for his trip back to Rome. Julia took advantage of his presence there to present her dilemma.

“I feel that the time has come for me to leave my place in the palace,” she told him when they met that evening at Clavius’ home. “I cannot endure another day of living with the evils that lurk within

¹ **Achaea** (also Achaia): a province of ancient Rome located in modern-day Greece

that heathen place.”

“I myself agree that the time is at hand, my child,” Clement answered. “I believe that God has clearly spoken to you concerning this matter. We shall try to arrange a place of refuge for you that is far enough from the reach of Flavius. Already he has rounded up many of our brothers and sisters here, and it is only a miracle of God that he does not pursue us more. But if he learns of your departure, and discovers that you have become a Christian, he will not rest until he has found you. And to do that, he will seek out, arrest and torture as many of us as he can. We shall all have to move with great caution and prayer.”

“Let me return to the palace tonight. I shall gather what belongings I can find, and the remainder of my riches and jewels, and tell Flavius that I am going on a journey. And indeed, I shall be going on a journey, only I shall not be returning—at least not to him.”

“As deceivers, and yet true,” Clement answered. “May God grant you wisdom in carrying out your plan. I myself shall arrange your transportation. Be here before sunrise, if you can.”

“Very well. If I am not here by then, and you do not hear any word from me, act carefully. If the governor has become aware of my doings, he could well be aware of yours also. In the meantime, pray for me, that I shall have the strength to do that which I have purposed to do.”

“God will grant you strength, my child,” Clement encouraged her. “Go in peace, and may the Lord be with you.”

Clement prayed for Julia, and she was soon making her way back through the streets of Corinth, together with Quientara, her servant, and towards the governor’s palace. It was dark by the time they

approached the edifice’. It stood three stories high, and was adorned with statues of gods and goddesses, and busts of great emperors and rulers of Rome. There was also a carving of the last governor riding on a chariot of gold. He wore a laurel wreath of victory on his head. Large marble columns towered to the roof. Over the arched doorway stood the imperial eagle of Rome, and beneath it an inscription which meant to inspire those that entered this edifice: *Diligentia in vigilantia*¹. There was a large fire at the entrance where several guards kept watch.

As Julia and her servant approached, one guard challenged them, “Who goes there? State your name and business.”

“I am Julia Romelus, resident of the palace.”

“Come closer so that I can see you.” He was able to make out the familiar face better with the torch that he held in her direction. “Julia ... you, you are dressed differently tonight. I am sorry I did not recognize you at first.”

Julia suddenly remembered that she was not wearing her purple pallia. “Oh yes,” she answered, clutching her simple mantle around her, “I thought it wiser to dress as a plebeian² to avoid being the target of thieves.”

“That was wise of you. But I suggest you hurry inside. The governor has been anxiously expecting you.”

Julia and Quientara hastened through the halls, and then up the spiral stone staircase that led to her bed chamber. Another maidservant, Helena was laying out Julia’s finest dresses on the bed. She looked up anxiously at Julia.

“Miss Julia, you are back! I was worried that you

¹ *Diligentia in vigilantia*: Latin for “diligence in vigilance”

² *plebeian*: a Latin term generally used to refer to the common people of ancient Rome

would not come home tonight. We have many preparations to make for the festivities.”

“What festivities are you talking about?” Julia questioned.

“Have you forgotten?—The games that are being held tomorrow morning in honor of the emperor’s birthday?”

“I cannot go!” Julia said abruptly.

“Cannot or will not go?” Helena probed.

“Both! I am tired of seeing spectacle after spectacle of another man’s suffering and pain.”

“If you pardon my frankness ... what has happened to you, my lady? You used to enjoy going to the games, and betting on the winners?”

There was a moment of silence, which Helena interrupted. “What you need is a bath in some of your special fragrant oils, and then I will give you a special massage to relieve your anxiety.”

“Thank you, Helena. That is very kind of you. But I’m afraid I cannot change my mind. I have other plans for tomorrow.”

“But my ladyship, what sort of plans? You know that you are expected to come. Your patron, the governor, will be most disturbed. What shall I tell him?”

“Tell him ... tell him that I have heard word that a friend of mine is ill, and that I am making the journey to go and see her tomorrow.”

Just then the door flung open, and in stepped the governor, Flavius Clemens, standing proud in his deftly wrapped royal white toga.

“Why, what is it, Julia? You look troubled.”

“I am sorry, your Excellency. But I cannot go to the games tomorrow.”

“Why don’t you want to go? Haven’t I supplied you with adequate clothing?” He pointed to the splendid array of fine linen dresses spread out on the bed.

“No, that is not the problem. You have been more than generous. It is a dear friend of mine—she is ill, and desires me to come to her.”

“A friend? Don’t worry for your friend, my dear. I can send my best physicians to treat her, and she shall be well enough to receive you when the games have ended.”

“Thank you, my lord. But to be honest with you, I would rather tend to this friend myself than go to see men dying in agony, crying out for mercy with their last breath and being shown none.”

“I understand how you feel, Julia. But these games have become more than entertainment. They are being held in honor of Emperor Domitian. To not attend will be seen as an insult to him personally. You know that word will get back to him. You know how he is.”

“Yes, I know,” Julia sighed. “Ever since he insisted on being called ‘*dominus et deus*’,¹ everyone lives in the fear of being seen as ‘irreligious.’ He is perhaps the most religious of anyone in worshipping himself. I’m sorry, I don’t think I can bear to sit through another day of senseless bloodshed for mere entertainment.”

“These are times that we have to set aside our personal beliefs and opinions in order to survive. Domitian has his informers in many places, not least of whom are the *procuratores Augusti*² among us. They are very diligent to record the names of those appearing less than enthusiastic in worshipping the emperor. I am his cousin, so he

¹ *dominus et deus*: Latin for “master and god,” a title which the emperor Domitian claimed for himself, and insisted on being called, much to the chagrin of many Roman nobles.

² *procuratores Augusti*: imperial officers (procurators) stationed throughout the Roman Empire, who reported directly to the emperor on the state of affairs in their regions

Chapter V - Julia

especially keeps his eye on me. He has many enemies, you know, and I will not risk falling into suspicion because of an ill friend and a weak-hearted girl who cannot stand the sight of blood.”

“But my lord...”

“I am sorry, Julia. I am tired, I have had a very long day listening to the complaints of these Greeks—I just want to lay down in peace tonight. I am afraid that I shall have to forbid you or any of your servants from leaving the palace before the games. I know how much you like to run off and disappear sometimes, but as your guardian, and for your own safety, I must insist that you go to the games with me tomorrow. If you do not sit with me in the grandstands, you may one day find yourself in the arena.”

Although Flavius said this jokingly, Julia knew from the experiences of others that it was not just an empty jest.

“My litter will pick you up in the morning. Helena, make sure that she is ready. Oh, and after the games I have arranged a special banquet for just the two of us. Until tomorrow, then, my flower.”

As Titus looked out the window of the small upper room of Clavius’ house, and saw the last glimmer of the familiar morning star fade into the light of the approaching day, he imagined the dawn as a curtain that was being drawn open for a grand performance. *What was it that Clement had said? Something about the believers being like lights shining in the midst of gross darkness?*

Titus lay there, pondering in his heart the words he had heard, and the things he had seen among these Christians these past days and weeks—their kind and loving manner, their hospitality and graciousness even in the midst of persecution. He relived the moments when he was first brought into their meeting, and remembered the curious feeling that had stolen into his soul as he watched the smiles and heard the songs of these people who seemed to radiate with a light all their own. His memories were particularly drawn to one face that instantly brought a smile to his own.

Julia!—*Oh, what was it that Clavius had said? Oh yes! She was going to be here before sunrise, to go on some kind of journey—and the sun was almost rising. I wonder if she’s already here?* Hurriedly, Titus got dressed, and clambered out of the simple but comfortable guestroom to search for Clavius and Clement.

It did not take him long to find them. They sat just outside the door to the main house, and seemed anxious.

“What’s the matter?” Titus asked as he approached them.

“Oh, good morning,” Clavius greeted him. “I hope you slept well.”

“Yes, I did, thank you,” Titus answered. “So where’s Julia? Has she left yet?” Titus asked anxiously. He was hoping he hadn’t slept too long, and missed her altogether.

“No. In fact, she hasn’t come yet. She should have been here well over an hour ago, and we have heard no word from her either,” Clavius answered.

Clement turned his eyes once again to the road that led in front of the house. It was then that Titus noticed the empty wagon that stood there—the same wagon that had brought him to Corinth, and which was now waiting to be taken on its next journey.

“If only we had a way to find out for sure what has happened with her,” Clavius thought aloud.

“The Lord told me,” Clement began with a slow and thoughtful tone, “that there is one within our midst who shall help her. But I know not of whom He spoke.”

Titus was puzzled for a moment at the old man’s words, but was then suddenly struck with an idea. “I might be able to gain access to the palace,” he excitedly began. “My father, Publius Octavius, who fought in the Danubian campaigns, was instrumental in helping the Flavians¹ to gain power. Surely I can use my father’s name to get into the palace to see him. And if Julia is indeed in any trouble, I might even be able to ask a favor in my father’s name.”

“You?” Clavius asked. “But do you really think you could?”

“I could at least try. Even if I don’t get to see the governor, I can try to find out about Julia—and

since my presence is not so well known in this city, I need not bring any suspicion upon your house.”

“What you propose is dangerous, young man,” Clement spoke, “perhaps more dangerous than you realize. If Flavius has learned of Julia’s faith, any stranger who comes to seek for her may find himself in danger.”

“It will not be my first time,” Titus answered, remembering his little adventure among the robbers on his way to this city. In truth, all this was beginning to sound rather exciting to him—a beautiful girl in trouble, a secret mission to discover where she was being held, and perhaps even a duty to rescue her from the clutches of evil. “Besides, what do I have to lose?”

“He is a brave soul, Clement,” Clavius answered. “I can vouch for that. Perhaps God has led him to us for this very purpose.”

“Indeed,” Clement answered, suddenly turning to look directly at Titus. “The Lord has shown me great things concerning you, Titus.”

“Uhh ... thank you,” Titus answered hesitantly, a little unsettled by the sudden show of utter confidence in the old man’s voice. “I hope I can live up to your expectations. But there is one thing that you should know. Though I count myself honored to be numbered with you, I ... I feel I still have much to learn about what it means to be a Christian.”

“Then this might be a good chance for you to learn the power of our Lord,” Clement answered. “Therefore, now, make haste, and prepare to go to the palace at once.”



It was not long before Titus was on his way to his secret and dangerous mission. The streets were already filled with the sound of the wagons’ loud clatter. The smell of the morning garbage being

¹ **Flavians:** a succession of emperors who took over Rome shortly after Nero’s death, who were all related. The first was Vespasian, succeeded by his sons, first Titus, and then Domitian, who was the last of the Flavian emperors.

thrown out of windows into the street was a slap to Titus' senses and brought him back to stark reality.

He was suddenly struck with the fear that he would fail, that his mission would be discovered and that he might even be the cause of hurting Julia or the other believers. Doubts pestered him like flies, but he shoed them away. The alternative was to run away from this formidable challenge, but, *No*, he thought. *I cannot disappoint my new friends. Still, who am I to stand alone against the might of the Roman Empire?*

Before another doubt could attack him, he found himself at the entrance of the governor's palace.

Titus stood alone—the guards before him, an empty palace courtyard behind him. The lack of any other people standing around at this early hour, except for the guards at the entrance, only served to enhance the feeling Titus had of standing alone against the entire Roman Empire. To the guards, however, he was only the day's first visitor.

"Who goes there?" one of them asked as he stepped in front of Titus.

"I am Titus Octavius, son of Publius Octavius, general of the empire. Here is my family's signet ring."

"What is your business?"

"I have come to request an audience with the governor."

"You must be desperate to come so early in the morning," the guard remarked as he motioned for another man to come over. "And what would you see the governor about?"

The second man, who appeared to be a courier of some sort, now joined the guard in waiting for Titus' answer.

Titus hesitated. He realized that he had not thought his request through. He searched frantically

for a reason. The first thing that came to his mind was the wagon outside Clavius' house, and the bumpy ride he had first had with Clavius on his way here. "I wish to speak of improvements to the public road which runs by our family's estate."

"Wait here for the answer. I cannot promise much, though. You may have to be prepared to return later this afternoon, or even tomorrow."

"Why is that?"

"Don't you know? Everybody is going to the games that are being held in honor of the Emperor. It is his birthday today, did you not know? Seeing you are not from around here, I can assure you it is a show you would not want to miss yourself. And you can offer some incense to his divinity while you're at it."

"Thank you for the advice."

Soon the messenger returned and announced, "There will be no audiences or official business today."

"I could have guessed as much," the guard sighed apologetically. "Why don't you try again tomorrow? I'll see if I can put in a good word for you myself. I know what it's like to be a soldier, and I have heard of your father."

"That is kind of you," Titus replied.

The guard edged a little closer to Titus, and then whispered, "For a pretty coin, I could put in a very good word for you."

Titus nodded, eager to keep the good will and friendliness of this guard. He discreetly slipped a coin into the guard's hand and then walked away. He turned the corner of the palace and wondered what he could do next. A feeling of helplessness fell heavily upon him. He walked aimlessly for several hours around the palace grounds, wondering what to do.

As he walked around the back of one of the buildings, he saw a procession of noble men, litters, and a retinue of servants. One of the litters that he saw caught his eye. The outside of the litter was draped in thin silk, and it was difficult to see who was inside. He slowly made his way nearer, until he recognized a Nubian servant who followed closely behind the litter. It was Quientara, the girl who had accompanied Julia to the meeting the day before. He made his way closer, hoping to catch a glimpse of Julia, if indeed she was in this litter. Soon he was close enough to make out her shape through the thin satin curtains. Then, as a sudden gust of wind blew a crack in the drapes, their eyes met. It was Julia.

Julia had not missed this tall and dark-skinned young man at the weekly meeting, though they had not talked. Seeing each other gave them both a renewed sense of courage. Julia felt she was being swept along in a wave of evil which would crash at the arena. Titus, who had felt rather helpless and disappointed that he was not able to enter the palace, now saw God's hand working, as he realized that if he had been able to enter the palace, he would have missed Julia altogether.

Titus had the difficult task of following close enough to keep sight of her, and far enough away to seem like he was a natural part of the procession. The closer they got to the arena the more crowded the roads became. Everyone was vying¹ to get into the arena to get a choice seat. The city fathers and the residents of the palace did not have this problem, of course, since they had a reserved section near the ground level. As the procession struggled to make its way through the throngs of people on the street, Julia thought to herself, *Isn't it ironic that these people would do anything to have my seat, and I would do almost anything to not have to be here?*

As they approached the stadium, the crowd grew denser. The procession slowed down to a snail's pace. Sights and sounds filled the air with a cacophony¹ of discord and confusion. Bakers were hawking their baked goods, street merchants sold wine, others sold small statues of emperors, gods, and even gladiators. People pressed from all sides, moving towards the arena like an engorged river slowly flowing towards its final destination.

A guard at the gate checked the stream of spectators at the entrance. Julia and her entourage went through a separate gate, and were escorted to their special section. Titus, by showing his signet ring, was also able to get through this gate. With some difficulties he was able to get a seat somewhere near where Julia was sitting. Her seat was in the family box next to Flavius. His wife, Domitilla, was not able to come due to a serious illness. Domitilla had long been suffering from a disorder of the blood that required her to stay in bed much of the time.

The crowd was getting restless and impatient for the games to begin. Julia tried to think of a way that she might excuse herself early, and miss what she did not want to see in the first place. A small entourage of gladiators marched around the arena, and then engaged in mock combat with wooden swords and javelins, as the voice of the watching crowds sounded like the troubled waves of a sea that could not rest.

At last the trumpet blast that signaled the start of the games sounded and everyone's attention was drawn to a central stage. The *aedile*¹ spoke very loudly. "Good citizens of Corinth. It is our good fortune to be able to host these *ludi*² in honor of his divinity's

¹ *aedile*: an elected official of ancient Rome who was responsible for public works and games, and who also supervised markets, the grain supply, and the water supply.

² *ludi*: Latin term for public games

birthday! We give honor to you, O divine Domitian, *dominus et deus.*”

The aedile then approached the altar that was set up on the stage and offered incense to a bust of Domitian. Ten priestesses from the temple of Hermes entered and danced in a circle around the likeness of the emperor. They fell prostrate and took off the garlands of flowers that hung around their necks and placed them reverently on the bust. A mighty cheer went up from the crowd. They were eager for the formalities to end, and for the games to begin. Many had gambled much on their favorite gladiators. Much money would be gained and lost this day.

Soon, the parading gladiators cleared the field, and the first two fighters prepared themselves for battle. The first was a *Murmillio*¹ wearing a helmet, shield, shoulder armor, and a short sword. His opponent, a *Retiarius*¹ had a trident² and a net. A loud cry went up from the spectators as the gladiators locked in mortal combat.

Julia turned her head away in disgust. Titus gazed intently at Julia, watching her reaction.

The battle was over quickly. The *Retiarius* lay in the dust. His opponent raised his sword in triumph looking to the crowd for the sign of *pollice verso*² to decide whether he should finish off his foe. The gladiator in the dust stretched out his hand and lifted his forefinger in a plea for mercy. The crowd was not pleased with the performance. The fight had been too short. The thumbs-down sign was given, and the victor did not hesitate. He pointed his sword at the man's back, and with one thrust,

the *Retiarius* was dead. The *Murmillio* was the undisputed victor.

The *aedile* could sense the restlessness of the crowd. He had planned to have a band of Christians come out later, but the crowd needed something spectacular now. He talked to his messenger. With a few swift commands, it was done. The Christians were coming out next.

A man dressed in a death costume knocked with a lion's claw on another iron gate. The gate was opened, and fifteen men were let into the arena together. The aedile had learned from experience that putting women and children in the arena at the time of a feast sometimes brought more sympathy for the victims, so this time it would only be men. Sheep and goat skins had been sewn to the men, and blood had been painted on their body to attract and arouse the wild animals to strike at them. The prisoners were driven with whips to the reviewing stand, where they were made to stand in line.

As they walked they sang together. “*We shall overcome by the blood of the lamb. Joy is ours for we shall see Jesus face to face.*” Their voices rose above the confusion of the crowd. Some of the people jeered them; others were strangely quiet.

The aedile then spoke to the crowd. “These men who stand before you are Christians. They are atheists¹ who have refused to worship our divinity. They have sought to subvert our traditions, and corrupt our culture and our beliefs. They are enemies of Rome, and as such, they deserve to die.”

¹ See endnote ii - Gladiators: the *Murmillio* and the *Retiarius*

² ***pollice verso***: Latin for “thumbs turned around” (turned down); a sign used by the public in ancient Rome to indicate death for a gladiator that had been defeated in combat

¹ **atheist**: An atheist is defined as one who does not believe in the existence of God. In the days of Domitian, the early Christians were often accused of being atheists because they denied the godship of the emperor.

Julia reacted with horror and disgust as she saw her friends, her newfound brothers, being maligned and about to be put to death. She made no attempt to conceal her emotions. Her mind and heart was out there in the arena, not on anyone who might have been watching her. If anyone had not known she was a Christian before, it was not difficult to tell now. Titus eyed her carefully, as well as the rest of the crowd. Thankfully, no one seemed to be paying any attention to her. All eyes were on the Christians down below, who were now all alone in the arena.

With another blast of the trumpet, another iron gate opened. A pack of some 30 wild dogs rushed in the arena. Their tongues were panting. They had not eaten for a few days, and their hunger only made them fiercer. The scent of fresh blood on the skins of the men excited them. The dogs quickly had the band of men surrounded. One or two of the dogs rushed in to attack, and then fell back. The men tried their best to kick the dogs away. One of the dogs bit the foot of one of the men and would not let go. The man winced from the pain, and tried to shake the dog loose. Another man quickly came to his aid and kicked the dog so that it let go, and backed off. Nevertheless, the dogs sensed they were gaining the upper hand. The man was visibly shaken. The dogs circled more tightly around the men. It would not be long now before they would gather the courage to attack the men in full force.

Julia could not stand it any longer. She stood up and started to walk towards the exit. On her way, she suddenly noticed a spear-tipped legion's standard¹ raised up on the side of the wall, and held

in place by a simple clamp. Before she could change her mind, she ran towards it, knocking it with all her might, and sending it tumbling over the edge of the arena, and into the dust below. A roar went up from the crowd when they saw what was happening.

Two of the arena's attendants quickly rushed to pick up the dropped standard. But the dogs noticed their hurried movements, and swiftly turned to attack these men instead of the prisoners. One of the attendants tripped, and was quickly mauled and killed by the dogs, and the other barely managed to run back to the safety of the gate, which was quickly shut behind him.

When the Christians saw that the dogs were distracted, they grabbed their chance. Quickly they rushed for the standard and picked it up, forming a triangle against the wall, with the spear-tipped banner protruding in front of them. A few dogs tried to attack the Christians, but their hunger seemed to have subsided, at least somewhat, and others still quarreled over the remains of the unfortunate attendant. Several of the more fierce dogs that did attempt to attack them soon lay dead at their feet, leaving the rest of the dogs to retreat from the band of men, and lie down calmly at the other end of the arena.

It was obvious that the fight was over, and it appeared that the Christians had won this time. The crowd cheered, however, at this unexpected turn of events. The cry went up that the men should live. The governor assented and the men were set free. The emperor's informers, however, were obviously displeased with the outcome.

Soon workers came out and drove the now curiously benign dogs back to their holding cells. Sand was sprinkled on the blood that had been

¹ **legion's standard:** an identifying banner, emblazoned with the colors and emblem of a Roman legion, often including the letters "SPQR," which stood for *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, or "the Senate and the People of Rome."

spilled, and any remains of the dead were carried off in preparation for the next event—a chariot race.

In the meantime, to Titus' horror, all eyes had turned to Julia now. She had violated one of the fundamental rules of the arena, that there should be no interference from the grandstands. She was quickly surrounded by a guard of legionaries. Strangely, Julia felt perfectly at peace with what was happening to her.

Flavius watched on from where he sat, still not quite believing what he had just seen, and unsure of what to do next.

A hopeless feeling overwhelmed Titus again, as he watched the guards close in around her. He must find a way to save Julia—but how?

Chapter VI – Flavius Clemens

As Julia stood there, trapped by ropes and surrounded by guards, the chief guard stormed away at her.

“How dare you desecrate our sacred symbol by throwing it to these traitors? Many of my brave friends have died fighting for that standard!”

“It is these games that have desecrated this symbol,” Julia answered.

“What is that supposed to mean?” the centurion questioned, caught off guard by her quiet and calm manner.

“This senseless slaughter stains the name of anything that was ever good in Rome. In the days of the Republic, Roman citizens were guaranteed the right of protection against this madness, but now the blood-thirsty mob rules by the turn of their thumb¹.”

Julia then turned to the crowd that was watching and yelled at the top of her voice, “WOE UNTO ROME! TO WHAT DEPTHS HAVE YOU FALLEN!” There was a moment of silence in the grandstands as the mumbles of whispering grew to a loud rumbling as her last line was passed from aisle to aisle.

“Death to the traitor!” somebody shouted. The chant was quickly taken up by the angry mob. The guard realized that he had a crisis on his hands—he could not have the governor's ward torn apart right in front of him. He had to get Julia out of the stadium quickly. A riot was developing as the mob tried to get near Julia. Mass confusion broke out as the crowd began to stampede. People were pushed against the wall. Some tripped and fell. It took many hours and hundreds of guards to begin to restore order.

¹ See endnote iii - Rome: from Republic to Empire

By making a wall of legionaries, the guards were able to take Julia out of the amphitheater and put her in a temporary holding cell. The only way the remaining soldiers were able to stop the rampaging mob was by holding out their javelins and swords. It did not take long before a pile of bodies lay on the ground before them, impaled by the spears in the mad stampede. The spectators had come for entertainment, but their day had ended in tragedy.

The prison was cold and dark. After the guards had left, the only sounds Julia heard were the clinking of her chains, the dripping of water from the ceiling, and a distant moan from a prisoner in another cell.

She prayed for a miracle. She remembered how the apostles had escaped from jail with the help of an angel.

Meanwhile, Titus had managed to escape the madness of the arena with his life. Outside, in a small street, he collapsed on a ledge wondering what to do next.

Then a still, small voice spoke to his heart. *The governor can help Julia.* He saw a picture in his mind of a river bending and turning through dry and barren wasteland, and then through a lush green forest until it emptied into the sea. *What could this mean?* he wondered.

His thoughts were interrupted by a crowd of people coming down the street. Some of them had been injured and were being carried away on stretchers, others were limping from the stampede at the stadium. It took Titus some time to find a quiet place where he could get alone with his thoughts. He had to decide what he would do. Then the words of Clement suddenly echoed back into his mind: "There is someone in our midst who shall help

her..." He realized that there was only one thing he could do—he would plead with the governor.

He quickly made his way through the confusion and back to the palace. Titus met the guard to whom he had talked to previously in the morning.

"Oh, it's you again. I thought I told you to come back tomorrow."

"Yes, I know. But this is a matter of utmost urgency!"

"Ha! Repairing a road is an emergency? If every pothole was an emergency, this empire would be in a *continual* state of emergency!"

"Another matter has come up. Please—if you give him this message, I know he will want to see me. Tell him I may be able to help a friend of his who is in grave danger. He will understand."

"I cannot promise anything, but I'll see to it that your message is delivered. You might have a long wait though. He has not yet returned from the games."

Just then a procession entered the palace grounds.

"By Jupiter, the gods must be smiling on you today, there he is now. Though he hardly appears in the mood for an audience."

Titus turned to look around. Indeed, the governor's face registered deep despair, and almost shock.

"Hmm, he must have made a bad bet," the guard smirked, as Flavius entered the palace.

"I think it's more serious than that," Titus answered. "And that is why I must see him."

"Very well," the guard answered. He then turned and whispered something to the messenger, who quickly sped off. After a short while the messenger returned, and whispered something in the guard's ear.

"It looks like the governor *will* see you now. Follow me. I'll take you there."

When Titus entered the governor's room he found Flavius slumped over his *bisellium*¹.

He looked up and sadly spoke, "I understand you think that you can help to save the life of this rebel."

"Sir, I think you know that if anyone wants to save her, it will have to be you. Please, sir, you are the only one with the influence to free Julia!"

"Ah, so you know my little flower, Julia? I did not know that she knew you," the governor answered him wryly, then motioned for him to come closer. He continued in a whisper.

"Do you realize the trouble I will find myself in if I side with her? I would be, to put it bluntly, committing suicide! But before I say more, I would like to know who you are, and how you have come to know Julia."

"My name is Titus Octavius. I am the son of Publius Octavius."

"Ah, the general of the Danubian campaigns. Yes, I have heard of your father's brave deeds. What about yours?"

"I am afraid there is not much that I can boast about except living in my father's shadow. I have left my father's estate and have come to Corinth in search of adventure, a new job, and a new way of life."

"Well, have you found it?"

"I have found something far greater than anything I had hoped for."

"And what does any of this have to do with Julia?"

"Well, I only met her a few weeks ago. It was at a gathering where I was shown the way to true happiness."

"I suspected as much," he muttered under his breath. "I take it you are referring to the sect of Christians. Has she been meeting with them? I should have known. Well, young man, if you witnessed any of today's performance at the arena, you will know that being a Christian these days has become quite dangerous."

Titus prayed that he might find the right words to reach this man's heart. He looked at the window and an idea came to him.

"It is only darkness that fears light, and calls it dangerous. When we have been in a dark room, a sudden burst of sunlight will hurt our eyes. But once you get used to the light, you will not want to return to the darkness ever again."

"Are you saying that I am in darkness?"

"Let your own heart answer that question," Titus spoke boldly, but it was a boldness he could hardly believe was coming from himself. Yet he dared not try to think of where it had come from—or how such words were suddenly streaming through his mouth—there was too much at stake. "I plead not only for Julia's life, but also for your own."

"So you would plead with me to abandon our sacred religion, to embrace the teachings of a crucified carpenter?"

"It is true that your gods have been worshipped and lauded by many, but did not even Socrates consider such beliefs and mythological tales merely inventions of the poets, and himself disregarded the traditions of giving honor to them¹? I myself was enthralled by the fascinating stories I was told as a child. The refreshing autumn rains were caused by Proserpina, the kidnapped goddess, being allowed to visit earth again each year after her visit to the underworld. The sun moving across the heavens

¹ *bisellium*: a large chair used by nobles of rank.

¹ See endnote xii - Socrates 71

was Heliopolis driving his chariot. Now, after I have heard the story of Jesus, I have seen the truth—the truth of one God Who not only created the earth, and the waters around it, and the heavens above it, but Who controls them all and causes them to work together in perfect balance and harmony.”

“And what does that have to do with this crucified carpenter?”

Words and stories instantly came to his mind—some that he remembered hearing, and others that he did not. But Titus had little time to think of what he was saying. It was as if his mouth had been taken over—the words were no longer his own. “The myths and legends teach that the gods and goddesses live high in the sky or deep in the ocean or under the earth. But Jesus came down to earth and took on the form of a man, in order that He might take our sins upon Himself. He died that we might be set free from the chains of our own sins, and live in joy and freedom. Which will be your God? A God Who so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life? Or will you follow after gods and goddesses who would rule your life as they live their own—by their capricious whims—killing their fathers, eating their own children, and prone to every form of jealousy, envy and internal strife?”

“Yes, well, that is all very well spoken, but it remains a matter of beliefs. I have a more pressing problem at hand, and I know not what I can do.”

“I beg you, sir, to please save Julia! She meant no disgrace to the Roman standard. She only meant to help those who had been unjustly condemned!”

“If it had been for any other offense, I would instantly use my influence to protect her. But because she has publicly shown herself to be on

the side of the Christians, I can do nothing. The emperor, who as you must know is my own cousin, is most adamant in his condemnation of this sect. I personally see no harm in them believing whatever strange doctrines they happen to believe in. And now you would convince me to become one myself! How do I know that the God you profess is any more real than the gods I profess?”

“I cannot convince you. You may have to find out for yourself by putting them to the test.”

“A very good idea! Signs are one thing we both believe in.” Flavius thought for a while and then said, “My wife has been very sick. The physicians have given her herbs which have only made her sicker. She has slept in the temple of Aesculpius¹, hoping she would have a dream that would show her a cure. She did have a dream, in fact—a dream that has not ceased to plague her many nights from that day on. It was a strange dream about a bird rising out of a fire, and how she would ride on its wings. I have asked the priests, and they have told me that it will require a larger donation to the temple before the meaning can be revealed to them ... I think that is their favorite interpretation.”

“I am not an augur or a haruspex²,” Titus replied, “but God can reveal these secrets, even the innermost thoughts and intents of the heart.” Then, before he realized what he was saying, he added, “Perhaps if I heard the dream for myself, God could reveal its meaning to me.”

They were both silent for a few minutes, Flavius considering what this young man had just said, and Titus wondering why in the world he had just said it.

¹ **Aesculepius:** The Roman god of medicine, in whose shrine people would sleep, believing that their dreams would reveal to them how their illnesses would be cured

² See endnote iv - Fortune tellers: the augur and the haruspex

“Very well,” Flavius suddenly answered. “You are welcome to try. Come with me. I will show you to her room. She can tell you the dream herself.”

As they entered her room, Titus almost choked on the incense and herbs which were being burnt in a futile attempt to ward off her sickness. A priest was mumbling prayers and another stood by, chanting incantations in an endless drone. The bed was draped with fine linen. The back light coming through the window and shining through the smoke cast an eerie atmosphere in the room, making all the figures to appear as ghostly silhouettes.

“Domitillia, I have brought someone to see you.”

“Flavius, is that you?”

“Yes, didn’t you recognize my voice?”

“I thought it was you, but it is hard to hear any voice with all this chanting going on.”

“Can everyone please leave? We would like to be left alone,” Flavius ordered the men standing idly around. “And take all this incense and other paraphernalia with you. I am choking from these foul fumes.”

The bald priests and pretentious doctors bowed as they left. They made no attempt at a protest, as if they knew that it would have been to no avail, and they were not eager to find disfavor with their wealthy patron.

“You said that you brought someone to see me?” Domitilla asked weakly.

Flavius opened several curtains and shutters to let in some light and fresh air, and then motioned Titus to come closer. “His name is Titus Octavius, son of the illustrious Publius Octavius.”

“Please come closer so that I can see you,” Domitilla responded. “I am very weak. I cannot sit up. We have heard about your father. He was a brave man. His death was a great loss to Rome.”

Titus nodded silently. He was still not sure how he had gotten himself into this.

“Titus says that he might be able to interpret your dream,” Flavius interrupted Titus’ hesitance.

Her pale hand grabbed Titus’ arm desperately. “My dream!—Yes, I had it again last night. In my dream, a scarlet and gold phoenix appeared out of the sun, singing a melodious song. It made a nest of fragrant spices and then set it on fire. The magnificent bird was consumed in a fiery death, but soon from the smoking ashes it arose again, reborn even more radiant than before. Then it flew to me, and bade me to climb upon its wings. When I did, it lifted itself from the earth, and flew into the sky with me.”

Domitilla now hesitated, looking at Flavius as if seeking his approval to continue the rest of the dream. Flavius nodded, and she continued slowly.

“I have only told Flavius the rest of this dream, but I will tell you also. As we flew, the phoenix turned to me and spoke, saying that I was to give a message to this one who thinks of himself as master and god. I was to tell him, ‘*You have no principles! You oppress the people and have brought disorder to the Empire! The spirits of the Earth have deserted you, and the forces of Heaven have forsaken you! Your injustices can no longer be tolerated, and your reign shall be brought to a terrible end.*’

“I fear I know only too well what this last part means,” Domitilla continued, “but I long to understand and to feel the joy and freedom of the first part. What do you think it means?”

Titus remained silent for a moment, as he sent up a desperate prayer for help and guidance. Instantly, he called to mind the words of Clement that he had heard those many days ago: “*the Heavenly King, Who died and rose again like the phoenix from the ashes of death...*”

“The phoenix is symbolic of the man Christ Jesus,” Titus began. “Just as the phoenix gave his life, only to rise again from the ashes in greater glory, so did Jesus Christ, the Son of the one and only true God, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, give His body to the death of the cross, that He might be raised from the grave. And just as the phoenix did not rise alone, but took you with him, so Jesus was not only lifted up to the heavens again Himself, but through His sacrifice for us, sought to carry us back with Him into His House of glory.”

“Ah, yes. I have heard many fantastic stories about this Jesus’ life and death.”

“Yes, and He lives again. And I believe that your riding on the wings of the phoenix means that if you call on Him, you can be healed. He has taught us that if we would ask, we could receive, that our joy might be full.”

“But ... but how do I speak to Him? How do I ask Him?”

“Our God is everywhere. One does not need to go to a temple or holy place, nor offer any sacrifices to get His attention. Simply ask in faith, right here, and believing, you shall receive.”

“Why not? After all, I have prayed to gods of silver and of marble and of stone. Still, it will feel strange to talk to Someone I cannot see—but I will try.”

Domitilla took a moment to get up the courage, and then began. “Christ Jesus, if You are really there, I want to believe in You. If You can raise me up from my living death, as the phoenix in my dream carried me into the sky, then please heal me. I want to live. Please let me live. Please heal me.”

There was silence for several moments, and they seemed to Flavius to last an eternity.

“How do you feel?” Flavius finally asked anxiously.

“I ... I don’t know how to describe it, but I feel a calm and a peace,” Domitilla answered. “It’s like ... like a burden has been lifted off my heart. Oh Flavius, Flavius—I believe this young man. It is true—it has to be true.” A peaceful smile swept across her face, a smile so wonderful that the long-forgotten beauty of it caused Flavius to momentarily forget about everything else in the room.

She looked at him, still smiling, and her eyes misty with tears. “I ... I think I need to rest now. I need to be alone.”

“Yes,” Flavius agreed, repeating her words. “You must get your rest now. We will leave you alone.” He gave a kiss on her forehead, and then motioned to Titus to follow him out of the room. He closed the bedroom door behind him softly.

“Titus, please join me for lunch.” Flavius was silent for a good while as they walked towards the banquet hall—so quiet, in fact, that Titus wondered what was going through his mind. Still, he did not think it his place to try to strike up any conversation at this point. At length, Flavius turned to him.

“So tell me what you know about these ‘Christians.’ I fear that all I know is from the reports that I have heard. Of course, anybody with common sense would have to disbelieve the wild stories told about them—that they worship asses’ heads, sacrifice babies, and perform cannibalistic rites. But tell me what you know about these Christians, and their Christ. Why do so many decide to follow such a God, knowing that it could mean their death?”

“I am perhaps not the best one to tell you, seeing that I have only known of them for a few weeks. But I’ll do my best and tell you what I have heard and seen.”



In her prison cell, Julia was praying out loud for the sake of her own sanity. It helped her to visualize Jesus listening to her. She was interrupted by the sound of the sliding hole opening in the door. A dish of crusty bread and some porridge was put inside her cell. Another hole at the top was opened that just revealed the beady eyes of the guard peering in to check on her.

"Saying your prayers, Christian?" he jeered. "You are going to need them. The aedile has already planned an especially entertaining way for you to die tomorrow. But I shall see to it that you can give me some entertainment first," he laughed sardonically. "I have to go now, but I'll be back for supper with some of my friends to lend me a hand with arranging our little party."

As the guard's footsteps faded into the distance, the echo of his laughter died away. Julia was once again left alone in the darkness to eat her meager meal. "Jesus, I need You now," she prayed. "Please do not let me fall into the hands of these men—these brute beasts. I will give myself to them if I have to, but I would rather die and be with You. Oh Lord, please do a miracle and save me."

When her strength failed her, and she could pray no more, she fell asleep and dreamed that she was on a ship, sailing away into freedom. She felt the fresh sea wind blowing through her locks and tossing them about. She smelt the salty sea air refreshing her. The sound of the bow cutting through the waves and leaving a wake behind it was like soothing music to her soul.

In the dungeon it was impossible to tell time, except by the clanging on the doors by the guards at mealtime.

"Supper time! Enjoy the hospitality of the citizens of Corinth. This will be your last supper as a mortal,

so make the most of it."

The guard who had threatened Julia earlier quickly returned as promised, obviously eager to make the most of this opportunity himself. He clanged the door open and entered with two other burly men. He drew near to Julia and quickly began to loosen his clothing.

"I am back again just as I promised."

"And so am I," another voice came from the doorway of the cell. The men turned to see Flavius standing there with three of his personal guards. "We can take it from here," Flavius said to the guard. "This prisoner has been granted clemency by virtue of it being the emperor's birthday."

The guard, looking both foolish and embarrassed, tied up his clothes. One of Flavius' soldiers quickly untied Julia and led her outside the cell. She was led up several flights of stairs by Flavius and his men, then through a tunnel which led to a small exit. The soft moonlit sky and the stars that shone above her had never looked as beautiful. In the courtyard, a wagon was waiting. A team of three horses stood ready to dash off. "Clavius! Titus! What are you doing here?" she exclaimed as she recognized the drivers on the front.

"Shhhhhh! Be quiet! I'll explain later!" Clavius answered in a hushed tone as he motioned for her to quickly climb onto the back of the wagon.

Flavius and his personal guards also mounted their horses, and stood ready to escort Clavius and Titus out of the prison grounds.

They rode down the rough cobble stoned street until they reached the gate of the prison grounds, where the guard dutifully, but respectfully because of Flavius, stopped them. An Augusti procurator suddenly stepped out of the darkness towards them.

"Where are you taking this prisoner?" he barked.

"She has been granted clemency," Flavius answered.

"On whose authority?" the procurator persisted.

"By reason of the emperor's birthday, and by my virtue as governor," he answered in a tone that made it obvious he was displeased with the procurator's challenge.

The procurator grunted, and reluctantly yielded to the greater authority of the governor. "Be assured that the emperor will hear of this," he said, as he stepped aside to allow the troop to continue.



As they traveled on through the city, Titus told Julia about what had happened since they had last seen each other at the amphitheater. When they came to the city limits, the wagon stopped, and Flavius dismounted his horse.

"You are on your own now, Julia!" Flavius said, walking over to her and taking her hand in a gesture of affection. "I must return to the residence, and be ready to answer the emperor concerning my actions on this day. You, on the other hand, must put as much distance as you can between this place and yourself so that, should the emperor should seek to arrest you again, he will not be able to find you."

"But what about you? You are risking your life by doing this!"

"Do not worry about me. My heart tells me I am doing the right thing. For once in my life, I am know what I am doing, and why I am doing it."

Bewildered, Julia climbed down out of the wagon to embrace Flavius. "I don't know how to thank you!" she said.

"Don't thank me," he answered. "Thank your friends here. They have brought joy to my household, and true meaning to my life at last. But go now,

and make haste. And take this—it is for your journey." Flavius handed her a bag of gold coins. "I shall miss you, my flower, but I entrust you into the hands of these two good men." At this, he pointed to Clavius and Titus, who were still seated on the front of the wagon.

"Thank you so much. I will never forget you," Julia said, as she embraced him.

"Neither will I forget you!" Flavius laughed, all the while struggling to hold back a tear.

"Farewell, Flavius," Titus called as the governor mounted his horse. "May God be with you, and your wife!"

"Thank you, my friend," Flavius responded. And with that, he turned and, together with his three guards, rode back into the city, and towards the palace.

Chapter VII - Coming Home

Upon arriving at the palace, the stable boys rushed out at the sound of the approaching horses, and took them off for feeding and tending.

Climbing the stairs to his chamber, Flavius was surprised to see a figure waiting for him on the porch with her arms outstretched.

“Domitilla, it’s you!—And you’re walking!”

“Yes, I wanted to be the first one to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“That I have never felt better in my life!”

“I can see that! And you have never looked better either.”

“Yes! It has happened, just as the dream said. The phoenix has risen, and I am on its wings. I am so happy!”

“This is wonderful!” Flavius laughed. He picked her up and twirled her around. A great love welled up within him. He felt as if he were carrying his newlywed bride to their first bed of love. After laying her down, they caressed each other tenderly. The fires of their love burned passionately into the night.



After bidding goodbye to Flavius and leaving the city behind them, Julia and Titus, together with Clavius, arrived at a *mansio*¹. Though the hour was late, this place, being the closest station to Corinth, was still open, and in fact, quite busy. They took advantage of the excellent food that the guest house had to offer: salads, breads, a hot drink of *mulsum*², roasted fish and vegetables served with *defrutum*³, and

¹ *mansio*: a state-controlled guest house, built every 15 miles or so, along main roads in ancient Rome to provide a place where weary travelers could rest and be refreshed.

² *mulsum*: wine sweetened with honey

³ *defrutum*: sauce obtained by boiling fruit juice until it is reduced by a third

a dessert of dates stuffed with apple, nutmeg, and nuts soaked in wine. Over the meal they discreetly discussed what they would do next.

“Could we not spend the night here?” Julia asked. “I am so tired. It would be so lovely just to rest.”

“Like Flavius said,” Clavius answered, “it would be better if we put as much distance between us and Corinth before anyone starts looking for us.”

“But it would take weeks before Domitian even *hears* of what happened. Can’t we just relax for one night?”

“That’s right, but there are many others around here who might recognize you and cause us trouble. The longer we stay, the more dangerous it will get.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Julia sighed.

“Since this is a government guest-house, there are more chances that our whereabouts will be known if we stay the night here.”

“So then where *will* we go?” Titus asked, curious as ever.

“To tell you the truth, I have no idea,” Clavius answered. “But I know Who does. Jesus said, ‘Ask and you shall receive.’”

“I notice that’s one of your favorite quotations from Jesus,” Julia remarked with a smile.

“And why not?” Clavius answered. “It is easy to remember, and as I always say, if you know it works, you might as well use it.”

Even though the inn was not a particularly quiet place, they were able to pray silently for a few minutes, as they waited for the Holy Spirit to direct their thoughts.

“I ... I think I know where we can go,” Titus suddenly ventured.

“Yes?” Clavius encouraged him.

“As we were praying, I heard the words ‘I will arise and go to my father.’”

“But didn’t you say that your father has already passed away?” Clavius questioned.

“Yes, but his house is still there,” Titus explained. “Maybe that’s what it means. It would be a safe place to go, at least for awhile. And it should be far enough away from Corinth—at least I always thought it was pretty far away,” Titus added with a laugh.

“Yes, it is far away all right,” Clavius answered, mentally recalling the approximate area where he had picked up Titus what now seemed like ages ago. “We could hardly reach it before night is over. We must find some other place to spend the night, and I think I might know a place. It’s not fancy, but it’s a place I have used more than once when I was stranded for one reason or another along the route that leads to your family’s estate.”

With that decided, they left the statehouse and continued on their way.

After a few hours they came upon an abandoned shepherd’s hut along a dusty trail, and next to a flowing brook. It looked like little more than a lean-to; a simple structure with leaves and branches for a roof and straw on the floor.

Clavius was easily able to build a small fire by striking some rocks of flint together. Titus collected firewood, as Julia lay herself down to rest on the hay, which she fortunately discovered was more comfortable than she had imagined. The sound of the water babbling over the rocks just next to them, and the crackling of the fire as it burnt blended together into a harmonious symphony of serenity.

Clavius insisted on keeping watch outside, and that the two youngsters make themselves comfortable, and try to get some sleep in the little hut, which, considering Clavius’ size, would hardly have fit the three of them. Titus was not at all displeased at this suggestion, and soon found himself lying next

to Julia in the hay. There, as any two youngsters would, they talked till late in the night.

"With all the escaping we had to do, I haven't had a chance to thank you for pleading my case with Flavius," Julia began.

"To be honest with you, I was terrified to face him. I have heard so many stories about how easy it can be to incur the wrath of a Roman governor ... but somehow I felt as if there was a presence with me, guiding me in all of my words and even actions."

"Jesus did promise that when we would stand before kings and judges—and governors too, I suppose—that He would give us a mouth and wisdom, that no one would be able to gainsay or resist. It looks like that must have been what happened to you. Oh, He is so wonderful, Titus. Maybe you think you hardly know anything about Him, but He was there with you, as surely as He was with me. I tell you, I was terrified sitting in that awful dungeon, just waiting for my execution. But I too felt Him right there with me, at every moment. Surely He is our very present help in time of trouble."

"Well, I guess it is a miracle that everything worked out the way it did!"

"And we're going to need many more."

As the embers began to die down, Titus peeked out of the hut to see Clavius peacefully lying under the stars—and sleeping.

"Well, I guess he's not too worried about any unwanted visitors," Titus joked as he lay back down.

Julia said nothing, but only eyed Titus intently. Then, as natural as the flowing of the water in the brook beside them, their arms flowed around each other, and they embraced, and then fondly kissed one another.

Titus could hardly describe what he felt inside. As Julia let go, he could only fall back and look up at the stars that peeked through the cracks in the ceiling. He finally turned to look at her once again.

"I ... I love you, Julia—ever since that first time I saw you at the meeting."

"I love you, too, Titus," she responded softly. "Now come, let's try to get some sleep. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

They held each other close until the day dawned. They awoke to the smell of cooking fish, and Titus peeked outside to see Clavius busily preparing what was sure to be a hearty breakfast.

"Clavius! Where did you get all this food from?"

"Ah, my friend, when you travel around as often as I do, you learn to think ahead, and to leave a statehouse with as many provisions as you can. How do you think I've managed to hold on to this for so long?" Clavius chuckled as he cradled his hands around his rather large belly.

Titus only smiled, and returned his head inside the hut to see Julia already awake and rising as well. Just as they were both about to leave the hut, Titus picked up a straw from the ground and placed it carefully in his bag.

"What are you doing?" Julia asked.

"I am saving this to remember this first night that we have spent together."

Julia smiled at this romantic gesture, and then they both joined Clavius for breakfast.

Soon they were on their way again, riding all day, and stopping as little as possible in order to try and reach their destination before nightfall.

It was late that evening when they approached Titus' home. As they came closer to the house they could see the lamps burning in the windows. Titus directed Clavius to park the wagon near the stables.

The sun was setting, painting its rich reds and violets on the clouds in the sky, and silhouetting the rest of the landscape below. They heard people talking loudly and laughing.

"It sounds like somebody is having a good time."

"Mother ... Brother! I'm home!" Titus shouted as he opened the door. His mother was the first one to greet him and embrace him.

"Titus! You're back! And who is this?"

"This is a fair goddess I have managed to rescue from the clutches of a gladiator," Titus boasted. "And this," he said, pointing to Clavius, who stood behind him, "is a good friend of mine who has saved my life in more ways than one."

As Titus' family exchanged pleasantries with their new guests, he continued. "I have much to tell you of all that has happened to me in these past few days."

With much excitement, surprise and laughter, Titus, Clavius and Julia each told their stories. Titus' family had already heard, of course, about the tragic stampede that had taken place in the arena in Corinth only two days before, but they were most surprised to learn that Titus had been there in the midst of it all.

"I must say," Clavius joked at length, "you kind folks are certainly a better audience than my horse!"

"So what will you do now, Titus?" his mother asked. "Where will the wind blow you this time?"

"I'm not sure. I was hoping I could stay here a few days longer—along with my friends—at least until I know what to do next."

"Of course. You're more than welcome, all of you."

"Thank you, that's very kind of you," Julia said.

"Yes, I'm sure that would do us a lot of good," Clavius added. "As I always say to my horse, you can squeeze a rock but you can't make it bleed."

Everyone looked at Clavius with a puzzled expression, wondering what these words of wisdom could possibly mean.

"What I mean is—we certainly could use a rest after all we've been through."

They shared a meal together, and arrangements were made to ensure that the two guests had a comfortable place to spend the night.

The next few days were like islands of calm in the sea of confusion that they had experienced. The peace and rest brought their minds and hearts into a sharper focus. Clavius took this time to witness to his new audience, and introduce them to faith in Jesus Christ. In the days and weeks that followed, they had lots of questions for Clavius.

"So is it true that you Christians meet in secret?" Cornelius asked.

"Yes, it is. We must hide because Domitian is a tyrant who strikes out at any whom he thinks threaten his rule. We meet at night, with a guard at the door, instructed to let in only those he knows well. We gather in a room with no windows and only a few lamps, and always making sure there is a back door through which we can escape."

"But if it's so dangerous, why *do* you meet in the first place?" Cornelius queried.

"We come together because we have learned what Jesus meant when He said, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.' We have found that Kingdom. It is not of this earth, but it is within each one of us—right here, at hand. It is a kingdom of the love and joy and peace and patience and gentleness and kindness and goodness and mercy that He places in our hearts."

"But aren't you Christians mostly Jews?" Titus' mother asked.

"No. Only a few of us are Jews; many are Greeks or Romans, and some from even more distant principalities and nations. Some are citizens; some are slaves. But we are all believers and disciples—followers of the teachings of Jesus the Christ."

"But didn't He die many years ago? So how do you know that all they say about Him these days is really true?" Cornelius continued.

"There are accounts and writings of His life and teachings, plus we have transcripts of letters from Paul or others who knew the Lord—like this one." Clavius pulled out a worn scroll of sections of the book of Mark, and letters from Paul.

"And these others, those who knew Him, who are they? And where are they now?"

"Most of the Lord's first twelve disciples have died, many at the hand of the antichrist emperors of Rome. There is one apostle, however, a man called John, who may still be alive. The last we heard, Domitian had exiled him to the isle of Patmos."

"But how do you manage to survive from day-to-day against so much opposition?" Titus' mother asked with a note of concern in her voice.

"We take care of our own, and reach out to our neighbors. We have all things in common. From each according to his ability and unto each according to their need. We feed our own widows and orphans, but all who can must earn their own living. We survive by obeying the Roman law as much as we can. Again, as our Lord told us, sometimes it is necessary to be wise as serpents, and yet appear harmless as doves."

After these, and many other questions, Titus' mother and brother opened their minds to the truth, and their hearts to their Savior. Titus felt renewed. He had become a Christian almost by happenstance—along the way—but now he understood

more fully what this new life was all about.

And another wonderful thing happened—Titus and Julia had decided to get married.

Mother was overjoyed when she heard the news, even though she had been expecting it from the moment she first saw her son again, and the way he treated his "rescued" friend.

Cornelius was also happy for them. "So does this mean that you're going to settle down now and help us on the farm?" he asked after Titus had announced their intentions.

"You never give up, do you, Brother," Titus laughed.

"You poor thing," Julia interrupted sympathetically. "You do need help, don't you? I don't know if..."

Clavius offered a solution. "I have quite a number of friends in Corinth who would love to help you. It's getting pretty hot for them in the city with that mad dog Domitian on the loose."

"Really?" Cornelius asked, his eyes as wide with excitement as that of a young child being given a new toy. "That would be wonderful! We could make this farm what I always dreamed it could be." Cornelius turned to Titus and embraced him. "Well, big Brother, I do wish you all the happiness in the world."

Soon the day of the wedding had come. Flowers and ribbons were hung around the house. Julia wore a white tunic, a headdress of flowers, and a red veil covering her braided hair. Mother led Julia forward and joined her hand with Titus'.

Clavius prayed, "Lord, we ask that You make this marriage a fruitful one, and full of joy. Bless their union of hearts as one."

"I promise to love you, Julia, and to care for you in every way," Titus declared.

"I will follow you, Titus, wherever you go, and love you forever," Julia responded.

Chapter VIII – Trouble

They kissed and embraced. After the ceremony came the celebration, and everyone sang to the accompaniment of the minstrels. Even Cornelius played the lute. And Clavius had a chance to try out some of his riddles on his audience.

Titus smiled as he heard Clavius bluster out his favorite “When are sheep not sheep?” riddle. He seemed to enjoy telling his riddles and tales as much as everyone enjoyed listening them.

At the end of the evening, Titus carried Julia over the threshold into his room, which he had scented with aromatic spices, and on the table next to the bed lay the single reed of straw which he had saved that one special night, so many nights ago.

As the days and weeks had passed, Flavius and Domitilla’s newfound faith grew. Flavius was able to obtain a scroll of the gospel of Luke, which they eagerly (and secretly) read together every day.

Their joy was soon interrupted, however, when one day an imperial courier arrived bearing a message from the emperor. Flavius broke the imperial seal and read.

To Flavius Clemens, my cousin, and governor of the province of Achaëa:

It has been brought to my attention that the tragedy of the games held in honor of my birthday in Corinth was instigated by the treacherous Christians. It has also been reported that you have granted clemency to one of your wards who was the main cause of this calamity. I command you to report to my court immediately to answer for your actions.

Your god and master, Domitian.

“I knew that this day would have to come,” Flavius sighed, as he handed the letter to Domitilla. “The emperor has lost no time to ensure his supreme authority.”

“What will you do?”

“I must leave at once for Rome, of course.”

“Take me with you.”

“You do not want to get involved in this.”

“But I am already involved. You are my husband.”

“You may regret that I am.”

“Never! Besides, remember the rest of my dream? I have a message for this man who thinks he is god and master.”



As they arrived at the imperial palace, Flavius and Domitilla couldn't help but notice the many proud busts which lined the walls of this imperial hallway as they were led to the throne room by a squad of Praetorian guards.

Flavius thought he should have felt intimidated by this show of pomp. Here he was going into the presence of this "master and god of the world" to face his scorn, but somehow he felt at peace—he knew he had done the right thing.

They went through several more sets of doors revealing rooms of opulence full of rich tapestries, intricate mosaics on the floor, costly vases and urns on pedestals, and elaborate carvings and inscriptions along the walls. Their purpose was obviously to awe the beholder. At last the most magnificent set of doors was opened to reveal the inner sanctum sanctorum¹, the throne room of the emperor himself.

After they were ushered in, they had to wait several minutes before they were noticed, as Domitian was preoccupied grooming his vanity. His left hand was being manicured while his right hand was flipping through drawings of his latest grand building project. A troupe of artisans and counselors were presenting a model of a new amphitheater, and a golden laurel crown that they had prepared for his inspection.

"This is the crown that your divinity ordered," one of the artisans said.

"Set it on my head. I wish to see how comfortable it is."

A craftsman set the crown on Domitian's head with the utmost delicacy.

"Yes, that feels just right. I want all the judges

to wear these at the next game. You can tell it is *my* likeness on the crown, can't you?"

"Oh, yes your divinity, it is a very close likeness indeed, although your magnificence would be worthy of a much finer metal than even such prized gold."

Domitian looked up and acknowledged his visitors. "Ah, cousin Flavius, you have come. And what do you think of my crown? Do you think it does me justice?"

"Yes, your majesty. It befits you perfectly," Flavius said with a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"Well, let us not waste any time in pleasantries, but get down to the matter at hand." Domitian dismissed his manicurist and the artisans with a snap of his fingers. Only his most trusted advisor remained standing next to him. "I have heard disturbing reports about the events that took place at the arena on my birthday, some weeks ago. I would like to hear your version of what transpired that day, and how the Christian perpetrator came to be released, by your clemency I was told. Do you think you acted wisely in doing so?"

"I acted according to my conscience."

"Ah, a conscience is a very dangerous thing, Flavius—you should have learned that by now. I understand you were emotionally attached to this girl, seeing that she was your ward. But that provides no excuse, Flavius. She should be made a public example of, and punished—not shown leniency because of her station—however exalted. Yes, nobles can be exempt from certain judgments—but once they are Christians, they are no longer considered noble, no matter what their station.

"These Christians are a threat to our empire, and everything that we hold dear. They speak of setting up a new kingdom that will overrule our own."

¹ *sanctum sanctorum*: the most private and holy place of a religious temple

"On that account you have nothing to worry about," Flavius answered. "Their kingdom is not of this world. From what I have heard, they teach only love and kindness."

"So, they have been teaching you, have they? They think they can convert my governors? Well, we shall show them that they are wrong, shall we not, my cousin?" Domitian was working himself up into a fevered pitch as he pounded his fist into the palm of his hand and twisted it viciously.

"I am sorry you feel that way."

"You'll be more than sorry if you don't do something to rectify this problem!" he screamed.

"What would you have me to do?"

"Do? Why arrest this woman immediately. Put her on public trial, and then execute her!"

"That will be difficult, divinity. She has fled Corinth, and Achaea too for all I know."

"How convenient. But surely, there is a way to make her come back, is there not? Use any means you can think of. Have her return to the palace. Tell her that all is forgiven, and that I have approved the clemency. Then the moment she sets foot in Corinth, you will deal with her!"

"I am sorry, but that is one order I cannot obey."

"What?! You would defy your emperor?"

"I am sorry, but I cannot and will not do anything to harm this girl who was too young to know what she did."

"You see, Seutonius, what this corrupt influence has done!" Domitian said to his advisor. "My own cousin refuses to obey my orders. What do you think we should do with him?"

"According to Roman law he is entitled to a trial and..."

"I do not care what the laws say. I am the law! Granting such a clemency sets a dangerous prece-

dent. What he should have done is execute her to discourage others who might try the same thing!"

"Yet even in your own experience," Seutonius advised, "did you not find that some of these Christians are not easily put to death?"

"You mean that old fool, John ... a magician of black arts, I imagine..." he remembered. "What did we do with him?"

"You had him exiled, sir, to Patmos."

"Oh yes, I remember. Even his magic won't be able to save him there. Do we know if he's dead yet? Oh, never mind. So what are we going to do with you, Flavius, seeing that you refuse to follow the voice of your emperor and your god?"

Flavius was silent.

"My former consul is speechless!" He paused for a moment then screamed, "Why don't you say something?"

At this point, Domitilla stepped forward. "I have something to tell you, Domitian."

"Ah, the man's wife speaks for him. Perhaps you will be more reasonable than your obviously ailing husband."

"I have been given a dream," she began, "whilst I was in the temple of Aesculepius seeking healing for my ailing body."

"No!" Flavius interrupted her. "Domitilla, don't do this!" he pleaded.

"A dream? About me? How interesting! Please go on."

"I dreamt that I rode on the back of a phoenix."

"A phoenix?" Domitian turned to his advisor.

"A unique bird that according to legend burns itself, that it may rise from the ashes with renewed youth," Suetonius whispered in Domitian's ear.

"Ah yes, a phoenix," Domitian smiled. "Go on."

"The bird gave me a message for you that..."

“That my reign would be long and prosperous, no doubt—yes, I have heard such fanciful dreams before, dear lady.”

“No, that your kingdom would be taken away from you because of your oppression.”

Domitian slumped back in his throne in disbelief. “And you dare to defy me also? So, even in your dreams you conspire against me. Get out of my sight! Both of you. Let me never see you again.”

Turning to Suetonius, Domitian said, “Find that girl, Julia, and arrest her. I don’t care what it takes. If there’s one thing I don’t need right now it’s an insurrection.”



It had been three months since Julia and Titus had arrived at the farm. Clavius had returned to Corinth after awhile, fulfilling his promise to find some laborers to help Cornelius with the work on the farm. He would drop by from time to time to pass on messages, or simply to visit. Today, however, it was different. Upon entering the house, Clavius immediately sought out Julia and Titus.

“You must both leave here at once,” he urgently warned them. “Domitian has ordered every legionnaire in Achaëa to be active in the search for you, Julia. And Titus, it seems that your name has been mentioned in connection with Julia, since you were one of the few visitors allowed into the palace the day she escaped.”

“It must have been that guard that I talked with at the palace gates,” Titus remembered.

“Did you hear any news of Flavius?” Julia asked.

“He was summoned to appear before the emperor.”

“You know that could not be good,” Titus commented with a worried look.

“He was a brave man to do what he did,” Clavius

answered. “And his wife, too. She went with him, and it is said that she told Domitian about her dream. You were instrumental, Titus, in letting Jesus work the miracle of healing, not only of her body, but their lives as well. By sharing the truth with them you have set their spirits free, even though their bodies might be prisoners of Rome right now.”

“Yes, but that will probably be the last time God will be able to use me. What kind of future can we have as fugitives from Roman injustice?” Titus asked despairingly.

“Take heart, Titus,” Clavius tried to encourage him. “Your life is just beginning. Who knows what places and lands Christ will send you to next. And as for Roman injustice, ‘fear not them which can kill the body,’ our Lord told us. Or need I tell you again the stories of people who have miraculously escaped death from the hands of our persecutors. Unfortunately, I’m afraid even if I wanted to, I don’t have the time. You must get going, and you must go now. Domitian’s agents are known for their speed and efficiency in carrying out their imperial orders.”

“But where will we go?” asked Titus.

“I know a good starting place, Titus. From there, you will have to seek the Lord as to where He wants you to go. In the meantime, prepare yourself. We are going to visit an old friend of mine, someone who will have no problems getting you anywhere you want to go!”



It did not take long before three horses were saddled and ready. This time Titus bid a proper goodbye to his family and loved ones. Titus and his brother embraced lovingly. They knew it would probably be a long time before they would see each other again.

Chapter IX - Flight

“Well, little brother, I won’t tell you to take care of the farm and Mother, because I know you will,” Titus said.

“And I won’t tell you to stay here and help me because I know you wouldn’t anyway ... and you had better not with the Roman army looking for you,” Cornelius answered.

Then he embraced his mother, yet was too moved to find any words to speak. But no words needed to be said, for they both understood each other. Finally she held him at arms length. “Go, my son. And may our Lord be with you and guide you in all your ways.”

Titus wiped a tear from his mother’s eye, and then turned to mount his horse.

“So, where are we going?” Titus asked as the three riders made their way to the main road that led off down towards the coast.

“To a dear friend of mine whose father owns an estate not too different from yours, but a great distance away from here, and near the sea. He has many contacts, and shouldn’t have any trouble finding a way to get you anywhere you desire to go. He’s kind of the shady type, but I think we can trust him ... his name is Jason!”

With that, Clavius gave his horse a kick, and the animal darted off, with Titus and Julia giving quick chase as the three of them made their way to their next destination—and their next adventure.

It was a moment of joyful embracing and new introductions as Titus and Clavius once again met the leader of the band of robbers who had come so close to killing them only a few months before. They laughed with great delight as each one recalled memories of their time together.

“Ah yes, this boy owes his life to having acted like a fool,” Jason joked to Julia.

She cast an amused and puzzled look at Titus, but Clavius interrupted anything he would have said.

“I am afraid there is not much time to tell stories at the moment. These two turtledoves are being hunted by the vicious eagle of Rome. We’ll need some of your expertise to see them safely to their new destination.”

“No problem,” Jason smiled. “You know, I used to rob the rich of their money—now I rob the Romans of their Christians, ha! Yes, we shall see what we can do. So where do you want to go?”

“We have been thinking and praying about it as we made our way here,” Titus said. “The Lord has shown us that we should go to the island of Limnos in the north of the Aegean sea. He has told us that we will be safe there, and that there are many sheep there who must be added to His fold.”

“A bold undertaking,” Jason commented. “But I can see that His Spirit is upon you. Well, my friends, I shall see what I can do for you. I assume the docks are being carefully watched, but I have ways to get around their checks, and with the Lord’s help, I’m sure I can find safe passage for you somewhere.”

“You have spared my life once,” Titus said, “and now you must save it again. Thank you, Jason.”

As Jason made arrangements for their departure, others helped to gather and pack some

essential items they were going to need for their journey: basic food supplies, manuscripts, medicines and bandages, and a few articles of clothing.



As Jason headed down to the docks that evening, in search of a ship that could bring Titus and Julia where they needed to go, he happened to overhear a conversation taking place around the corner of a wall.

"The Romans have been swarming the harbor all day in search of a man and a woman."

"Offering five hundred denarii for their capture too," another voice added.

"I wonder what they could've done for a price like that?"

"From what I heard, she interfered with the games in Corinth and saved some Christians from death in the arena by throwing a Roman standard down to them, allowing them to fight off a pack of wild dogs."

"That would've been a sight to see. Did she throw in some of the Roman spectators while she was at it? They could use a taste of their own medicine."

"And what about the man?"

"He helped her escape."

"I say that anybody who is an enemy of Rome is a friend of mine."

This was the sign Jason had been waiting for. He turned the corner, and walked up to the group of men, whom Jason recognized were slaves. He came up close enough so that his face could be seen in the firelight. "Good evening, friends," he called.

"And who are you?" one of the slaves asked suspiciously.

"Watch out, he could be a Roman informer."

"Yes, guard your tongue," one whispered to another.

"That's right," Jason smiled. "I am an informer, actually, and I would like to inform you about the Kingdom of Heaven."

"You are not one of those Christians are you, because if you are, you can save your breath. There is no god that cares about us. We are the forsaken of the gods. All we know is the taste of the lash and the crusts of bread in our living hell."

"No, wait!" another slave called out. "I have heard that their God is the only God Who loves slaves and free men alike."

"Yes, that's right," Jason answered with a smile. "And He loves all men so much that sent His only Son, Jesus, to come to earth and show us this love. Jesus invited the weary and heavy-laden with burdens to come to Him and He promised He would give them rest. And in the end, He suffered by dying on a Roman cross, to pay the price for our sins, so that whosoever would believe on His name, would not perish, but have everlasting life."

"And if I choose to believe, can He join me with my wife again?" one of the largest of the slaves, a muscular man who went by the name of Phileus, asked.

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know. We had a peaceful and happy life together—I as a fisherman and she making clothing—that is until the Romans captured us, and we had to be sold as slaves. We were bought by different masters and..." his voice drifted off aimlessly.

"Someone will tell her of the Savior, I'm sure. We can pray for that. No matter what distance separates you now, He is able to bring you together in Heaven."

These were words Phileus longed to hear.

"What is it that brings you to the docks at night, stranger?" he then asked. "It can be a dangerous

place for unwanted visitors.”

“I have to find a ship going in the direction of the Kalimonos island.”

“*Have to?*” one of the slaves emphasized skeptically. “That sounds desperate.”

“Yes,” answered Jason, hoping he would not have to give more information than necessary.

“I have heard of a ship going that way next week.”

“I *must* go tomorrow morning.”

“Oh? What’s the hurry?”

“Let’s just say that my situation is somewhat similar to the one you were just talking about.”

“Ah, perhaps you are the man they are searching for? I could live quite well on that reward money if you were, and maybe even earn my freedom by turning you in.”

Phileus came forward and said threateningly, “And if he is, and you do, I’ll make sure that you never live to enjoy it.” With that, the man remained silent.

“I shall see what I can do for you, stranger,” Phileus answered. “Be at the quay* over there at the first morning’s light tomorrow. I will explain to my master your problem. He owes me several favors, you see, and I might be able to persuade him to help.”

“Thank you, friend. Yes, I shall be here in the morning. And make it two passengers.”



Early the next morning, Jason and Clavius took Titus and Julia to the docks. A river meandered through the busy town that had sprung up around the port, and then flowed into the sea. There were ships ranging from small rowboats to great merchant ships. There were traders and merchants from all over the Mediterranean, and some from as far away as Africa and India. There were

naval ships called *triremes*¹, each with up to three hundred oarsmen and complete with underwater rammers and spiked drawbridges docked here, their bows elaborately decorated with swans, eagles, birds, and other animals both real and mythological. Then there was the endless train of naked bodies, glistening with sweat, stooping like beasts of burden, unloading the precious cargo of oil and wine, sacks of grain, and bales of merchandise from the quay to the warehouses.

But neither Titus, Julia or Clavius noticed the endless sights and sounds around them. They only had one thing on their mind.

“We are to meet a friend of mine here whom I met last night,” Jason said when they finally stopped walking. “He says there is a chance that he might be able to get you aboard his ship, which I discovered will be heading the direction you want to go. They are sailing out this morning, with the tide.”

Just then two figures walked up behind them. As they came out from the shadows Jason could recognize Phileus and another man who spoke.

“Good! You have come on time. Our ship is leaving soon. My servant tells me that you may be into some kind of trouble with the Romans—that is of no concern to me. My allegiance is to money, and my trust in the highest bidder.”

“We appreciate the risk you are taking,” Jason answered the man diplomatically.

“I do not intend to take any unnecessary risks. I am a businessman, and risky business is expensive business. How much are you willing to pay for your passage?” “Four hundred dinarii,” Titus ventured immediately, casting a glance at Jason, who nodded. They were thankful for the gold coins

¹ *trireme*: an ancient Greek or Roman warship (galley), having three tiers (levels) of oars on each side

that Flavius had given to them when they had last parted.

"HmMMM ... it will be dangerous."

Titus cast another glance at Jason, who nodded again. "All right then, five hundred dinarii, but more I cannot give you."

"Done," the captain said with a clasp of the hands. "But you'd better have a good excuse for being on my ship if any Roman comes snooping around. Quick, get on board. I don't have much time."

Clavius quickly embraced Titus. "Take care of yourself, my young friend. Who knows when our paths will cross again. You know they say 'all roads lead to Rome,' but for us believers, all roads lead to Heaven. So, my friend, until we meet again!"

"Until we meet again," Titus answered. "Take care, Titus," Jason said. "And Julia, once you get on the ship, put these on. It should be a most effective disguise," he added, handing Julia a bundle. "Now, farewell, my good friends, and Godspeed!"



After all the cargo was loaded, all the ropes and gear checked, they were ready to sail.

"Everything is ready!" Phileus shouted to Titus and Julia who were below decks. "The captain has gone to the harbormaster to get clearance to set sail."

They did not have long to wait. The captain soon returned, accompanied by a centurion, and five other soldiers.

"They have to check the ship before leaving. They're looking for criminals," the captain explained to Phileus on deck, but in a loud enough tone of voice so that Titus and Julia could hear it where they were huddled down below.

"Do you have any passengers on board?" the centurion barked.

"Yes, we do," the captain answered.

"Who are they?"

"A wealthy couple from Corinth..."

"A wealthy couple, huh, on a dingy freighter like this?" the centurion said sarcastically. "Where are they now?"

"They are below decks, but sir..."

The centurion nodded his head to his soldiers. Some of them were already roughly shifting cargo around looking for any sign of stowaways. "You wouldn't mind me seeing your passengers, would you?"

"You are welcome to see them, but if I were you I wouldn't..."

The centurion's men had already flung open the door to the lower deck, and saw Titus and Julia sitting there. Their face, hands, and legs were covered in bandages and hideous sores.

"LEPERS!!" the soldiers shouted.

"Quick, close the door!" another said as he ran up to the top deck.

"You didn't tell me that they were lepers!" the centurion exclaimed.

"I was trying to, before you started rifling through my ship. As I was saying, a wealthy family from Corinth has paid me a goodly sum to take them to the leper's island."

"Well, we won't keep you any longer," the disgusted centurion said as he left the boat, hoping that he hadn't touched anything to infect himself.

The ropes were cast off and the ship set sail. Once out to sea, Titus and Julia unwrapped their bandages and washed off the flour that had simulated leper's sores.

There was lots of time to think as their vessel bobbed up and down on the emerald green sea.

Julia found herself experiencing what she had once seen in prison with the eyes of hope—the salty air playing with her hair as she sailed towards new horizons. She looked tenderly at Titus as they held each other tight.

Titus himself remembered the vision he had once had on the streets of Corinth, outside the arena—the river flowing through deserts and forests. Now he understood—the river was God’s will, flowing to touch the mighty and the lowly. The river had led him through dry and dusty places, and through times of plenty and of great joy. And now it had taken him out to sea, and to a new life. So much had happened since that first day that he had felt the joy of freedom as he left in search of adventure and a new life. But now it seemed to him as if his journey had just begun.

Titus thought about his friends, the people he had met. The faces of Clavius, Clement, Flavius and Jason appeared before him. When he had set out on his journey he had left his only brother. Now he had many.

Julia and Titus felt great peace as they looked towards the brilliant sun just now rising on the eastern horizon, beckoning them as the Sun of Righteousness, and shining forth with His eternal promise:

“Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”



Epilogue and Historical Notes¹:

Domitian was the last of Flavian emperors to sit on the throne of Rome. His rule, which lasted from 81 to 96 AD, was considered by many to be the most cruel and vicious of any of the Roman emperors. He presided over the senate with an iron fist, and even many nobles took great offense at his insistence of being addressed as *dominus et deus* (master and god).

After the revolt of a military governor in 89 AD, his actions became more tyrannical. He suppressed even the mildest form of dissent by executing and confiscating the lands and property of any senator who disagreed with him. Veneration of his statues and his image became compulsory on pain of death.

A Jewish revolt caused fresh unpopularity against the Christians as well. To observe Jewish practices became illegal; to reject the religion of Rome, without being able to plead the excuse of being a Jew, was atheism. On one count or the other, as Jews or as atheists, the Christians were liable to punishment. Domitian, in his attack upon the aristocratic party, now had the excuse he needed to condemn any who were Christians.

In 95 AD, after retiring from his position as governor, **Titus Flavius Clemens** was brought before the imperial court on charges of *contemptissimae inertiae* (contemptible lack of performing his duties). Both he and his wife, **Flavia Domitilla**, were found guilty of atheism and of participating in illegal Jewish

¹ Taken from “The Catholic Encyclopedia”

rites. Flavius died a martyr for his faith, and Domitilla was exiled to a small island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, where she died not long after from the rigors of her banishment.

Domitian was assassinated a year later in a plot orchestrated by his wife and a Praetorian prefect. He was so hated by the Romans, nobles and commoners alike (with the exception of the army), that even tearing his corpse into pieces did not satisfy their rage against him. After his death, his memory was officially banned. A decree was passed that his name should never be written, except where it appears on the list of emperors, and that no statue of him be preserved. His name was erased from all inscriptions in Rome and wherever else it had been written.

The new emperor, Caesar Nerva, revoked many of the tyrannical judgements instituted by Domitian, and all those who had been unjustly banished by him were allowed to return to their homes and have their properties restored to them.

Clement I, the first of the “apostolic fathers,” was bishop of Rome from 88-97 AD. He may have known Peter and Paul in his younger years, and is considered one of the earliest appointed “popes” of the church after Peter. He was the first known Christian writer to have used the myth of the phoenix as an allegory of Christ’s resurrection. He lived through the persecutions of Domitian, writing letters of counsel and encouragement to the churches in and around Rome in much the same way that Paul had done almost forty years earlier.

After Caesar Nerva came to power, Clement converted one of his courtiers, and after performing several miracles, led over four hundred others within the palace to Christ. He was later banished by Nerva’s successor, Trajan, and exiled to the Crimean peninsula in the Black Sea. Here he was said to have slaked the thirst of two thousand Christians by a miracle, causing the country to be converted. Trajan, angered at this report, ordered that Clement’s body be tied to an anchor and dropped into the sea.

Several hundred years later, his remains were discovered in a mound along with the anchor, and brought to Rome. They were laid to rest alongside the graves of other great martyrs in St. Clement’s Cathedral.



JEROME

JEROME

Though night had fallen over the illustrious^{*} city of Rome, it was anything but still. This was the place for the rich and fashionable—those who lacked nothing. The year was 60 AD, and Nero¹ sat upon the imperial throne of Rome. A selfish and haughty man, he indulged^{*} in himself and the things of the flesh. In fact, this was the case with most of the rich nobles and senators^{*}. They were carefree and egotistic, seeking only to please themselves. They had no desire to help the poor and needy of even their own country, but were fully absorbed with themselves, and with how to make their own lives more comfortable.

These noblemen and women worshipped their own gods and frowned upon those who did not. Many of them despised the ever-growing sect of Christians, who were fast gaining popularity among the people and were turning them away from their Roman gods and pagan superstitions. Thus the ruling class furtively sought opportunities to legally arrest any Christians that they could, hoping to curb the spread of this fanatic rebellion and to turn the people back to Roman sanity.

Most Christians were just common people, but there were also a few influential senators and noblemen who had converted. These could not profess their faith openly, as it was considered treason for a Roman citizen, especially one of rank, to profess faith in any God supreme to the emperor himself.

A little ways out from the city, in a humble yet spacious room, a Christian meeting was being held. A crowd of nearly fifty people had already gathered inside, and more were coming in. When everyone

had settled, an elderly but robust man stood up. He was tall and heavyset, and his brown hair showed streaks of white. He was a blacksmith by the name of Elmo.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said, “and we thank You, dear Lord, for protecting each one here from the eyes of any intruders. Keep us safe, as well as our brethren who were not able to come tonight. Amen.”

“Amen,” the crowd echoed in hushed tones.

“Before we begin, I would like to welcome and introduce you to our new brother and sisters in the Lord. Senator Adrian, his lovely wife, Claudia, and their daughter, Lydia.”

“God be with you!”

“May we all be a blessing to you!”

“Welcome!” the greetings came back from the crowd.

Elmo turned to them, and continued. “As your brothers and sisters in Christ, we welcome you into our fellowship. May God bless and keep you. We pray that we will be whatever help we can. Please feel free to come whenever you wish. Our doors are always open!” The newcomers then sat down, and Elmo began his sermon.

In the back of the room, leaning up against the wall, stood Jerome, Elmo’s 16-year-old son. Jerome was the eldest of five brothers and sisters, and he had grown into a charming young man with fine features and wavy, jet-black hair. He worked with his father, learning the trade of a blacksmith, and it showed in his muscular body.

Jerome’s parents had once been rich nobles of Rome, but when he was only seven, something had happened—exactly what, he did not know—and they had to leave their fine house and place in society.

With what little money his family had left, they

were forced to rebuild their lives. They did so among the common people. Still strong and able-bodied, his father soon found work as a blacksmith. He prospered in this business, until they were fairly well off once again.

Sadness struck the family, however, when one day, his mother died of a sudden illness. Jerome was only nine years old at the time, and he had adored his mother. To him, she was a saint. Everything she did was right, and she never let him down—except the day she died. He felt upset at God for taking away his beloved mother, and that it had happened so suddenly.

Jerome often thought back to the early days of his childhood, when he had had everything he wanted. In those days, a personal servant took care of him and his brothers and sisters. Now things were different. Since his mother died, he was expected to help his father support the family, and to take care of his siblings.

The change of lifestyle was hard for Jerome. He was used to a life of pleasure and ease, having servants wait on his every whim. But now, while they managed, it took a lot of hard work, and being the eldest, Jerome was very much aware of the burden it was to provide for their family.

Only one servant had loyally remained with their family; a burly, quiet man named Clyde, who mostly helped Elmo in the workshop.

Jerome looked over to where the senator was sitting. *It’s not fair*, he thought, *how God prefers some people. That girl there ... what was her name? ... Lydia. She must have everything she ever wanted. She has both her parents, and probably lives like a queen. Why do we have to be any different from them? If only things had remained the same, I would have been happy and living a normal life—like her.*

Jerome then cast a glance towards his father, who was still deeply engrossed in his sermon. *What is it that gives Father such power, such life? He's always so happy and finds good in everything. I don't understand what he's so cheerful about all the time.*

When the sermon had ended, and everyone was leaving, Jerome wove his way through the people milling about, and went over to his father. All he wanted to do was get home. Things were scary these days, and with Nero on the throne, they could never be too sure what to expect from the Romans.

Elmo was talking with Adrian, whose wife and daughter stood nearby. As Jerome approached his father, Elmo motioned towards him. "Oh, here comes my son now. I want you to meet him."

Jerome came up to his father. "Father, when are we leaving? I've gotten all the stuff together."

"Not so fast, my son. I want you to meet the senator and his family."

Naturally, Jerome was more interested in Lydia, the senator's 15-year-old daughter, than he was in the senator and his wife.

Lydia was slender, with long, reddish hair, and turquoise eyes—a picture of grace and beauty. Jerome could hardly keep his gaze from wandering her way, even as he answered the questions the senator was asking him.

After a few more moments of talking, Elmo hinted that it was time to leave. They quickly made their farewells, and then dispersed and headed to their homes.



It was early when Jerome awoke; the sun had not yet risen. He sat up in his bed, remembering that this day he had to go to the marketplace. He managed to drag himself out of the hard bed he had

long gotten used to, and then proceeded to get dressed and ready.

Elmo met him at the door before he left. "Have a good day, Jerome, and be careful. Remember, we have enemies all around."

"Yes, Father, don't worry. I'll remember," Jerome said, somewhat perturbed that his father didn't trust him to leave home without a word of warning.

It was now the year 65 AD, and during the past five years life in Rome had become all the more dangerous for the Christians. After the great fire had ravaged much of the city, Nero charged the Christians with the crime of starting it. A vicious campaign was now underway to apprehend Christians and bring them to justice for their crimes against the Roman nation. Christians were routinely rounded up and thrown into prison, to await their death. Those that remained were driven further underground, meeting secretly, and never twice in the same place. They had to be careful of when and to whom they spoke about their faith.

As Jerome walked down the dusty pathways leading to the main road, he mused on his home life. *How does my father always manage to be up earlier than me? And he always has some word of advice to tell me at the beginning of each day. I'm 21 years old now, and well able to care for myself. I wish he wouldn't be so worried about me. He almost seems out of touch with us, he's so good.*

Occasionally, Jerome would take a short detour on his way to and from the marketplace to stop by the place the gladiators trained.

At this early morning hour, as he passed by the gladiator ring, it was still deserted. *I'll stop by on my way home, Jerome thought. Hopefully there'll be some action by then.*

Jerome went through the whole market, envying those who could buy the things he couldn't. Every once in a while, a pretty girl would catch his eye, but Jerome knew that, as flattering as the looks he received from these rich girls were, they would never be seen associating with him, a commoner; so he just kept walking.

A while later, Jerome had finished, and headed towards the gladiator ring. A number of people had already gathered. *I wonder who's fighting today?* he mused within himself.

Suddenly, his eyes fell on a most comely sight. *Oh God, Jerome thought, where did she come from? She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.*

Not more than eight meters away, on the fringes of a small crowd, and in the middle of a group of whispering young women, stood a gorgeous girl. Jerome was sure he had never seen her before. She was average height, and beautiful to behold. Her long golden hair fell softly down her back. Her clothes accentuated a body that could afford to be shown off, and she had a noble, almost royal air about her.

For a split second Jerome's eyes caught her soft brown ones as he slowly made his way towards her, trying not to be obvious with his fascination for her beauty. As he had done with all other girls, he planned to ignore her. As difficult as it was not to stop for a decent look, Jerome kept himself together quite well and when it came time, casually walked straight past her.

"Hey there! Come here for a moment!" he was surprised to hear a voice call after him. Jerome stopped. He slowly turned around to find himself the object of attention of this group of girls. As he suspiciously looked them over, the girl called again. "Are you deaf or something? Come on, handsome. There's nothing to be scared of—or is there?" It was

the girl he had adored, and she was calling *him* over! The girls surrounding her were giggling.

I'd better not make a fool of myself, he thought, as he tried to rearrange the filled baskets he carried in his hands.

"What's a good-looking guy like you doing shopping around in the marketplace? You should be having a great time."

Jerome looked at her questioningly.

"Oh, I see!" she continued. "I was assuming you were the son of a rich noble or senator, but I suppose you're only common class." Again, a round of snobbish snickers arose from the group of young women standing around her.

Jerome took that to mean he should continue on, so he started walking away, but the girl called him back. "Aren't you going to tell me your name? I'll tell you mine."

He turned around once again. "My name is Jerome, the son of Elmo—once a noble." Jerome looked down a little to hide his embarrassed face.

"And I'm Chloe, daughter of Marcellus and Octavia—still nobles," she replied with a smile.

Jerome returned the smile. He had heard much of her parents, although he'd never met them. They were one of the richest families in all of Rome, and well acquainted with the emperor himself.

"Oh well," Jerome found himself saying, "I guess I'd better go, since I'm obviously not one of your kind." With that, he took one last look at the sight he figured he would never see again, and turned and went on his way.

Jerome arrived home, and his father greeted him with some unexpected news. "Jerome, you and I have been invited to a party with Senator Adrian. His family will be there, along with many other friends and nobles."

"But father," Jerome protested, "I just don't fit in with that sort of people. I'm not good enough."

"Don't give me that. You know it's not true. You're well-mannered and educated, and as good as the rest of them. You'll fit in just fine—you'll see!"

"But father, I don't want to go. Isn't there some way out of it? Who will stay with the house?"

"Your brothers and sisters are old enough to look after themselves, Jerome. And Clyde will stay with them. We can't turn down this invitation. It would mean a lot to Adrian if we could come."

Jerome knew that was the end of the discussion, and said no more.

It wasn't that Jerome didn't like being around the rich; in fact, a party in the house of a rich man, with all the food he could eat, and servants to attend to his every whim, somewhat appealed to him. He just didn't feel comfortable; he knew that he was not one of them.

Oh, maybe it'll be all right, he mused after a while. *After all, Senator Adrian is a Christian. Lydia will be there, too. I could just talk with her.* Jerome had not seen much of Lydia since the great fire, as it had been too dangerous for the senator to come to any of the meetings. But although the two had not spoken much over the years, Jerome had become quite interested in Lydia, who was now a sweet, mature young woman.



It had been a long time since Elmo had attended any sort of upper-class parties, and as he and Jerome made their way to Senator Adrian's mansion, they were both somewhat nervous. There were so many questions Elmo did not want to be asked, but he prepared himself for the worst. Although he hoped to avoid any direct confrontation, when it came down to it, Elmo knew

he would never deny his Christian faith.

Jerome, too, felt nervous. As many times as he had been to this house in the past, accompanying his father on visits to the senator before the persecution, the stately building they now approached once again brought back memories of his childhood—memories that he otherwise did his best to suppress.

As they entered the large, spacious guestroom, Adrian and Claudia were there to meet them. Jerome looked around the room—and then he saw her! Chloe had come. His face turned slightly pale.

"Are you all right?" Claudia asked Jerome, a note of concern in her voice.

Jerome ignored the question, as Adrian continued speaking with Elmo.

"I'm so glad you could make it! It is so good to see you again. I hope you will not be too uncomfortable around all these people. We won't mind if you decide to leave earlier than the rest."

Elmo looked around the room. A number of people were already milling about. He recognized a few of them, although not many recognized him. Jerome looked around as well, and noticed a few faces that seemed vaguely familiar. One man, in particular, caught Jerome's attention.

"Father, see that man standing by the table? Do we know him? I seem to remember him from somewhere."

"Why, it's Marcellus. I didn't know he was back in Rome. Yes, Jerome, we know him—all too well." Elmo grew silent for a moment. Then he continued in a whisper, "It is because of him that we live the way we do today." Elmo shook his head, as if he sought to shake whatever thought was troubling him. "That's his wife, Octavia, standing next to him," Elmo added in a more casual tone.

Marcellus and Octavia! Of course, the richest nobles in Rome—and Chloe's parents! Jerome summed up. "So ... does that make them our enemies?" he asked his father.

"No one is an enemy, Jerome. We should be kind to all," Elmo answered simply.

At that moment Marcellus caught Elmo's eye and made his way over. "Elmo," he said, "is it really you? It has been a long time. And this must be your eldest son ... Jerome, if I am not mistaken. You have surely grown, boy," he said as he turned and looked at Jerome. The coldness in Marcellus' eyes sent shivers down Jerome's spine.

"I assume you don't remember me."

"Oh, I do—vaguely," Jerome replied, then, trying to sound courteous, he added, "How are you, sir?"

"Quite well indeed. And what has become of you, Elmo? What brings you to this festivity?"

"Senator Adrian and I are friends. He invited us."

"Friends, huh?! Interesting. I didn't know he knew you." They continued to chat for a while longer, until Marcellus politely excused himself.

It was now dusk, and preparations for the banquet were under way, while a variety of entertainments took place.

Jerome went out into the spacious garden, where he found Lydia. She looked very beautiful this night, and what was more, she seemed to take quite an interest in him.

"So Jerome, tell me about yourself. What sort of things do you enjoy doing?"

"I like walking around, looking at things. I enjoy watching the gladiators train, although it sometimes reminds me of the days when we were better off."

"That's right, I remember now. You used to be nobles, too, right? What was it that happened to your family?"

"I only remember having to leave our villa in the country when I was seven. My father never told me why, but I think it has something to do with Marcellus."

"Hmm, that does sound like something sly Marcellus would do. His daughter acts just like him."

"You mean Chloe?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"I met her briefly. I must confess I was quite taken by her beauty!"

"Yes, I suppose she is pretty, but that's about it. She has a lovely body and rich parents, but when it comes down to things that really matter in life, she doesn't have much at all." Lydia stood silent for a moment. It was obvious she often thought on such matters.

When they were out of earshot of any others, Jerome changed the subject. He was curious to know how Lydia felt now about being a Christian.

"Why risk your life being a Christian when you have so much ahead of you?" Jerome asked her.

"What do you mean? It's not much more of a risk for me than it is for you. I love the Christian life, and would give anything to keep it," Lydia said.

"Well, you know, my father has been a believer for as long as I can remember, and I know what Christianity is all about. It has good morals, but really, what good does it do? It seems like it only makes you an enemy of the state and therefore of most of its people. Sometimes I wonder if it's really worth the trouble."

"There's more to it than merely good morals, Jerome. You, of all people, should know that. The Words of Jesus that your father spoke to us have changed our lives. It is the power of the risen Savior within us, and the hope of eternal life with Him—that He is preparing a place for us, so that where

He is, we may be also—that keeps us going. Not just the good moral standard. ...And what do you do for sport?” Lydia said, quickly changing the subject when she saw Chloe enter the garden.

Seeing Jerome and Lydia, Chloe pranced over and said, “You two look like you’re getting on quite well. May I join in?”

“Sure!” Jerome replied, quite pleased at the idea of all this female company. Lydia, however, slowly backed away and excused herself, leaving Jerome and Chloe to themselves.

“So, is this what you do when you’re not traipsing through the marketplace?”

“Well, no, actually. My father is a blacksmith. I help him with his trade, as well as the care of our house and my younger brothers and sisters.”

“A blacksmith who shops and does chores?! Ha!” Chloe held her hand over her mouth as she let out a giddy laugh. Jerome looked a little indignant as Chloe continued, “By the gods, is that all? Someone like you could easily find work as a soldier or a gladiator—anything more exciting than being a blacksmith.”

“Well, since my mother’s not around anymore, my father needs my help. Besides, we prefer to stay together.” Although there was a measure of truth in what Jerome said, it was not his real reason. He knew that his father would never approve of him going off to follow any such career.

“I think I could get you such a job, as well as a more decent education. You know, Jerome, I quite like you; you’re different than the other guys around here. There’s something more to you, even though I don’t know exactly what it is.”

This whole conversation was beginning to sound flattering to Jerome. Chloe obviously liked him and, as they continued talking, he couldn’t help but wonder if maybe this opportunity was just what he

had been looking for. Besides, he was beginning to realize that he quite fancied Chloe, and wondered what it was that Lydia didn’t like about her.

Jerome liked Lydia as well. Even though she was rich, she was simple and caring and concerned about others. She had an inner spark that fascinated Jerome even more than her pleasing physical attributes. But there was something about Lydia that Jerome couldn’t quite understand either: Why would she be willing and content to risk losing a carefree life of pleasure to be a Christian?

As Jerome and Chloe were engaged in conversation, so, once again, were Marcellus and Elmo.

“So Elmo,” Marcellus was saying, “what has become of you these days? Are you still involved with that fanatical sect of Nazarenes?”

Elmo, trying to avoid getting into any talk of religion, simply answered, “I’m a blacksmith, working hard every day.”

“Ah, how strange the ways of fate, are they not? The once great and noble Elmo, now a blacksmith. Tell me, it must have been difficult for you after a life of ease.”

“I’ve gotten used to it now,” Elmo responded. “And it’s done me a lot of good.”

“Such as ... ”

“Such as learning a concern for the world around me, a concern for those who don’t live in fancy houses and own four—or is it now five?—estates.”

“Are you saying that I don’t have compassion on others?” Marcellus’ eyes gloated at the mere implication of his own hardened nature.

Elmo remained silent. Such a question did not need answering.

“But tell me, what are these rumors I hear, that you are now the leader of your own sect of Christians?”

Just as Marcellus finished this question, someone came running up to Elmo telling him that a messenger wished to see him.

Thank You, Lord, for saving me from having to answer that question! Elmo prayed silently, and then excused himself and turned to walk away.

"Perhaps we shall finish this conversation another day," Marcellus called out.

Elmo ignored him and calmly walked out to the waiting room where Clyde, Elmo's trusted servant, waited. Elmo could tell something was wrong, as Clyde was perspiring heavily, and doubled over on a bench, his head in his knees. As soon as Clyde heard Elmo's voice, he jumped up.

"Master, I have terrible news. Shortly after you left, soldiers came and went house to house. They took many people away including ... including your other children. There was nothing I could do to stop them." Clyde was shaking and he held his head down.

"I would think that any soldier would think twice before crossing your path," Elmo said with a tone of surprise. Clyde was not only large, but also a very strong man.

"Alas, my lord, I was not there. I arrived moments after the soldiers had gone, and it was too late." It was obvious that Clyde felt much condemnation. He could not bear to look into Elmo's face.

Elmo stood still for a moment and closed his eyes as he recovered from the shock of this heart-rending news. When he opened them, he looked at Clyde, who was still obviously shaken himself. Elmo, always forgiving, hugged Clyde and whispered in his ear, "My friend, I don't know why the Lord has allowed this to happen to me, but I do know He always knows best. Don't worry, Clyde, this is not your fault. If this is God's will, nothing you could have done would have prevented it."

They were both silent for a moment, deep in thought. Then Elmo said, "I will talk with Adrian and see what we can do. Clyde, can you try to ascertain where they have taken them, and bring word back here to Adrian's house?—And may God have mercy on us all."

Elmo went back inside, his heart still heavy with the realization of what had just happened.

Seeing Elmo's distraught face as he approached, Adrian knew something was wrong. "Elmo, what is it?"

"We cannot discuss it here," Elmo replied in a whisper.

Adrian and Elmo went to an upstairs bedroom while a servant called for Jerome. When they were alone, Elmo spoke. "Something dreadful has happened. Clyde came to tell me that all my household, as well as many others, have been taken captive this evening. Surely, whoever is behind this will soon be looking for me as well."

Adrian looked stunned. "But how ... who ... how did they know? There should have been no reason for them to suspect you!"

"I don't know. All I know is that it's done and there's nothing I can do right now to get them back. Jerome and I will be needing a place to stay."

"I have a secret place that was built not long ago. It's in no way fancy, but it's safe. You and Jerome should remain here until the guests leave. Then, as soon as the coast is clear, I'll take you there."

At that moment Jerome walked into the room, escorted by Lydia. Elmo broke the news to his son and told him of their plan. Jerome was as angry as he was shocked, and he didn't relish the idea of hiding.

"But, Father, there must be something we can do to help them. We can't just hide and do nothing!"

"I'm afraid there's not much we can do for the present, son, but wait—and pray for God to show us what to do next."

"So we're just going to stay hidden, in some secret hole? Father, with all due respect, no!"

"Son, listen to me. I believe Marcellus may be behind this. I sensed something in his eyes when he talked with me today. And if he is, we will not be safe anywhere in the open. He has eyes everywhere."

Jerome threw himself down on the bed, put his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling. "And now we're going to have to wait here," he murmured glumly. Elmo sat down on a chair and closed his eyes for a moment of silent communion with his Savior.



Back in the dining hall, Chloe was looking for Jerome. Spotting Lydia, she called out, "Have you lured Jerome away from me?"

Lydia gave her a look which said that even if she had, Chloe would not get him back.

Acting like a little spoiled child, Chloe went to her father and told him that Lydia had taken Jerome away from her, and now he was nowhere to be found.

"Hmm, how unfortunate," he said casually. But to Chloe's frustration, he did nothing further about the matter.

The partying went into the wee hours of the morning until most of Adrian's pagan guests were thoroughly drunk. Marcellus, however, wasn't. He now busied himself trying to locate Elmo. He and Jerome had suddenly disappeared, and nobody seemed to know where they had gone. He finally asked Adrian, who told him that Elmo had already left the party with his son because some pressing matters had to be attended to.

"I wonder what that could be ... at this hour of the night?" Marcellus glumly retorted as he walked away.

As the rest of the guests were leaving, Marcellus called Adrian aside and spoke demandingly. "I hear that you and Elmo have become close friends. Well, Senator, I must inform you that he is wanted for questioning. If you know of his whereabouts, you would be wise to let me know. Elmo is an enemy of the state." Marcellus paused for a moment, and then added, "Or perhaps you already knew that."



After what had seemed like an eternity, Adrian returned and led Elmo and Jerome away to his private "catacomb."

Behind the house, in view of the back garden, Adrian pulled aside a stone slab, and slid down into a small, dark crack. He beckoned Elmo and Jerome to follow as he lit a torch. They made their way through a long, curving tunnel. After about five minutes they came to a small wooden door and opened it.

"I told you it was nothing fancy," Adrian apologized, "but you should be safe here."

"Great!" Jerome muttered to himself. This was not his idea of a pleasant evening.

"I know this is not your idea of fun," Adrian said sympathetically, looking at Jerome. "I regret that this is all I can do for you at the moment."

"Thank you, Adrian," Elmo quietly said. "We appreciate your help. Don't worry about trying to convince Jerome. It just makes things worse."

Jerome looked up with a scowl on his face. "What makes things worse is that you don't understand, Father. I'm only 21 and I have my whole life ahead of me! But before I even have a chance to live the way I choose, you have decided my fate for me. You turn me into an enemy of our own people. As much

as I admire and respect you, Father, I do not see how I can go on like this. I need variety, I need friends, I need to have some fun, some challenge in my life! As things are now, we're always hiding from something or someone."

As Jerome and Elmo looked intently at each other, Adrian silently stood by. Finally Elmo walked away, back into the tunnel, leaving Jerome alone in his misery. Adrian followed him, and they both sat down and began to talk.

"I don't know what to do anymore," Elmo began. "We always figured that Jerome would stick to his faith. He used to love the stories of Jesus and the disciples. When I would give sermons, he always used to listen attentively. But now he's so different. I don't know what's come over him. Perhaps I have failed in raising him, or perhaps there are other reasons. But I feel that I must find a solution, or I may lose him."

"Did you ever think that it could have something to do with losing his mother? Have you ever told him what really happened?"

"I have not been able to. He has not yet learned what it means to truly forgive, and I fear he may take revenge."

"Well, I think it's time that someone did take revenge on Marcellus for all the harm he's caused you."

"Vengeance is the Lord's, He will take care of that. He is the Almighty and He knows best. We do well to let Him lead."

"You're right, Elmo. I'm sorry. But I still think you should tell Jerome."

"I don't know."

"I will be leaving on a trip early tomorrow morning, and will be gone a few days. Lydia will see to it that you have all your needs."

"Thank you, Adrian. May the Lord be with you!"
"And with you, my friend. Sleep well!"



At the house of Marcellus, a servant entered the room to tell Marcellus that a messenger had come to the door for him. Marcellus was entertaining guests of his own, however, and instructed him to bid the messenger wait. In a moment the door burst open, and Clyde walked in. Marcellus jumped to his feet.

"Oh, Clyde, I'm sorry! I did not know it was you. What news do you bring?"

"Master, I have confirmed that Senator Adrian has indeed hidden Elmo, although I do not yet know where. I cannot be too inquisitive, lest I fall under suspicion. His house is being watched should he try to return, though I doubt that he will."

"Senator Adrian, huh," Marcellus said wryly, rubbing his hands together. "Why, I couldn't have planned it better myself. If Adrian is indeed hiding a traitor, we will have somewhat to accuse him of, and if he does not deny it, he will face the sweet justice of Rome."

"I shall return to the house of Adrian and see what more I can learn about the whereabouts of my master."

"Very good. And be quick." A smile surfaced on Marcellus' face. *I have to see Elmo's face when he realizes who it was that betrayed him.*

Turning to his guests once again, Marcellus continued his conversation. "Now that we have found another nest of these traitorous Christians, they will be brought into the arena, where we shall watch the lions have some fun. The emperor himself will be there."

The men sitting across from Marcellus smiled at the thought, already gleefully toying with the idea of seeing bloodshed.

“And,” Marcellus continued, “it appears that we may see some familiar faces. I have just heard that Adrian is helping the Christians. I, for one, will find great pleasure in seeing him die.”



The few days that passed seemed like an eternity, especially to Jerome. Each day Lydia brought Elmo and Jerome food, water and anything else they needed. Often, she and Jerome would talk together, and her visits were the only reason Jerome had managed to keep his sanity as long as he had. Even though Lydia would often come down to the cave—or the hole, as Jerome called it—he was still beside himself with anxiety and restlessness.

It was also not easy for Elmo to see his son this way. He had always wanted to give Jerome the best, and it made him sad to see his son so unhappy now.

Jerome sat in the corner, as he usually did, thinking—to himself, and occasionally out loud—about how horrible life was. He jumped up as heard a distant, now familiar noise. Within minutes, Lydia entered the secret room with some food.

“Here you are,” she said with a smile, as she set the platter down on a rough piece of rock that jutted up from the floor. She kept talking as the two men ate their food. “With every day that goes by, I pray for you more and more. Clyde came to the house again this morning, to inquire about you. He said that he had discovered who was behind this attack. He told me they have guards everywhere in the city and that there would be no chance of escaping.”

Elmo spoke quickly. “I still don’t think he should know where we are. As much as I love Clyde, the fewer people that know, the better. And besides, Clyde is not one for keeping secrets.”

Jerome, who had been quiet up until this moment, suddenly blurted, “Lydia, will you take me with you outside of this place? At least for a few minutes of fresh air?”

Lydia looked questioningly at Elmo, who said, “I think it may be good for him to be out for a bit. We have been here for quite some time.” Elmo knew he could make good use of a few moments alone, to pray and find out what God wanted him to do next.

As Lydia led Jerome out of the cave, Jerome thought to himself, *I’m really starting to enjoy Lydia’s company. She’s a very nice person and has something special to her. She reminds me a bit of Mother.*

They were soon out in the spacious gardens. Jerome breathed deeply of the fresh evening air, which had never felt purer to him than it did now. “It is nice to be outside again,” Jerome said as he stretched out his arms.

Lydia watched him with a smile. She had grown to like Jerome more and more, and suspected that he liked her. She only wished he would act more grown up, and not be so much into himself and his own wants. They sat down on a nearby rock and began to talk. Jerome could hardly keep his eyes from staring deep into hers, and for a while, he was silent.

“What’s wrong?” Lydia questioned.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just thinking about you and I.” Jerome turned to Lydia and held her hands in his. “Lydia, I love you and enjoy your company. I think you’re a wonderful person and ... sometimes I think you like me. But there’s something about me that bothers you, I can tell. What is it, Lydia? I want to know because I want you to feel for me how I feel for you.”

Lydia spoke softly. “I don’t know how to say this. I don’t think it’s something all these other girls would think, like Chloe. They like you the way you

are.” Lydia slid her hands away from Jerome, and continued. “I do like you, Jerome, and I think very highly of you. It’s just that sometimes I wish that you would be a little bit more concerned about life and those around you. You seem to resent being a Christian. It seems to me that you want to live as the rich do, reveling in their frivolous pleasures. But Jerome, that won’t make you happy. I have everything, like you did when you were younger. When you’re young, life is easy, and these things seem to make you happy, but when you begin to see the injustice and the hate, the callousness and the deceit, the indifference and the misery of those around you ... oh Jerome, it’s so empty! I hate the riches. I hate the ease and the pleasure. I would give it all up. Oh Jerome, can’t you see the true riches that you have?”

Jerome looked away, trying to control himself. *She has everything she wants, but she’d give it all up? I don’t understand.* He looked deep into her eyes and for a moment it seemed as if their souls had locked together.

Slowly they leaned closer to each other, their lips about to touch and unite their feelings of love in a passionate embrace, when suddenly, and seemingly out of nowhere, Chloe walked up.

“Oh, hello!” she began, seemingly oblivious to the meaningful moment she had just interrupted. “One of your servants let me in, Lydia, and told me that I might find you here in the garden. And Jerome,” she said, turning to face him, “I’ve been searching for you everywhere. It’s a good thing I stopped by.”

Jerome let go of Lydia and stood up. “Why were you looking for me?”

“One of my friends is having a party tonight, and I wanted to invite you along.”

“I don’t think I can ... ” Jerome began, but Chloe cut him off.

“Oh, don’t give me that nonsense. Of course you can come. You’re not afraid, are you—afraid that you might fall in love with me?”

Jerome didn’t feel like answering that question.

Chloe walked off. “I’ll be waiting for you outside—go ahead, finish what you were doing.”

Jerome turned to look at Lydia.

“Go ahead, go with her,” she said. “There’s nothing you can do about it now.”

“I’m sorry,” Jerome managed to mutter. “Tell my father that I didn’t mean for this to happen. Tell him that I love him, and that I’ll be back as soon as I possibly can.”

“Jerome,” Lydia added, with one last look into his eyes, “think about what I said, won’t you?”

“Yes, Lydia, I’ll try to understand. I love you.”

Jerome walked off to meet Chloe, who was nonchalantly waiting for him.

“So where have you been, Jerome?”

“Around,” he answered evasively.

“Oh, it’s a secret, huh? In Lydia’s room, perhaps?” she remarked.

“No, actually—though I would have liked to be.” The last comment seemed to quiet Chloe, at least for a little while. She decided not to bring up the topic again.



Adrian had just returned from his trip out of town, and was downstairs talking with Lydia. “So, my daughter, what has happened?”

“A lot, Father, and I will tell you all. But firstly, Jerome has gone with Chloe.”

“Why? How? What happened?”

“Well, Jerome and I were talking in the garden...” Adrian looked up as she said the ‘in the garden’

part, but let her continue. "Then suddenly Chloe appeared and invited Jerome to a party. Jerome wasn't sure what to do, but Chloe insisted that he come—and so he went with her."

"But why? Jerome is being looked for. Doesn't he realize that?"

"Father, Jerome would have done anything to get out of that cave. I guess he didn't mind taking that risk. Besides," she said, as she lowered her eyes, "I don't think he wanted to turn her down."

"And what of Elmo, does he know?"

"Yes. He said that God had told him Jerome would be gone for a while, but that he would return a wiser, more mature man."

"I pray God he does. But how did Chloe get in without your knowledge?"

"She told one of the servants I was expecting her, and they let her in."

"I hope Jerome is wise," Adrian finally said. "This could get us all into a lot of trouble."

"Oh, Father!" Lydia said with tears in her eyes. "I love Jerome. You can't let him die. Please, Father, isn't there something you can do?"

"I'm afraid not, my dear."

As they were talking, a servant rushed in. "Sir, a messenger from Marcellus is here to see you."

"Marcellus?" Lydia blurted out.

Oh no! Adrian thought, *He must know.*

The messenger came in and handed Adrian a sealed message. "I have been instructed to wait for a reply," the messenger said.

Adrian opened the message, which read:

To the noble Senator Adrian,

What a great delight it is to have you back from your unexpected journey. I must confess, I was rather worried to hear you had left. Not

because I was concerned for your safety, for I know you are a capable man, but because I knew if you were away it would be longer before I could find Elmo.

Does it shock you that I say this, Adrian? We both know that you know the whereabouts of Elmo, and his son, for that matter, the mention of which you have taken great care to avoid. But you would be wise to let me know. I do not wish to think of you as my enemy, but if you hide the enemies of the state, then I have no choice but to consider you such.

*Signed by my own hand,
Marcellus*

Adrian crumpled the letter and told the messenger, "I have no answer for Marcellus!"

"But sir, my master will not let me return without an answer."

"Then find yourself another master," Adrian bellowed, and walked away. Lydia followed him.



The party at Chloe's friend's residence was coming to a close, and Jerome and Chloe were walking in the garden.

"You can spend the night at my house, if you'd like, Jerome, since yours is so far away from here."

"My house is ..." Jerome caught himself, and stopped, not knowing what else to say.

"Your house is what?"

"I really don't think I should stay at your house. Your parents might not like it."

"My parents stay in another house on the other side of our estate. They won't even have to see you."

That was all Jerome needed to hear, because he was in fact eager to stay with Chloe. He just had to be certain that her father wouldn't be around.

Chloe's house wasn't very far, but before they reached it, Jerome thought he saw Lydia.

"Is that Lydia coming?" Jerome asked, stopping for a better look.

"Oh Jerome, must you always be thinking of Lydia? Why not think of me and the fun we're going to have tonight?"

But it was Lydia—Jerome could hear her calling him, and he ran to see her, leaving Chloe standing behind him.

"What are you doing out here by yourself this late at night?" Jerome asked when he reached Lydia.

Lydia ignored the question and, in an urgent tone of voice, whispered, "Jerome, I've come to warn you. Marcellus is behind all this. He is looking for you and your father. You can't go with her!"

Jerome's eyes fell. "But I will not let Marcellus see me. I can't go back with you, not to that ... that hole."

Lydia felt hurt that he didn't want her help. "Call it a hole if you want to, Jerome, but we are trying our best to save your lives. And if that's all you can say in return, then maybe it's better that I leave you to fend for yourself." She tried to hold back her tears. "Maybe you'll find this great world you imagine out here isn't so great after all!" With that, Lydia started running back home.

"Lydia," Jerome called after her. "Lydia, please! I'm sorry. I'll listen." Jerome turned around to see Chloe walking up to him.

"Is she leaving you?" Chloe asked, a tone of mock sympathy in her voice. "Did I make her jealous?"

"She has no reason to be jealous of you," Jerome retorted.

"Oh yes she does—I have you!"

"You do not have me! I'm only walking with you."

Chloe didn't like that. "So tell me, what did you say to make her so upset?"

"That's none of your business—or is it?"

"Oh Jerome, don't get cross with me just because you've lost Lydia. Look at the bright side. Now there's nothing holding you back from being with me."

Jerome suddenly grew quiet, as he thought the situation over. *If I go with Chloe, she'll give me everything I want. I can be popular and have fun, and lots of money. The only problem is Marcellus. If he sees me, what will I say about my father? But ... I'm sure Chloe has ways of dealing with him. Perhaps this is all for the better. Maybe Chloe can get us all out of this mess.*

He was jolted back to reality by Chloe's voice, and her hand caressing his back. "So, are you coming with me, or are you going to stay here all night and think of the woman you won't get?"

Jerome hesitated a moment or two, as he made his final decision. "I'll go with you," he answered resolutely.



A week had passed and Adrian continued to receive threatening letters from Marcellus. Jerome never returned to Adrian's house, but was still staying with Chloe, albeit in secret.

One morning Marcellus showed up at Adrian's house with a band of soldiers. "We have orders to search the house!" Marcellus stated brusquely.

"And you, Adrian," Marcellus continued, "are to be summoned before the emperor and his council, that we may see where your loyalties lie. Then we shall see what will become of you."

The soldiers searched the entire house, but found nothing. After two hours they left, but Marcellus, refusing to give up, stayed to continue the search. After the third hour he, too, gave up, but promised that he would return.

Never in his life had Adrian felt so frightened. He went down to see Elmo. "Elmo, Marcellus and his soldiers have just searched the house for you. They have left now, but I have been summoned before the emperor. Please help me. I'm scared. I'm worried that I'll make a mistake and hurt someone. Nero has never had a reason to doubt my loyalty, but when he finds out I am a Christian, as he now undoubtedly will, he'll be fuming."

Elmo spoke slowly and deliberately. "Do not fear, Adrian. Our Lord Jesus will be with you. He has promised to give you a mouth and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to gainsay nor resist. Just think of Jesus and what He had to go through—the pain, the torture, the betrayal. But He suffered that we might be saved. We must be willing to go through anything for Christ, though our suffering will only be a small portion of what He has suffered for us."

Adrian remained quiet, reflecting on the words of his friend. Would he be willing to go through pain, torture, condemnation, and even death for what he believed?

After a few long moments, Adrian spoke again. "I pray God will grant me the courage and the peace you have, Elmo. I hope I will not fail the One Who has given me so much."

The door to the secret room suddenly burst open. The two men turned at the same instant and were both shocked to see Jerome standing there. Elmo could hardly believe his eyes. "Jerome!" he exclaimed. "How good it is to see you!"

Adrian was suspicious, but managed to grunt a greeting.

"What have you come for?" Elmo asked. "Tell us what has happened."

"I just came to see how you are doing, Father. I

have been worried about you," he said meekly.

"And I no less about you, Jerome."

Adrian felt rather out of place, and excused himself to tell Lydia that Jerome was back.

Jerome continued talking. "Father, I sure have been enjoying myself, just like I wanted to."

"I see," Elmo answered somewhat sadly, trying to sound interested despite his disappointment.

"I've been staying with Chloe, and learning to fight from one of Marcellus' bodyguards. He says I'm doing very well, and that I'm a fast learner. I've been going to parties every night, and am gaining respect and popularity."

Elmo listened quietly, not wanting to dampen his son's enthusiasm. Finally Jerome asked, "Have you heard anything more of our family?"

Elmo looked distraught, and answered in a broken voice, "Yes. They and the others are to face the lions in the arena within a few days."

Jerome's face became downcast as Elmo continued speaking. "Jerome, would you do one thing for me? I cannot leave this place, it is too dangerous. But can you get into the jail and see my children—your brothers and sisters? Give them my love, and tell them not to lose hope. Tell them that they must always remember what Jesus said, that if they persecuted Him, they would also persecute us. But tell them that Jesus has promised that He is with us always, even unto the end of the world, and that we shall receive an hundredfold in the life to come. Remind them that whosoever believeth in Him shall never die. Please, Jerome, will you tell them that? And ..." Elmo looked away as tears welled up in his eyes, "tell them goodbye for me."

Jerome could hardly look into his father's face as tears rolled down his cheeks, but he managed to promise that he would do what he could.

Jerome left the cave and found Lydia waiting for him. “Jerome,” she said in a straight voice, “I want to apologize for the way I acted the last time I saw you. It wasn’t very Christian of me. I didn’t mean to hurt or upset you in any way. It is just that I was concerned about you.”

“Oh, that’s fine, Lydia. You know ...” Jerome wanted to continue talking with Lydia but she obviously wasn’t in the mood for it. All she had needed to hear was that Jerome had forgiven her. Then she turned, and swiftly walked off. Jerome didn’t know if he had offended her or if she was just busy. Whatever the case, he somehow needed to get into the jail, and he would probably need Chloe’s help.

It wasn’t long before Jerome found Chloe again. They had become good friends by now, though Jerome still liked Lydia better, and hadn’t hesitated to make that clear to Chloe.

As soon as Chloe saw him, she said, “Jerome, where on earth have you been? I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Chloe, I need your help. Can you get into the jail where the Christians are kept?”

“I can go anywhere I want. But to see Christians? How unromantic. Why would you want to go there?”

“I just found out that one of my friends is a Christian, and that he has been taken away.”

“So? Why even bother?” she answered with a look of disgust on her face.

“Because he’s a friend,” Jerome replied, feeling a little uncomfortable, as he always did when Chloe was so blatant about her disdain for Christians. “Wouldn’t you do the same for your friends?”

“Oh, all right then. Come on, let’s go.”

As they headed to the palace prison, Chloe began to ask Jerome questions. “So, what do you think of Christianity?”

Jerome hesitated, not quite knowing what to say. “I don’t think about it much. I guess it’s all right. ...It has good morals, and seems pretty easy to live up to, providing one’s not living in Rome,” he finally muttered.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met any Christians, so I don’t know much about them. My father tells me that they follow some strange teachings that don’t make any sense.”

“Shows how much he knows,” Jerome retorted.

“Jerome, are you a Christian? My father says that your father is a Christian leader, and they’ve been trying to find him, but that even Elmo’s servant, who is helping my father in his search, doesn’t know where he is now.”

Clyde? Jerome thought, looking at Chloe with astonishment.

“Well, here we are now,” she suddenly said, not even noticing that Jerome had not yet answered her question.

Jerome and Chloe walked over to the main guard. After using much manipulation*, Chloe managed to persuade the guard to let them in.

Soon they reached the hall that led to the large room where the Christians were being held.

“You can stay outside, Chloe. I’ll go in alone,” Jerome told Chloe.

“But I’d like to see your friend—I wouldn’t mind meeting a real Christian.”

“Well, just let me talk to him first, and then you can come in.”

By the time Jerome reached the front bars, word had been passed around that someone was there to see Elmo’s children, and Jerome’s brothers and sisters eagerly came to the front, where they tearfully greeted their brother through the iron bars. It was a painful moment, but Jerome passed on

Elmo's message. His brothers and sisters, in turn, gave Jerome words of love and encouragement to pass on to their father.

"Tell him that we are fine and well, and in the care of the Lord, and the loving brethren who are imprisoned here with us," they said. Jerome was deeply touched by their words of faith, and couldn't hold back his own tears.

Then Jerome got one of his brothers to act as his friend so that Chloe could come and meet him. But they did not have long before the guard told them to move along.

"You've been here long enough," he ordered gruffly, and with that, Jerome, sorely shaken, left the room, following close behind Chloe, who had grown uncharacteristically quiet, and seemed all too eager to leave.



As soon as he could, Jerome made his way back to Adrian's house. He had messages to pass on to his father, and he also desperately wanted to see Lydia again.

Jerome soon found out, however, that Lydia was not there, and no one seemed to know where she was.

Just as Jerome was heading to the secret entrance by the pond, Adrian met up with him. "No, don't go down there!"

"Why not? I have a message for my father."

"Marcellus and his men will be here any moment to take me. And besides," Adrian said, shifting his gaze away from Jerome, "your father is not there anymore."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. He left, along with Lydia."

But Adrian did know. In fact, he had arranged another place of refuge, and Lydia was at that very

moment taking Elmo there. Claudia refused to leave the house, but insisted on staying with Adrian for as long as she possibly could. Elmo had instructed Adrian not to tell Jerome of his location. The time had come for Jerome to learn to stand on his own, Elmo had said.

Jerome sat down on the edge of the pond. "But why would father leave so suddenly—and without me?" he thought aloud. He did not have long to wait for the answer.

At that very moment, Marcellus appeared in the doorway, accompanied by two armed guards. Jerome looked questioningly at Adrian, and Adrian answered with a smile, "My time has come, Jerome. I've made my decision."

"Ah, Jerome, we meet again!" Marcellus greeted him. "The whole city's been looking for your father. Perhaps you know where he is?"

"Actually, I don't," Jerome answered glibly. "I've been trying to find him myself."

"Ah, but Chloe told me you came here looking for Lydia. Have you then found her?"

"Obviously not."

"So is it perhaps that Lydia knows where your father is? If she does, she could of course tell you!"

"Why makes you think Lydia knows where my father is?"

"Come on, Jerome. We all know she's a Christian. In fact, we know you are, too, but my daughter seems attracted to you—I have no idea why—and for her sake, I will not harm you—just yet. But watch yourself, young man. Your day will come soon enough. I can assure you of that!"

As Marcellus led Adrian out the door, followed by the two guards, Jerome suddenly realized that Adrian would not be coming back. He also realized the very precarious situation he was now in himself.

Disappointed and frustrated, Jerome sat down and thought about his life. *My father is hidden away, probably in some little hole. Lydia is gone—although she probably wouldn't speak to me if she was here anyway. Adrian is going off to prison, and I am left by myself.*

Claudia rushed up to Jerome. She had tears in her eyes. "Adrian ... my husband ... they've taken him. Oh, what shall I do?"

Jerome was too depressed to answer, so they both just sat there.

After a long silence, Claudia spoke. "Jerome, please stay here. I don't think I could stand to be left alone at a time like this."

"Yes, I'll stay." Jerome felt good being around another Christian for a change.



The trip to the imperial palace had never seemed so long to Adrian. He remained silent the entire time, despite Marcellus' taunting. He was worried, and didn't know what he would say. Almost as soon as they had arrived, they were admitted into the emperor's presence.

"Ah, my good Senator Adrian, it's been a long while, hasn't it?"

Adrian bowed respectfully. "Yes, it has, your excellency."

"Adrian, I have heard troubling rumors about you, so I brought you here to confirm that they are lies."

Nero, whose main motive for persecuting Christians was one of convenience rather than of hate, was not eager to condemn a member of the senate. He was sincerely hoping that the rumors of Adrian's conversion had been false, and that Adrian would declare his innocence, and affirm his loyalty to the emperor and the gods of Rome. However, if he did not, Nero would have no

choice but to condemn him for treason according to his own decree.

Adrian looked around the room. It was filled with counselors and nobles. *They look like they are ready to believe anything. If I deny being a Christian, they would likely take my word for it, Adrian thought, but then quickly pushed the thought away. No, I cannot do that. How can I turn my back on the One Who has done so much for me? I would never be able to live with myself.*

He was jolted from his thoughts by Nero's distinctive voice. "So, Adrian, it has been said that you are part of this subversive sect of rabble who call themselves Christians. Is this true?"

After a moment of silence, Adrian finally and solemnly answered, "It is."

Some of the counselors winced, and others shook their heads. Nero rose to his feet, and flew into an angry rage. "After all I've done for you! How can you do this to me? You, Adrian, whom I have showered with gifts and praise, money, slaves, and position. Is this how you repay my kindness?—With treachery?"

Nero slumped back down into his throne, and stared at Adrian in disbelief. "Do you have nothing to say to me?"

"Nothing that you would want to hear, Nero. I mean no treason toward you, and I have always considered myself a loyal citizen of Rome. But I cannot deny that I am a Christian. All you have given me, Nero, I gladly renounce for the One Who gave His life for me. I only wish you could understand, and come to know this love too."

Nero's face grew as hard as it was indifferent. "Are you trying to make a Christian out of me, Adrian? ... I hear you Christians believe in a better life after this one. No, Adrian, I shall make a better Christian out of you. I hereby sentence you to die

with your people. Now go!! Get out of my presence! You are a disgrace to the Roman Empire. By the gods, let me never see your face again!"

The guards then led Adrian away to the prison where the Christians were kept, and threw him in with all the others.



Elmo and Lydia were far from the city now. They had left early in the morning to a small and distant villa in the country. Adrian had only acquired it recently, and had told no one about it, until now. Since Adrian knew he would most likely not be returning, he had told Lydia where it was, and that they would be safe there. It was not without many tears that Lydia had said goodbye to her father.

As distressed as Lydia was, Elmo managed to keep her mind both occupied and distracted by his conversation. Elmo told Lydia all about their life, how Jerome had been brought up, and how they had lost all they had. Finally Lydia realized what Jerome was going through, and by the time they reached the villa, Lydia felt like she could understand Jerome a lot better. "I've been so unwise," she said. "I never once put myself in his place or tried to understand him."

"It's not your fault," Elmo said in an attempt to encourage her. "You didn't know; in fact, there is much that he still does not know."

Lydia was silent. *I hope I didn't hurt him*, she thought. She wished she could go back and talk with Jerome, but she knew that wasn't possible. "He must be so alone and lost without you to counsel with," she finally said.

"He needs to learn," Elmo answered. "Besides, he's getting a taste of what he's always wanted to experience. He has no one to blame but himself if he's miserable."

Lydia agreed, and decided it wouldn't do any good to worry or to condemn herself.

"I will write a letter to Jerome," Elmo said. "I have much to tell him, and I do not know when I shall see him again. Can you write, Lydia?"

"I will write as you speak."

"To my blessed son, Jerome. How I miss you. I often think back to the fun that we used to have together. Being away from you, and not knowing when or if I will ever see you again, has caused me to think about you a great deal, to reflect on the times we spent together, and on the past. It seems that God has willed that we be separated for a time, and I pray that He will keep you safe in His hands. I am sorry that you could no longer stay with me, and I'm sorry if I have made life difficult for you in any way. I tried to do what was best.

"I guess I just did not understand you, or make enough effort to. I know that you have reasons for what you have chosen to do, reasons that may seem legitimate to you. I am sorry that you feel I have not been the father that you needed, especially after the loss of your mother. I know she meant a lot to you, as she did to me.

"There is something I must tell you, Jerome. I have not spoken of this to you before, and I hope you will understand why. But now that I do not know if or when I will see you again, I feel that the time has come for me to tell you what really happened.

"You know your mother was a very beautiful woman; she was desired by many. It is still a wonder to me that I had the privilege to call her my wife, and to care for her. Marcellus and I were boyhood friends; we liked the same things, so it was no surprise that we liked the same

girl. It became a game for us to see who would get her attention.

“But the game abruptly ended when she consented to marry me. Marcellus was furious, and refused to talk to me after that. Of course, he did not keep that promise, but after that day we were never more friends. Marcellus swore that he would take revenge one day.

“Years passed, and there was constant competition between us to see who would gain the most power, respect, and influence. Then came the fateful day that Marcellus discovered we were meeting with the Christians. He then had a legitimate reason to remove us from our position. I was banished from the Senate, and my rank, salary and properties were taken away. Well, you know what happened after that. We rebuilt our lives as well as we could, and as the years passed, most people forgot about us, and the whole incident.

“As we struggled to get back on our feet and to survive, we never heard from Marcellus, so I figured that he had forgotten about us as well. I was wrong. I did not know that his desire for revenge ran as deep as it did. One day I came home and discovered your mother was gone. Marcellus had finally gotten the revenge he most wanted to take, and it dawned on me that I would never see my beloved wife again.

“The truth is, your mother did not die of sickness. Marcellus had persuaded the emperor to declare her the daughter of a slave. As such, she became the property of the state, and the emperor could do with her as he pleased. I was never allowed to find out what became of her, and I never did. But I knew that you children would not understand this, or why I could do

nothing about it. You see, Marcellus was a powerful man by this time, and somehow he also knew all about our dealings with the Christians. He warned me that if I tried to take any action against him, many would suffer—and you, my dear children, would have been taken away from me.

“I am telling you all this, my son, so that you may know the truth of what happened. Yet I am trusting you to act as a Christian would, and to trust that God has had His hand upon all these things, even though we may not understand why. I pray that God will lead you, my son, and my thoughts will always be with you. With love, your father, Elmo.”



A year had now gone by since the time Elmo and Lydia had left the city. Adrian, along with many other Christians, had been sent to the lions—to meet their fate, as some put it, or their glory, as others said. As time went on, more Christians continued to be found and condemned, the persecution perpetuated more by the bloodlust of the Roman nobility than by their crazed and self-absorbed emperor. People from all over Rome, and other cities as well, would flock to the grandstands to see these gruesome events take place.

Elmo and Lydia stayed in the country. They were soon joined by other Christians seeking refuge. They would gather once a week for prayer and fellowship. Many of these persecuted Christians would stay within their homes for days, and sometimes weeks at a time, trying to hide from the emperor's rampage against them. Elmo kept a very low profile, and very rarely ventured out of their town, in order to keep his whereabouts unknown to Marcellus' spies.

The persecution in Rome soon became too much for Jerome. He wished to leave the city and travel around, seeking adventure. He was still interested in learning to fight. Since their house had lost their title of Roman nobility, he had missed out on the military training that he otherwise would have received. He traveled south to Naples, where he enrolled in a school for gladiators. Here he was taught to fight; and as he had no money, he worked for the school to cover his lessons. He never received the letter from his father, as by the time Lydia came back to Rome, Jerome had already left, and Claudia did not know where he had gone. She did not want to ask Chloe, or go anywhere near Marcellus' household, for that matter.

As time went by, a change began to come over Chloe. Seeing the way Christians cheerfully accepted their cruel fate, singing in the face of death, and smiling through the flames of agony, her heart was filled with awe and wonder at the courage and spirit of the Christians. Eventually she left her old friends, and desperately sought out, and then joined the Christians. She did her best to stay undercover, but she knew that sooner or later, her father, who most zealously despised Christians, would find out, and that day would not be a pleasant one.

She often thought of Jerome, who hadn't communicated with her since leaving Rome. She missed him and wished to see him again, wanting him to know of her newfound faith.

But Jerome wasn't eager to return. He enjoyed his life. He loved learning to fight, and to let all his emotions out in the clashing of his sword. Then one day, Jerome bumped into some merchants from Rome who were passing through the city he was in. Interested, he joined them in conversation,

eager to hear whatever news he could. "So, what is happening back home?" Jerome inquired.

"Still the same—Christians, Christians, Christians. They cause all the trouble. And if you're not a Christian, or following one around as an informer for that Marcellus guy, you live in fear, hoping that no one would be stupid enough to think that you're a Christian. Rome is a dreadful place to be right now, I tell you."

"And what of Marcellus' family?" Jerome was curious about what had become of Chloe.

"Busy as ever, hunting down the Christians, paying good money to those who betray them, and getting extra commissions from the emperor for the task. He's in a lucrative business, and he spares no one. In fact, I heard a rumor that he has even imprisoned his own daughter. People were saying that she converted to the Christian faith."

Jerome didn't hear anything else the man said after that. He became lost in his own thoughts, which seemed to be racing faster than they ever had, as he once again faced a past he had been trying to forget. *Chloe, a Christian? Can it be true? I mean, she did seem somewhat interested, but to actually defy her father, I don't think so. But what if she did? Would Marcellus condemn his own daughter?*

As for himself, he never spoke of his Christian heritage, and he gave no reason for anyone to believe that he was one himself. Jerome felt as if he'd turned his back on God. He wondered what his father would think of him now, although he was pretty sure that he would be disappointed.

His heart was filled with longing. He had to return to Rome. He had to find his father—and Lydia. Surely they would be able to tell him what he could do—and this time, he would listen. Jerome was beginning to understand what Lydia had meant

when she had spoken of her life, and how she had wished for something more.

Learning to fight had been fun at first, and Jerome proved to be an apt student who learned quickly, and earned the respect of the teachers as well as the attention of many young ladies. He had also earned a good bit of money by betting with his friends at the gladiator fights they would often go to watch. But he soon began to see the futility of it all. He had seen more than one of his friends seriously maimed in training sessions that were only meant to be for sport. With time, he became disgusted at this form of “entertainment” that served only to satisfy the crowd’s seemingly endless lust for blood and gore.

He thought back over the past year. He had enjoyed himself somewhat, but he also knew that something had been missing, although he couldn’t quite grasp what it was. He had many so-called friends, he was popular among the girls, he was smart and had everything he needed, but still he wasn’t happy. Even his comparative riches meant nothing to him now. All he wanted was to be truly happy. Jerome wanted to love, and wished for someone to love him regardless of whether he was rich or popular or not.



Finally deciding that his life was in need of a change of some kind, Jerome returned to Rome. The first place he went to was the house of Claudia, who lived there alone since Adrian’s death. Marcellus seemed content to leave her alone with the memories of her dead husband. The shock that showed on Claudia’s face when she saw Jerome was so great that Jerome wondered if he had done something wrong.

“I’m sorry,” Jerome said, advancing towards her, “was it wrong of me to come?”

“Oh no, Jerome, it ... it’s just been so long. I didn’t expect to see you again. Oh yes, there is a letter here for you, from your father. It has been here nearly a year now, but we could never find you.”

They both walked into the dining room, and Jerome sat down while Claudia went to get the letter. When she returned Jerome asked, “What news is there of my father?”

“He has not been back here since you left, but I hear from Lydia that he is well and prospering.”

“Lydia? Is she here?” Jerome asked, immediately interested.

“No. She’s with your father. But she sometimes comes to see me, although I never know when, or for how long. If you are planning to stay for awhile, perhaps you will meet her.”

Jerome broke the seal off the letter and began to read. His eyes soon widened in horror. “Marcellus!” he whispered, “So it *is* you who ruined my life. Why ... why do you have to be involved in everyone’s life?”

Claudia knew what the letter said, and could see the anger rising in Jerome’s face. She prayed he would not take it upon himself to do anything. “What will you do?” she asked.

“I must see my father—before I do something wrong,” Jerome said. He was in shock, and his first impulse was to kill Marcellus, although common sense—rather than Christian values—told him that this would be futile. Besides, Marcellus was too well guarded, and not one to be caught unawares.

Claudia tried to change the subject, “So Jerome, tell me, what has become of you? You seem to have changed a lot. What of your Christian life?”

“I am a Christian, Claudia, but I’m afraid I may not be such a good one.”

"Don't say that, Jerome. What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't think God would approve of my way of life. I know I've displeased my father by what I've done, and I fear that I have displeased God as well."

"Don't worry Jerome," she tried to comfort him. It was easy to see that a lot was on his mind. "Nothing is too bad to be forgiven, if you are willing to accept Jesus' forgiveness."

Jerome fell silent for a moment, thinking about what Claudia had just said. Suddenly he remembered Chloe. "What about Chloe? What has become of her?"

"Oh yes, Chloe!" Claudia repeated. "I think you should go see her, Jerome."

"What has happened? Is she in trouble?" he asked, noting the quiver in her voice.

"She has become a Christian."

"So ... ?"

"She is in prison, Jerome. She has been sentenced to death."

Jerome's mouth dropped open at this news, and for a moment he could not think. "But ... Marcellus would do something like that?" he asked.

"Obviously! He refuses to talk to her, and has now become even more enraged and ruthless in his attempts to find and kill any Christian that he can!"

"But Chloe ... how did Chloe.... I have to see her. I need to find out what happened."

"Go to her, Jerome. But be careful. If Marcellus sees you or discovers you are here, he will certainly not spare you."



Jerome made it into the prison without much difficulty. The guard agreed to let him say his last good-byes, as the Christians were to be thrown to the lions that night. It was not difficult to find Chloe.

She had been placed in a cell on her own, and she sat slouched on the floor. "Chloe! Is it really you? What happened?"

Chloe jumped up, startled by his familiar voice. No one else had come to visit her, and in an instant she was on her feet. "Jerome, oh Jerome, God has answered my prayers and allowed me to see you before I die."

Jerome put his hands through the bars to take hold of Chloe's. "Oh Chloe, tell me what happened."

"I have become a Christian, Jerome, like you. After you left, and I saw your friends—your Christian friends—so boldly accepting their fate, choosing to suffer affliction rather than to turn their back on the Savior, I started thinking about my life, too. I wanted to know more about you Christians. I wanted to see what it was that made you like Lydia more than me. I saw that she had an inner beauty which far outweighed what I merely had on the surface. I wanted that same beauty, not only because I wanted you to like me, but because I saw it was worth more than all the riches in the world. So I looked for the Christians, although they were difficult to find. Those I tried to talk to feared I was an informer, and never told me anything.

"One day I saw Lydia at the marketplace, where I first met you, and I went over to her. I told her how I felt, and she believed me. Soon after, she led me to the catacombs, where the Christians have been hiding out. I began meeting with them regularly and my heart began to change.

"Then, not too long ago, my father asked me to help him in his hunt for Christians. He said that, with my beauty, I could attract the young men and lure them into telling me things. I refused. I could not betray those I loved, and those who had given me something to live for. This infuriated

my father, and he accused me of being a Christian. I did not deny the allegations, and that made my father even more upset. I have been here nearly a week now. You are the first person that has come to see me—and you will probably be the last, for tonight I will meet my Savior.”

Jerome was disgusted by Marcellus, and this made him hate him all the more. He had abandoned his own daughter and condemned her to death. After a long moment of silence, and with tears in his eyes, Jerome said, “Chloe, I must find my father. It is important that I see him.”

“I don’t know where he is, but I do know someone that might be able to help you.” Chloe gave him some instructions. He was to sit at a certain street corner, and whenever someone passed by, he was to draw the symbol of a fish in the sand. “If someone stops and draws a fish in front of you, too,” she said, “follow them. They will stop when it is safe, and ask you in whose name you come. Say then that I have sent you, and ask for a man named Simon. He knows where your father lives, and they can take you there.”

“Thank you, Chloe. You don’t know how much this means to me.” Jerome paused for a moment and then added, “Chloe, I must confess, I never expected that the Christian life would appeal to you, much less that you would choose to die for it. I cannot deny that it has changed you for the better. I ... I will miss you.”

“Thank you, Jerome, and goodbye. Please give my love to Simon and all my friends there. Tell them that I am well, and that they should not fear for me. Tell them to keep the faith.” A few tears rolled down Chloe’s white cheeks, but her smile and peaceful expression reflected her undying faith in her newfound God.

Jerome nodded, and walked away, awed at the change that had come over Chloe. He was encouraged that, if she could change, then surely he could too, and now, he finally wanted to.



The torches marking the perimeter of the arena were ablaze, and the grandstands were packed. The crowd had already begun heartlessly chanting, “Christians! Bring out the Christians!”

Marcellus stood behind a curtain with Clyde, now his right-hand assistant.

“They are a bloody crowd tonight, Clyde, and we have plenty to satisfy them,” Marcellus remarked.

Clyde nodded in agreement.

Octavia, his wife, came running in. “Marcellus, oh Marcellus! Please change your mind. Don’t let our only daughter die!”

“Justice must be served,” came his lone and cold reply. *I must harden myself*, he thought, *If the emperor sees that I can kill anybody, even my own daughter, without flinching, he will surely be pleased with me, and my loyalty to his empire.*

Octavia stood by and wept, but nothing she could do would change Marcellus’ mind.

The trumpets sounded, and Nero arrived. In a moment Nero’s order echoed across the field. “Bring out the Christians—that they may die.”

A large gate opened, revealing a band of Christians standing upright.

Nero had heard that Marcellus’ daughter was among the Christians who were to be killed that day, and he intently eyed both Marcellus and Octavia, to see if either of them would show any emotion at the fact that their daughter was about to die. Octavia looked greatly distressed, but the unfeeling stare on Marcellus’ face frightened even Nero.

“Such a man could be dangerous,” Nero whispered to the praetorian prefect standing next to him. “If he is willing to renounce his own flesh and blood, what regard could he hold for me?”

“I shall watch him closely,” the prefect answered. “He is a powerful man, but he does not have the making of an emperor. I would not think him any threat to you.”

“Still,” Nero answered, “I do not trust him.”

As the Christians calmly walked towards the center of the ring, the roar of lions could be heard echoing from underneath the walls that surrounded the arena. Octavia could stand the sight no longer. She walked away, and Marcellus turned to watch her leave, until suddenly his attention was riveted back to the arena. A familiar voice rang out from the group of Christians.

“Romans! Nobles! All of you waiting for us to die, I want to say something. I am Chloe, the daughter of Marcellus and Octavia. It may surprise some of you that I am here. I want to tell you that these Christians are not the criminals that my father, and Rome, have made them out to be. They are the best people I have ever had the privilege of knowing. Yes, I too have become a Christian. I have learned to truly love, even those who have hurt me. I have learned to forgive and to be forgiven. I have a meaning and purpose in life that goes beyond the emptiness of endless parties and pleasures. I have found a life worth living, and dying for.

“There is more to life than Rome! There is Someone Who can fill the emptiness of soul that I know you feel. I was once one of you, and I felt that emptiness too. I am not ashamed to be called a Christian. I am not ashamed of Jesus, the One Who lived and died for me, for you—yes, each one of us—because He loves us.”

As Chloe continued talking, Marcellus listened, partly in hate and partly in admiration, until Nero’s command rang across the arena: “Release the lions!”

The gates were opened, and the sound of the roaring lions made Chloe’s voice inaudible, but she continued to speak—until she was dragged away by one of the lions to meet her death, and her reward.



Jerome sat on a small, wooden bench in a poverty-stricken area of the city. There was hardly anyone in sight, and everything was still. Every time someone walked by him, Jerome used the staff in his hand to draw the image of a fish in the dirt, as Chloe had instructed him. After a couple of hours of sitting there, two men rushed by, carrying baskets on their shoulders. Jerome drew a fish as usual, but they didn’t stop.

Within minutes, however, one of the men walked past again, and looked down at the ground, where Jerome was running his feet across the sand, erasing the fish he had just drawn.

Jerome looked up to see the man walk on further. As he watched, the man turned around again, and headed back to where Jerome was sitting. The man stopped in front of Jerome, and then bent over as if to hand him something. When he walked on, Jerome noticed that the man had drawn a fish in the sand with his foot.

He instantly stood up, and followed the man.

When they had rounded a corner, the man turned around, seeing that Jerome had indeed followed him.

“In whose name do you come?” the man asked.

“I come in the name of Chloe, who told me to seek the man called Simon.”

"Very well! Follow me," the man answered kindly. The man joined his friend, who had been waiting around another corner. The two walked on and Jerome followed closely behind. They soon arrived at the mouth of the catacombs and went inside.

Jerome had heard that the Christians now hid in the catacombs, a vast network of tombs and hallways that stretched underneath the city, but he had never been inside of them. The air was thick and heavy and the passageways were narrow. The man led Jerome through a maze of dark tunnels before they reached their final destination.

At long last, they entered into a small candle-lit room, where a group of Christians were gathered. They were silently praying. As the men drew near, the crowd looked up and greeted them. Their looks, however, changed to ones of suspicion when they saw the newcomer. The two men nodded to a man at the end of the room, who stood up, and walked over to see them.

"Are you the man named Simon?" Jerome asked him.

"I am," he answered calmly, with a questioning look on his face.

"What business do you have here, and how do you know my name?" Simon asked him.

"I was told to find you by a friend of mine, Chloe. She said you could help me."

"Me?—Help you?" the older man chuckled. "My good friend, what could you need my help with?"

Jerome didn't laugh, although he realized that it looked odd for a man as strong as himself to be asking for help from Simon, who was not only much smaller in build, but skinny as well.

"I'm sorry. I haven't even introduced myself. My name is Jerome, the son of Elmo. I have been away from Rome for the past year. But I have now

returned to seek my father. Chloe told me that you would know where he is."

"Jerome! Ah yes, I have heard of you, and I do know your father, and where he is. In fact, I am going there tonight, and would be pleased to have your company."



Jerome and Simon waited until after dark before they set off on their journey. They again went through a maze of tunnels, but Jerome was unable to tell whether it was the same route he had taken, or an entirely different one. They emerged from a hole at the outer edge of the city. From there, they walked along a road leading away from the city.

Simon was curious as to what had kept Jerome away from his father all this time, and so Jerome told him the whole story.

"Your father is very concerned about you," Simon said to Jerome. "He prays for you often."

As they went on further, Jerome grew silent. He wondered what his father would say to him and if he would be happy to see him again.

It was still dark when they arrived at a fairly large villa, and by the sparse light of the moon, it appeared beautiful and well-kept. Stunned, Jerome asked, "My father stays here?"

Simon only nodded, but motioned for Jerome to remain silent. It seemed something was wrong. Jerome looked around, but saw nothing suspicious. He cast a questioning look at Simon.

"Something's not right," Simon whispered, as they came around to the main entrance. "The house seems deserted. There is always at least one person on watch, and a fire going here. It's unusually quiet."

As Simon thought, they did find the house deserted—and locked up. There was nothing they

could do but find shelter for the night. They headed for a nearby inn, a place that Simon knew well, where Christians would secretly meet each other to be brought to the villa. There they found a bed for the night, and also discovered what had happened to “the nobleman and his young lady” at the villa. Word had it that the old nobleman was a fugitive from justice, and that one of his old servants had recognized him and turned him in. They had been taken away by soldiers under Marcellus’ command, and were to be tried and condemned as Christians.

“That evil Clyde,” Jerome muttered to Simon once they were in their room. “He’s not going to stop me from seeing my father. Tomorrow I will return to the city and seek them out in every dungeon if I have to!”



By first light of the sun, Jerome was on his way. He had said goodbye to Simon, who returned to the catacombs by another route to share the sad news with the other Christians, and to enjoin them to pray for Elmo and Lydia, and any others who had been taken captive.

Once in Rome, Jerome wasted no time in trying to find his father. He headed straight for the jail where Christians were kept.

“I have come to see Elmo, the Christian,” he told the guard authoritatively. “Where is he?”

Before the guard could answer, another man stepped into the hall from an adjacent room. “Ah, Jerome. I had heard you were in town. We’ve been expecting you!”

“Clyde!” Jerome exclaimed, as he recognized—and at the same time did not recognize—the man who now stood before him. “How could you ... What have you done with my father? And where is Lydia?” he demanded angrily.

“Oh, they are well enough. In fact, I have been given the privilege of escorting you directly to them!” Clyde grabbed his arm, and led him down the hall, motioning the guard to follow them.

As they approached a small cell at the end of the hall, Jerome recognized his father and Lydia. He wrenched himself free from Clyde’s grasp, and ran over to them, reaching his hands through the bars to touch them.

“Jerome!” his father cried. “I thought I would never see you again. But you have come back, you have come back!” Tears welled up in his father’s eyes, and Jerome could scarcely contain his own.

“I have so much to say to you, Father. So much has changed ... ”

Jerome suddenly felt his arm locked back in Clyde’s strong grasp. The soldier unlocked the iron gate, and Jerome was pushed inside. “There, now you’ll have plenty of time to talk ... at least for awhile!” Clyde sneered. The soldier locked the door, and the three were left to themselves.

Jerome flung his arms around his father, and they held each other for a moment. Then Elmo took a step back to look at Jerome.

“You surely have changed, son. There is no mistaking that. The Lord told me that you would come back a wiser man, and I can see in your eyes that this promise has been fulfilled.”

Jerome looked deeply into his father’s eyes. They were still the same loving eyes which he remembered. “You mean, you’re not angry that I left you?”

“How could I be, when I know that in all this, God has had His hand upon your life? No, Jerome, I am not angry. I am sorry—sorry for how difficult it has been for you, and sorry for the way I acted towards you. I could have been more understanding

of you. I know that now. I have learned much this past year, and have changed a great deal. I only wish we would have had more time to get to know each other. But whatever happens, Jerome, know that I dearly love you, and always have. God works in mysterious ways, and who knows but that all this was a part of His divine plan.”

“And this,” Jerome said, looking around, “you being in prison ... is that part of His plan too?”

“Take heart, my son, and be strong. Remember all that your mother and I have taught you. God will take care of us. ‘Fear not them which kill the body,’ Jesus told us, ‘for after that, there is nothing more that they can do.’”

“Oh, Jerome,” Lydia burst out, not able to contain herself any longer. She flung herself into his strong arms, and looked up into his eyes. They were locked in each other’s embrace for what seemed like an eternity. Finally Jerome loosened his grasp, and held her head in his hands.

“I’ve waited for this moment a long time.” Slowly their lips came closer, and finally met in a moment of passion. They kissed in ardent abandon, oblivious to the world around them.

They were suddenly interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. Jerome looked up, a bit embarrassed when he realized that his father had been standing right there watching him.

Within a few moments, Marcellus stood in front of them, Clyde behind him. “Ah, so, the young gladiator has returned!” he taunted. Jerome looked down at the ground.

“Leave my son alone,” Elmo protested. “He has done nothing against you.”

“Oh, but to the contrary,” he replied, as his anger was beginning to mount by the moment. “It was he that turned my daughter into a

traitorous Christian!” By the end of that sentence, he had flown into a rage. Lydia hid her face in Jerome’s chest, who held his arms tightly around her, as if seeking to shield her from the wrath that filled the room as the echoes of Marcellus’ outburst resonated through the hall. Even Clyde took a step back from the forceful, though sparsely built and delicately dressed man.

Marcellus then paused for a moment, his cold eyes looking first at Elmo, then at Jerome, and then at Lydia. “Keep them here until I tell you what is to be done with them. The others can be taken away.” With that, Marcellus left the room, Clyde following behind him.



A week passed, and the three were still locked up in their spartan cell. Jerome couldn’t help but wonder if his trip back to Rome had been a mistake. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. But Jerome was now much more humble. He was now willing to listen to what his father had to say. He only wished he had listened to him more before. Now, in this trying and uncertain situation, his father’s peace and trust meant more to him than he had ever thought it would. Jerome now found great comfort in his father’s words.

“Father, there must be something we can do,” he said at length.

“No, Jerome, I’m afraid not.”

“But why do you think they haven’t said anything to us? If they wanted to kill us, why is it taking so long?”

“I don’t know, Jerome. But all things are in the Lord’s hands. We should trust that He knows what is happening, even if we don’t.”

At that moment a couple of guards came over. “Which of you is the man called Jerome? You have

been summoned to appear before the emperor.”

Jerome had a questioning look on his face, but Elmo motioned for him to go with the guards.

Jerome stepped out into the hall. “May God be with you, son!” Elmo called after him. The sound of their footsteps faded into the darkness, and then all was silent once again. Lydia let out a sob, “Oh Elmo, what are they going to do to him?”

“I don’t know, Lydia. I don’t know,” he softly whispered.

The soldiers led Jerome into a large hall, where they waited, not saying a word. After a few moments a door opened, and a voice decreed that the prisoner Jerome was to be brought forth. Jerome looked at the two soldiers, who were standing on either side of him. One of them motioned for him to walk forward, and he did. He was soon standing in front of the emperor himself.

Jerome bowed in respect—he did not know what else to do—and then looked up at where Nero was seated.

“Jerome, I hear you are a Christian. Am I correct?” Nero asked coolly.

Jerome looked around the room. Marcellus and Clyde were there, and a roomful of others whom he took no notice of. Jerome looked boldly and directly into the emperor’s eyes. “Yes,” was his reply.

“And yet I hear that you have also trained to become a gladiator?”

“Yes,” came the monosyllabic reply again.

“A Christian who would fight to kill!” Nero mocked, as a small laugh erupted from those present. “And are you aware of what happens to those who profess to be Christians?”

“I am.”

“So what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I will say nothing, except that I would rather

die for my faith than to submit to tyrants who profess themselves to be gods.”

Some nobles in the crowd winced in expectation of Nero’s wrathful outburst. Nero, however, remained calm.

“Jerome, Jerome! You are a young man who has his whole life before him still. Why would you throw it away for such a ridiculous reason?”

“You are wrong, Nero! To deny my faith in the only true God, and His Son Who died for me, would be to throw my life away. I am not afraid to die for what I believe.”

“I see. Then this may be your chance. Your father has been sentenced to death, together with a young woman whom, Marcellus tells me, you’ve taken a liking to. And such noble love provides good opportunity for sport, I believe. You are a gladiator and a Christian, so I will give you the opportunity to die the death of both a gladiator and a Christian.

“Seeing that you will not deny your faith, I decree that you be given a worthy opponent to fight in the arena. If you lose, Marcellus has the freedom to decide the fate of both your father and the young lady. And if you win, Jerome, your father and the young lady will be set free, and you can decide a fate for Marcellus such as pleases you. Do you agree?”

Jerome’s stomach tensed as he thought this over. *A chance to get back at Marcellus! How could I turn it down? If I don’t take this chance, I’ll die anyway.*

Marcellus was taken aback for a moment. He had not expected that his own fate would be hanging in the same balances. But Nero now feared and distrusted Marcellus as much as any Christian, and he saw this as a sportive opportunity to pit the two against each other.

“Most certainly,” Jerome finally answered.

"Wonderful," Nero replied gleefully. Marcellus stood up and walked over to Nero, whispering something in his ear. "A wonderful idea!" Nero exclaimed, as his face lit up with a delighted smile. "I decree that the spectacle take place a week from today. Now, you may go."

Jerome walked out the room, hoping he'd made the right decision.



The long awaited day for Marcellus, and the much dreaded day for Jerome, had come. As Jerome entered the arena, where several fights had already taken place, he could see his father and Lydia being led up to the podium, past Marcellus and his wife Octavia, who was still dressed in mourning apparel for her daughter.

Jerome couldn't think about what he was about to do—it made him nervous. After his decision to fight, he had been returned to the prison, where he sought his father's blessing on this endeavor, as well as his counsel on choosing a fate for Marcellus. And now the day had come. He was as prepared as he could be, and he would have to trust God for the rest.

Jerome heard the sound of the trumpet, calling him to come before the emperor. Dressed in a small, flimsy garment that wrapped around his waist, and carrying a sword in his hand, he walked the full length of the arena and stood directly below where the emperor, as well as Marcellus and a few other soldiers and nobles, were seated. His father and Lydia stood a short space behind Nero, unshackled, but guarded. Jerome came and stood boldly before Nero, his wavy black hair glistening in the morning sun.

"Young man," Nero called down to him, "are you sure that you do not want to forsake following such foolish rabble as these Christians, and return to

the comfortable palaces, and the open and forgiving arms of Rome?"

"I have made my decision, and I am ready both to fight and to die for what I know to be the truth!"

"Then turn, and behold your opponent," Nero called out. A second trumpet sounded, and the gate at the other end of the arena opened, revealing a heavily-built, armed man.

"Clyde!" Jerome gasped, his eyes widening in shock.

Nero stood up. "May victory be to the strongest!" With a nod of his head, the battle had begun.

Jerome stood still for a moment, his hands tightening their grip around the hilt of his sword. He checked the straps that held the round shield to his arm, and then walked out to meet Clyde in the middle of the field.

Jerome carefully maneuvered his way around Clyde, striking at him whenever the opportunity arose. It was obvious that Clyde had done a lot of practicing. He deftly used his own shield to defend himself against Jerome's blows. The fighting seemed almost endless as the two men continued to circle each other, first one attacking, and then the other, but neither of them gaining any clear advantage.

It had been Marcellus' idea to pitch Jerome against someone whom he had known so well, and would therefore hopefully have more difficulty killing. Although Clyde was not an experienced fighter, neither was Jerome. Marcellus figured that Clyde's size and strength would eventually give him the advantage over Jerome's younger frame.

The contest suddenly took a downward turn, however, when Jerome looked up at his father and Lydia. Lydia's eyes were so full of pity that Jerome could hardly pull himself away from her gaze. Clyde

seized the opportunity, and with one swing of his sword cut a gash in Jerome's leg. Clyde stepped back for a moment, grinning at the sight of the blood that had begun to seep from the wound. Lydia let out a sob and covered her face. A roar of cheer arose from the grandstands, and it only grew louder and louder with each passing moment as the crowds began chanting for blood.

Jerome was stunned. The cut was deep, and he was in danger of losing a lot of blood, as well as his composure. He looked into Clyde's eyes. They were filled with the same hatred that always emanated from Marcellus' eyes. Just the thought of it was enough to give Jerome back the strength he needed. Jerome began to swing his sword furiously, as he limped to the place where Clyde was standing. By a force of sheer determination and supernatural power, Jerome suddenly knocked Clyde's sword right out of his hand, and Clyde fell to the ground.

In an instant, Jerome's sword was at his neck.

The crowd suddenly fell silent. Marcellus rose to his feet in disbelief. Nero looked around at his counselors, who only sat there silently, and Jerome glanced over at him to see what he would do. Nero said nothing, signaling that it was up to the people to decide. "Kill him!" a bloodthirsty voice suddenly rang out from the grandstands, and the rest of the crowd quickly joined the chant. Jerome hesitated for a moment. Despite all that Clyde had done to his family, he did not desire to kill him, yet he had no choice. Sparing him would mean not only his own death, but his father's and Lydia's too. With one thrust of his sword, Jerome sent Clyde to his death, and the crowd let out a great cheer.

Nero stood up and raised his hands in the air. In

an instant, the crowd fell silent. Jerome looked up, and walked over to where the emperor stood.

"It appears that your Christian God has given you the victory this day, young man," Nero said with a note of satisfaction in his voice. "I hope that the fate you have chosen for Marcellus will be equally as amusing! Let the scroll be brought to me."

A guard handed Nero a scroll, which had been given him by Elmo. Nero quickly glanced over it, and then passed it on to the prefect to read in the ears of the people.

"Let it be decreed ..." the prefect paused for a moment, and looked to Nero, as if wondering whether he should continue. Nero's face showed an almost childish expression of disappointment, but he nodded, and the guard continued. "... that Marcellus from henceforth be banished from Roman soil, to live out his life as a fugitive, without a country, without a servant, without a name."

The bloodthirsty crowd was obviously displeased, and a wave of murmurs could be heard echoing over the grandstands.

"But my lord," a voice suddenly sprang up, and Nero turned around to see Octavia rise to her feet.

"Ah, the wife of the poor man has somewhat to say," he acknowledged, motioning for her to speak.

"Only this, my lord," she said in a loud enough voice that all in the grandstands could hear. "The God of the Christians may have smiled on this Christian; but let the gods of Rome deal with the son of Rome. The people should be given a spectacle worthy of such a man, who has provided us such fine spectacles himself!"

With this, the crowds gave another cheer. Nero was not disappointed himself, but was in fact rather gleefully intrigued that this woman spoke such words against her own husband.

"And what sort of spectacle do you suggest?" Nero asked curiously.

"One such as has been written by his own hand," she proclaimed, holding high in her hand the scroll she had taken from Marcellus, who sat stupefied by what was happening. "Justice must be served," she whispered, looking into Marcellus' glassy eyes.

Nero eagerly took the scroll and opened it, his eyes gleaming with delight. He handed it to the guard, who stood again to proclaim the sentence of this man to all the people.

"Let it be decreed—by the gods of Rome—that this man be placed in the arena, alone and unarmored, to be torn apart and trampled upon by a wild bull!"

The crowds cheered again, and then began chanting, "Blood, blood!" but Nero stopped them.

"We shall have to wait until our Christian can witness his glorious victory!" Nero said as he pointed to Jerome, who had been forgotten in the commotion following his victory. He had fallen to the ground from exhaustion and loss of blood.

Elmo and Lydia had already risen, and now that they were at liberty, they rushed down to see Jerome, and commanded some attendants to take him to a nearby room where he could have his wounds tended to.



Hours later, Jerome awoke and, remembering what had happened, his thoughts were immediately occupied with what had become of Marcellus. He sat up, and saw Lydia sitting at the foot of the bed. Suddenly everything else faded into oblivion.

"Oh, Jerome, you're all right. I was so worried about you. How are you feeling?"

He looked down at his bandaged leg, and winced as he tried to move it. "Marcellus! What happened to Marcellus?"

"Nero rejected our choice that he be banished," she replied with no hint of disappointment in her voice. "Marcellus is to be killed, Jerome, condemned to die by his own wife—and according to the judgment written by his own hand intended for your father. Vengeance is of the Lord!"

"But they can't kill him—not yet! I have to find out what he did to my mother—I have to know."

"Don't worry, Jerome, there will be time for that. The execution has been delayed until you are well enough to attend the spectacle. Now, Jerome, relax and try to get some rest."

But Jerome was already sitting up. Nothing would deter him from going to see Marcellus. He was soon making his way to the room where Marcellus was being held.

Marcellus was severely angry. He was punching the walls he was chained to and fiercely kicking his legs like a spoiled child. "Ah, the *killing Christian* is here," Marcellus taunted as Jerome walked into the room. "I thought you would have shown more mercy for an old friend. Otherwise I could easily have fought you myself, and won."

Jerome did not bother to mention the obvious error in the man's statement. Clyde was at least twice the size of Marcellus, and Jerome had beaten him.

Marcellus continued his taunting monologue. "I'll wager you enjoyed that battle, didn't you, even if it was an old friend? See, it's not so difficult to be a tyrant after all, is it?" Marcellus stopped when he realized nothing he said would aggravate Jerome.

Jerome stood there calmly, until Marcellus had made an end of his taunting. "Marcellus, what has become of my mother?"

"As if I would tell you, Jerome." Marcellus cackled with glee, until Jerome grabbed him by his collar and shook him violently.

"Tell me where I can find my mother!" he demanded.

"Really now, Jerome. Have you never learned the art of negotiation? What will you do for me if I tell you?"

"What can I do for you? Your own wife wants you dead."

"So I will die without telling you."

"No, Marcellus, you're wrong. If you don't tell me, I'll have them keep you alive. I'll have you thrown in a dungeon somewhere, and give you barely enough food to survive. Or maybe I'll have you tortured, as you have done to so many of my friends." Jerome tightened his grip on Marcellus' clothes, as he became visibly upset. "Yes, Marcellus, you will tell me—and you will tell me the truth, because until I know for sure what happened to my mother, I will make your life so miserable that you will wish for death, but not find it!"

Jerome let go of Marcellus, who remained silent. Marcellus realized he would not win this time. Had this sudden turn of events only been a strange twist of fate, or was it the hand of a God Whom Jerome had refused to deny? Marcellus said no more. Jerome felt weak from the fight, and the added strain of confronting this heartless soul was almost too much for Jerome. "I'll give you until dawn tomorrow to think about it," Jerome said as he turned to leave. "I will be back!"



The night had passed slowly for Jerome, who fell into a restless sleep, but nevertheless morning had soon come, and Marcellus had given his answer. Ethna, his mother, had been sent to be one of emperor Claudius' concubines, but Marcellus did not know what had become of her when Nero took

to the throne. "You can direct any questions to the head maid. She should be able to tell you more," Marcellus had told Jerome.

Jerome wasted no time in starting his search. He was at a loss as to where to go, but he figured the palace grounds would be a good place to start.

Jerome approached a guard to ask for directions, but the guard didn't seem to know much and so he referred Jerome to another guard, who referred him to another, and on it went.

After much time, Jerome found himself face to face with a very stern-looking man.

"Why have you come here, disturbing the guards of the emperor?" the man gruffly asked him.

"I must speak with the head maid of the concubines," was Jerome's prompt reply.

"I must speak with the head maid of the concubines," the man parroted jokingly, and broke into a laugh. Jerome grinned, but the man's face suddenly grew stern. "Don't waste my time, boy. Be gone, and don't let me see your face again!"

"Wait! Please, sir," he said, a little more respectfully this time. "I'm searching for my mother, and I was told I might find her here."

"Your mother, huh? Ha! There are no mothers here, kid! And even if she was, you would never be allowed to see her—these ladies are for the emperor only."

"Please, sir, at least I'd like to find out if she is here."

The guard thought for a moment, suspiciously eyeing Jerome. "Okay, I'll inform the head maid of your presence. You may wait in the hall, but if I hear of any trouble, it will be your life before mine, understood?"

Jerome nodded, and the man called a guard to escort Jerome to a nearby hall, where he was

again told to wait. Soon a stocky older woman came in. "So, what do you want here, young man?" she asked brusquely. The stern look on her face made Jerome a little nervous.

"I've ... uh ... I've come to see if my mother is here."

"Young man, this is the house of the emperor's women, and you come here to look for a mother?"

"Yes ... Marcellus told me she was here."

"Ah, yes, Marcellus. And what is her name?"

"Ethna."

"Ethna," the lady repeated slowly, as if searching her memory for someone by that name. "Why yes, of course. Ethna, now I remember. Yes, she was here—but that was a long time ago." The woman fell silent for a minute, as if she was thinking back on times long past.

"So are you going to tell me where she is?" Jerome asked impatiently.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she replied. "As I said, it was a long time ago. She is no longer here—she didn't last long here when Nero discovered she was a Christian. But I don't know what became of her."

A young woman came out from a nearby room and whispered something to the older lady. She looked back at Jerome and then said, "I'll see what I can find out for you. Come back tomorrow, early, and we can talk. Just tell the guards that Garlene has sent for you. They'll let you in." The lady got up and turned to leave, but not before drawing a fish in the dirt of a nearby planter.



Jerome arose at the crack of dawn the next morning, and instantly made his way to the palace. Garlene, the woman Jerome had talked with, was waiting for him at the same place they had met the day before.

"You are a Christian too?" Jerome asked.

"Yes, I and many of the girls here. We have to be very careful, though, because there are many who would kill us if they found out, not least of whom the emperor himself. But when you told me you were the son of Ethna, I knew I could trust you. She was a close friend of mine, but she never spoke of any family. It must have been too hard for her. She did tell me about Marcellus, and how it was she got here. Ethna was not the first woman to suffer such cruelty at his hands, and his name is known all too well here. I hope that devil gets what he deserves one of these days."

"That day may now have come. But tell me, what else do you know of my mother?"

"She was a kind and loving woman, and she soon became a favorite of the emperor Claudius. He treated her well. But then Claudius was killed. Nero did not take the same liking to her, but a visiting dignitary from Babylon fancied her, and so Nero gave her as a gift to this man. He took her with him to Babylon, along with her maid-servant. A month later, the servant returned, on Ethna's orders, and has remained here since. I talked with the servant last night, and she gave me this."

Garlene produced a faded leather pouch, inside of which was a piece of parchment with curious writings on it. "Your mother had told the maid-servant that if anyone should ever inquire about her, to give that person this paper. Of course, that was many years ago. I do not know what may have become of her in all this time. But the answers you seek may well be contained here."

Jerome took the pouch solemnly, and thanked Garlene. He could hardly wait to be on his way. Jerome shared the good news, and his plan, with

his father and Lydia. He would travel to Babylon and unravel whatever secret was contained upon this faded piece of parchment.

Hearing that Jerome had now recovered, Nero ordered the spectacle of Marcellus' judgment to take place that day at noon, much to the delight of the Roman public who had eagerly been awaiting the finalé of this bizarre vendetta between these two men. And so it happened that Marcellus found himself alone in the arena, with a raging bull, to meet his fate.

Jerome did not stay to watch the outcome. He knew who would win. He set off for Babylon, leaving the decadent city of Rome behind him.



Babylon was very different from Rome and it took Jerome some time to adjust. This was one place Jerome had never heard much of, and he found himself fascinated by the place and how the people lived. He would show the parchment to passersby, but they only shook their heads. Either they could not read what the message on the paper said, or they did not know what it meant. Jerome had no way of knowing, as many just shrugged their shoulders and walked on.

Finally a simply dressed older man came up to him. "Sir, I can see that you have come from afar. Do you need assistance?"

Thankful to find someone who would stop long enough to talk and who spoke Latin, he replied, "Why yes, I do, in fact. Can you tell me what is written here?" Jerome showed the man the piece of parchment paper.

"I cannot read such things," the man said apologetically, "but I know someone who can—and where you may find the answer you are seeking. Follow me!"

Unsure, but with nothing else to try, Jerome followed the man through an intricate maze of streets, until finally they came to the edge of the city, a short distance from which stood a single, mud-brick house. "This place has the answer I'm looking for?" he questioned unbelievably. The old man simply motioned for Jerome to enter.

It was the house of a soothsayer, and inside, behind an old table, sat a very old woman. "Come in, come in," she grinned, revealing what few teeth she had left. This woman was obviously not very rich. He walked over and sat down on a short bench opposite the lady.

"Ma'am," Jerome spoke, "I'm looking for my mother, she's here somewhere. She gave me a message, it's on this parchment here." He took out the leather pouch, and opened it to reveal the well-preserved slip of parchment. "Your friend told me that it is a riddle. I'll give you money—lots of it—if you can help me decipher the meaning of this message."

"Show me the paper," the lady said solemnly. Jerome handed it to her, and she studied it closely. She closed her eyes, and after a moment's pause slowly began speaking. "Yes, she is here, close by—I can feel her presence." Her look suddenly changed to one of pleasant surprise, although her eyes remained closed. "Was she a queen?"

"No." Jerome shook his head and, impatient to find out what the message said, asked, "So what does the message say?"

The lady opened her eyes and stared at Jerome, long enough to make him feel quite uncomfortable.

"It says, 'I go from whence I came. I do what I know best—with the children.'" Jerome tried to think what that would mean. "How can she go from where she came? That doesn't make sense."

“What did your mother do before she left?” the old lady asked him.

“She was the emperor’s concubine.”

The lady closed her eyes again—perhaps she was thinking, perhaps seeing a vision. She spoke haltingly. “Not a queen ... but still ... could it be ... a palace?”

“A palace!” Jerome echoed as he thought aloud. “From whence I came.’ Yes, that’s it. And ‘with the children’ ... my mother always taught us herself. We had our servants, but she would tutor us. Could it be that she is a tutor ... somewhere in a palace?” Jerome stood up swiftly. “Where can I find the palace?”

The woman gave him directions. It would be at least a day’s journey from there. Jerome thanked the lady and dropped a handful of money in her lap. He was thankful to be able to leave that eerie place, and to have an idea of what he was looking for.



The following afternoon, Jerome arrived at the palace entrance. It was a magnificent structure. Jerome hardly knew where he would start, or even how he could enter. It looked as if he could walk right in, but if anyone stopped him, what would he say? And even if he did get in, how would he know where to search?

Jerome walked up the steps that led into the outer grounds of the palace compound. A couple of guards came over, obviously curious as to what his business was.

Not knowing if they could understand him or not, Jerome told them, “I have come here to find a friend.”

The two guards looked at each other, and motioned for him to follow them. Warily watching, they escorted Jerome to a small room, where they motioned for him to sit down. Jerome did as they

asked. One of the guards then disappeared through a door, while the other remained, keeping a suspicious eye on Jerome.

Before long the first guard returned with another man whom, Jerome was thankful to discover, spoke Latin. “What is it you have come for?” he asked in a very businesslike manner.

“I have come to search out a friend,” Jerome repeated. “I have been told that ... that she may be here.”

“She?” The man raised his eyebrows in obvious interest, but his face suddenly became stern again. “And what should stop me from thinking that you are a spy, come to find whatever information you may gather?”

“Please, sir,” Jerome begged. “I have traveled a long way from Rome to find my mother. I heard she may be here. Do you know of a Roman lady here by the name of Ethna?”

“There are many people that come and go around here, young man. I do not keep track of them all.”

“No, but she would be a teacher ... or working with children!” Jerome didn’t sound too clear, and the man was not too impressed with his story.

“A teacher, you say? Listen, stranger, Roman ladies do not just walk in here and become teachers.”

It seemed as if Jerome wasn’t making any progress. The man turned to the guards, however, and appeared to be asking them something. Jerome looked on, hopeful. The man suddenly turned back to Jerome. “Come with me,” he ordered.

Jerome followed the man through hallways, courtyards, and finally into some kind of council chamber. A man, who appeared to be some important official or ruler, stood at the end of a table talking with some other men who stood gathered

around him. They stopped talking when the two men came into the room.

“Sire, I believe this young man may have something to tell you,” Jerome’s guide told the richly dressed man.

Jerome looked at his guide, and then back at the man. The other men in the room stood there, looking somewhat agitated at the interruption.

Jerome gathered all the respect he could muster, as he was not sure what sort of station this man held. “Sire, I am extremely sorry to disturb you with such a small matter. I am Jerome, a citizen of Rome. I have come in hopes of finding my mother, a Roman woman named Ethna. I believe she came here from Rome many years ago.”

The man seemed interested. He whispered something into one of his advisor’s ears, and then dismissed everyone from the room, except for the translator, who was standing next to Jerome. Jerome continued, feeling more at ease now. “Through a series of events I have come to the conclusion that she may be here in the palace. But no one seems to be able to help me find her.”

“Your mother, you say? And what makes you think that you would find her here, in the palace? What would she be doing?”

“I’m not sure, sir. But I believe that perhaps she’s working with children somewhere?”

The man fell silent for a moment, and seemed impressed by Jerome’s answers. Finally he spoke. “I believe that your search may well have come to an end. Yes, there is a woman here by the name of Ethna. She works for me—teaching my children. I have five children who were a rowdy bunch. But this woman, Ethna ... your mother ... she took a great liking to them. Among all my servants and maids, there was not one who would love and care

for my children as much as she, so I gave her the job of being the personal care-taker of my own children. I am proud to say she has done marvelous things with them, and we have come to know each other quite well.”

The doors of the room suddenly opened, and in walked a beautiful woman whom Jerome barely recognized ... but it was his mother.

“Mother?” he questioned. He stood frozen to the floor, as all the memories of his past suddenly rushed upon him. “Have I found you? Is it really you?”

“Jerome?” his mother exclaimed. “My son, my boy!” She threw her arms around him in a joyful embrace, and neither of them could hold back the tears that rolled hotly down their cheeks. After a few moments, she held him back out at arms’ length.

“Oh, my son, my own son! How you have grown! Just look at you, such a handsome young man—oh, my Jerome. How are your father, and your brothers and sisters? Oh tell me, you must tell me everything!” Jerome looked over at the man, who was still standing there, silently watching this emotional reunion. He nodded to them, and they walked out to a spacious garden which was enclosed within the palace walls. There they walked, as Jerome told his mother all that had happened over the past few weeks, months, and years.

Within days, Jerome started off back to Rome. He arranged for his father to be taken to the palace in Babylon, where he was reunited with his beloved wife, and there they remained, together.

Jerome went back to Rome and married Lydia. They lived with Lydia’s mother, Claudia, and had two children, whom they taught and raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.



Five years had passed since the time that Jerome had found his mother. Emperor Vespasian now sat on the throne of Rome, and the persecution of Christians had abated.

Today everyone was especially excited as Elmo and Ethna were coming from Babylon. This would be their first visit to Rome since the time Elmo had moved to Babylon. It would also be their first time to meet their grandchildren, Chloe, four years old, and little Adrian, just two.

As soon as the neighing of the horses from the approaching wagon reached the children's ears, they dashed out the door. "Grandma! Grandpa!" they shouted excitedly.

"Oh, dear, look! Our grandchildren!" Ethna exclaimed.

"They're lovely," Elmo added, looking to Jerome and Lydia.

Jerome walked over. "Father, Mother, welcome back to Rome. It's wonderful to see you."

"Yes," Lydia joined in. "It's been a long time."

Claudia joined in on the fun as little Adrian entertained Elmo and Ethna with his charm and his playful antics. "He reminds me so much of my husband in his looks and character," Claudia said. "I'm so thankful for him."

Jerome led his parents over to a small sitting area where they all knelt together and gave thanks to the Lord for bringing them all back together. Even little Adrian knelt down and folded his hands to pray.

When they had finished, Elmo stood up. "Now, I have a surprise of my own. Let's not waste any time." He turned to little Chloe and Adrian. "How would you two like to ride with Grandpa on the horsy wagon? We're going to go for a little ride. Come on, Daddy and Mommy," he said cutely, looking at Jerome and Lydia. "Shall we?!"

The two children were incredibly excited and jumped up and down uncontrollably. "Yes, yes!" little Chloe shouted. "Come on, Mommy! Come on, Daddy! Let's go!"

Within a few minutes they were all heading down a small road, bouncing up and down in the simple horse-drawn wagon. By the distinctly familiar paths and houses and trees that they were passing, it soon became apparent to Jerome where they were going—the old mansion and home that they had been forced to leave what seemed like an eternity ago.

Elmo's face gleamed as he told the story, and revealed the surprise. After they had been forced out, Marcellus had taken possession of this property for himself, but after his death, it had fallen into the hands of the emperor. Now, Elmo had managed to buy it back, and he was going to be moving back in, together with Ethna—and the young child that she was now expecting.

Jerome looked at his father, who was sitting proudly on the wagon, little Chloe and Adrian on his lap. Jerome had never seen his father so happy.

"You know, children," he was saying, "once upon a time, when your father was as old as you are now, we used to live in this house. One day he was out in the back, playing with one of the horses, when ..."

Jerome fell silent, as the stories his father told his spellbound little audience brought back his own memories of that long-ago time—and how suddenly everything had changed. Lydia slipped her arm around Jerome, and looked lovingly into his eyes. Jerome smiled at Lydia. He knew she was thinking the same thing he was: They were both thankful those days were over.



THE TRIBUNE'S ASSIGNMENT

THE TRIBUNE'S ASSIGNMENT

It was late evening when Anthony and Lucius slowly made their way through a series of darkened streets, then down a steep, narrow staircase leading to the lower road.

“Shhh!” Lucius whispered, as Anthony tripped over a loose stone and sent it tumbling down the rocky steps. “Quiet! I hear someone coming. Quick, into this alcove!” he said, roughly pulling Anthony into a doorway at the bottom of the stairs.

Within moments, the sounds of three approaching Roman guards could be heard from around the corner.

“Did you hear something, Secundus? I thought I heard something!” one of them said.

“No,” replied Secundus, “you’re just hearing things. Ever since Tigellinus¹ warned us to be on the lookout for those dangerous Christians, you’ve been jumping at every sound.”

“But I’m sure I heard something,” Vestus persisted. “Didn’t you, Cornelius?”

“No,” he replied, “there isn’t anyone. Every decent person is at home by this hour—where we would be, too, if it weren’t for Tigellinus! Come on, let’s get this patrol finished and get home!”

The soldiers continued down the darkened street, past the stairway where Anthony and Lucius were hiding with bated breath.

“Whew! That was close! I’ve never prayed so desperately in my life,” whispered Anthony. “Come let’s get out of here and over to Martha’s quickly!”



It was early spring in Rome, in the year 65 AD, less than a year since the great fire of Rome had ravaged much of the city. Although construction

was already underway to build the great palace, the Golden House, from the ruins of the old city, the effects of the fire still lingered in Rome, and not only in the charred buildings that could still be seen. Shortly after the fire, people had gotten suspicious, and Nero¹, anxious to absolve himself of all blame in the eyes of the people, had looked for a scapegoat². It was not long before he found one.

The Christians had started the fire, he decreed—the Christians, who mocked the gods of Rome, and preached that the world would end in a flood of fire—they were the culprits. And so a great persecution of the Christians in Rome had begun, and was still underway. Every day more and more Christians were being arrested and put to death, but no matter how many were found, the movement only seemed to grow in strength and numbers.

Our story centers around one small group of Christians from varied walks of life—Romans and Greeks, nobles and slaves—yet all united by the love of Christ, and whose faith in Him would give them strength and courage in the face of death. Into this scene there comes a military tribune³, a brave and loyal son of Rome we shall call Marcus. What follows is his story.



“So, Marcus, how is Britannia³?” Nero inquired.

“Cold and damp, sire,” Marcus replied, “but there are plenty of pretty girls to warm the cold nights.”

The emperor smiled. “So I heard, Marcus, so I heard. Your reputation amongst the officers is quite unique. I am told that there is hardly a night that

goes by without your ... ‘entertaining’ someone.”

“Such are the privileges of war, sire. It relieves the boredom between the battles.”

“Ha, ha!” Nero laughed. “So my dear Marcus, I am sorry to have pulled you away from your heavily demanding position in the west. You are probably wondering why you were summoned here. Hmm? Especially as your campaigns there were so successful! Both in the field and out, eh?”

“Well, yes, the thought had crossed my mind, sire. But I’m sure you would not have called for me had it not been important to the Empire. If I could guess, I would think it might have something to do with the great burning of our beloved city, of which I have heard so much.”

“Exactly, exactly. I knew you were the right choice.” Nero rubbed his hands together. “Well, to the point, to the point,” he said. With a motion of his hands, three handsomely arrayed slave girls came running in carrying trays laden with plums, peaches, grapes, dates, figs, and a flask of red wine.

“Please,” said Nero, “make yourself at ease, Marcus. Enjoy yourself.”

Marcus poured himself some wine and scanned the room where ten Praetorian guards⁴ were positioned in various corners. He respectfully sat down a short but careful distance from Nero. Many thoughts flew through his mind. Nero was considered insane by many, and subject to fits of anger that spared no one, not even his own mother and wife, both of whom he had condemned to death. And Burrus², who had been long his counselor and Praetorian Prefect, was now

¹ See endnote v - Nero Claudius Caesar

² **tribune**: a high-ranking military officer of ancient Rome. Tribunes, of which there were roughly six per legion, were appointed by the emperor, and served directly under the legion commander.

³ **Britannia**: Latin name for ancient Britain

¹ **Praetorian guards**: Personal guards of the Roman Emperor. Originally recruited to be household guards, their bands eventually grew to become a powerful force commanded by their Praetorian Prefect, a powerful figure of the Roman empire.

² See endnote vii - Sextus Africanus Burrus

also dead, likely by order of Nero, many whispered—though none dared to say this aloud. Marcus knew that he would have to tread carefully, as already there was a great deal of envy over his successes in the Britannic campaign and the attention showered upon him by the emperor. Life in the courts of Rome was precarious at best, and its politics like a delicately spun and easily tangled web. Whatever Marcus' mission, he knew that his chances of incurring the wrath of Nero were just as real as his opportunity to win the emperor's favor and approval.

"So, Marcus, as you so wisely observed, there has indeed been a great fire and destruction in our beloved Rome. It was caused by a group of conspirators, a sect of people who call themselves Christians. They actively seek to destroy our Empire and raise up their own King."

"Christians?!" Marcus exclaimed, raising his eyebrows in interest.

"Yes, have you heard of them?" Nero inquired.

"Hmm," Marcus answered, "perhaps I have, somewhere during my time in Britannia, but it escapes me now."

"Well, you shall hear of them plenty in Rome," answered Nero. "The city is crawling with Christians. These conspirators are numerous and are even infiltrating my court, corrupting my counselors and senators. The more we attempt to find and kill, the more we seem to find. They are like cockroaches, springing from every sewer in the city. You crush one, only to find a dozen more springing up. We need to find the leaders, then we can destroy them once and for all! This is why I sent for you. You were instrumental in rooting out the resistance of the Iceni and that vixen Boudicca¹. Now I have called upon you to seek out

and destroy these Christians!"

As he spoke, Nero took a cluster of grapes, and threw them to the ground, emphatically trampling on them with his feet. "This is what I want! I want them destroyed—all of them—their men, women, children, all! I want you to bring me their leaders. I want their heads on a plate. Pluck them out like weeds and destroy them. This is why you have been summoned. This is my commission to you."

Marcus was stunned. He couldn't speak, but only stare at Nero, amazed at his strong outburst. Nero's face was contorted and had turned purple with rage, and his eyes were twitching uncontrollably. Gathering his wits together, Marcus stood up and saluted Nero. "I will seek out and destroy these traitors, sire, according to your eminent wish. I shall do all in my power to rid the Empire of those who would dare to destroy our eternal Rome."

Nero calmed down, and motioned to Marcus to sit. "There, my friend, I knew I could count on you. Come now, and rest. Your journey must have been long and wearisome. Tonight there is a feast at the home of Petronius¹. I shall expect to see you there. Thereafter, I will instruct Tigellinus to inform you of all that we know about these conspirators, these Christians."

With that, Nero turned abruptly, and walked out of the room.

Hmm, Tigellinus, the ruthless Praetorian ... I have heard of him. Somehow I don't think this will be as pleasant as I had imagined, Marcus thought as he plucked some grapes from the bunch he held and slowly ate them as he walked out of the palace.

"Marcus, oh Marcus!" a young voice suddenly called. "It's been so long, Marcus!"

¹ See endnote viii - Queen Boudicca

¹ See endnote ix - Titus Petronius Niger

Marcus turned and saw Camilla running down the corridor to meet him, her long dark tresses whirling behind her. Throwing herself into his arms she cried out, "Oh, Marcus, I have often thought of this moment when we would meet again! The night shall be ours to consume together!"

"Ah, my little fiery one, you haven't changed any, have you?" Marcus laughed, and held her at arms' length. "But I'm very sorry. Tonight it can't be, as I am required to attend a feast at the house of Petronius. But I shall see you at noon tomorrow. Hmm, or better yet, perhaps tomorrow night."

"Marcus, I missed you so much. Rome has not been the same without you."

"Ha! I doubt that," he laughed. "You have suitors in every house, from the Palace to the Gates of Rome." He smiled as he turned her face up to his and kissed her. "Ah, there is none to compare with your Roman beauty. These *Celtae*¹ are savage barbarians, but you, ah, you are the breath of life, the goddess of love."

"Shh," Camilla replied, putting her finger on his mouth, "enough for now. Save your flatteries for tomorrow night."

Smiling, and with a quick kiss on his cheek, she broke out of his arms and dashed back down the corridor from which she had come.

Ah, Rome, dear Rome, how I missed you! You do have a pleasant side to you, Marcus sighed. Then his thoughts returned to his assignment. But there is also the dark side. It is easy to remember why I wanted to leave Rome, and why I volunteered to go to Britannia. Life here is as delicate as a thread in the hand of that madman. My command in Britannia was refreshing compared to the uncertainty of life in Rome.



"Come in, come in," Martha urged the two men who stood at her door. "Oh, we were so worried about you, Anthony, and you, too, Lucius. You're so late. Was there some problem? Come quickly. The others are in the basement."

"Welcome, brothers," said Luke, as the men entered the room. "We just finished praying for you."

"God bless you, Luke," answered Lucius. "Your prayers were truly answered; that's why we are here. A Roman patrol almost caught us, and but for your prayers, we'd surely be sitting in Nero's dungeon awaiting our fate."

"God be praised," replied Luke. "It's getting harder to meet these days. But for our unity and strength it is therefore all the more important that we continue to meet together. There is so much the Lord is doing, adding to our ranks daily such as should be saved. Why, just yesterday, three more families joined our fellowship. And ask dear Martha how we are making friends even in the palace. The Lord has surely been doing great miracles! Quinton the Senator, to whom Martha and Anthony are bond in service, is coming nearer to His Kingdom every day. As you know, Quinton has long been in Nero's favor and the Lord has used dear Martha to be the minister of His Word to him."

"May the Lord bless you, Martha," said Lucius. "It must be hard to be the concubine* of these Roman dogs. God must give you great grace for such a task."

"Hush now," Martha answered, "and don't speak so of them. You know how our Lord felt. Remember the Roman who came to him for the healing of his servant? Jesus said that this man's faith was greater than all the faith of Israel. We cannot put ourselves up as judges over them. Who knows God's plans, and what He may have in store, as dear brother Paul exhorted us while he was with us? God

¹ *Celtae*: Latin for "Celts," a generalized term for the native inhabitants of Britannia.

alone is Judge. Quinton, if converted, could greatly influence the senate in our favor. There is hope for all. None is past God's loving mercy! So let us not speak so, brother Lucius. Pray for Quinton, that his heart will soften and be receptive to Christ."

"Of course, you are right, dear Martha. I'm sorry, it was wrong of me to burst out like that," Lucius apologized. "I have a lot to learn yet."

Martha smiled and put her arm around Lucius. "We all do, Lucius, we all do, but different things at different times. But come now, for there is not a lot of time before I must return to the senator, so let's sit down together and pray. I feel there are great victories in sight and we need the faith to claim them."

"Amen!" came the chorus.



Nero was lounging on a couch, talking with his old friend and counselor Seneca¹, while sparsely dressed girls surrounded him, tending to his every need. Pompous senators indulged in all sorts of immorality, while Praetorian guards stood in silent watch around the room, ever alert to the safety of Nero. Marcus stood near the entrance to the room, taking in the scene before him. Everywhere was revelry and noise, fat men stuffing themselves with mountains of food, and lying in corners with other men.

Oh, for the cold fields of Britannia! At least men are men—and not as these, Marcus thought, disgusted at the scene before him. He sipped from his cup of wine. *Hmm*, he thought, *tonight I need my wits about me*. He would keep his usual heavy drinking in check.

Then his attention switched to Quinton and Petronius, who had just entered the room. But his

attention was especially drawn to the beautiful girl at Quinton's side. His eyes took in every detail of her form, but stopped as he suddenly made contact with her eyes. There was something special about her—something he had never seen in any other girl, and he had seen many. Her deep eyes moved into his very soul, radiating love. Who was she? He watched as she took leave of Quinton and was escorted by his guards back out of the house. Quinton then made his way over to Nero and greeted him.

Then Marcus spotted him. *Yes, I'd know him anywhere*, he thought. *Those cold dead eyes, look how they radiate evil. Quite a contrast to the beautiful girl who just left!* Yes, this was Tigellinus—tall, muscular, handsome, with a proud smirk on his face. This was the man feared by all in Rome. *So*, Marcus silently told himself, *this is who I am to take counsel from, a mad emperor and his hand of death! Well, such is life! As long as I can walk the line of life with my sword, I will get by. But the sooner I finish here and get back to the fortresses of Britannia the better, so let's get on with it.*

Marcus put down his drink and made his way over to Nero. His eyes met Quinton's. For a moment he halted. What was it? There was a sparkle, similar to the one he had seen in the eyes of that girl who was with him. Quinton's gaze was different from the rest—the dull and glazed eyes or the cold and sinister ones shifting all around. There was no fear in his eyes, either. Yes, this was someone to get to know. Then Marcus shifted his attention to Nero, saluting him and advancing to his side.

"Welcome, Marcus. You please me with your presence. Come now, let me introduce you to Seneca, Quinton, Petronius and Tigellinus."

¹ See endnote x - Lucius Anneus Seneca

"We have heard much, Marcus, of your feats in Britannia," said Quinton.

"Thank you, noble friends. Please do not let me interrupt. You seem deeply absorbed in your conversation," Marcus answered.

"I was just commenting to Nero," Seneca began, "that, as Cicero¹ once said, true joy is a serene and sober motion, and they are miserably wrong that take laughing for rejoicing. The seat of it is within and there is no cheerfulness like the resolution of a brave mind. Cultivation of the mind is as necessary as food to the body."

"Yes, but what we need is the cultivation of friendship, not the mind," added Quinton.

"True that may be, my friend," said Petronius. "Indeed, Cicero also said friendship improves happiness and abates misery by the doubling of our joy and the dividing of our grief. What say you, dear Marcus?"

"Alas, you have lost me. I am but a soldier, and unused to such high thinking."

"But even as a soldier, you will have to agree that a friend to offer advice and counsel in time of need is as a refreshing stream to a thirsty soul," said Quinton.

"That is right," added Seneca. "As an officer you know that censure and criticism never hurt anyone. They show a man his weak points and forewarn him against failure and trouble."

"But life is so short," added Nero, "it must be lived to the full."

"You cannot act like you have ten thousand years to throw away," Petronius added. "Death stands, my friends, at your elbow."

"Therefore, dear Petronius," Quinton answered, "you need to be good for something while you live

and it is in your power."

Marcus smiled. He rather liked this man Quinton.

"The life of a philosopher," Marcus interjected, "seems as dangerous as that of a soldier. I have read of Socrates¹. Was it not his writings that brought him to an untimely death?"

"True, Marcus; when you meddle in government, it is always dangerous," replied Quinton. Then turning to look at Nero, he added, "unless you have a gifted patron of the arts such as Nero, who being an artist himself encourages others in such matters. But it is true that dear Socrates died at his own hand, by sentence of the government," continued Quinton.

"And Aristotle², did he not have to flee for the same crime?" Marcus added amusedly.

"Again true, my friend," answered Seneca. "Being mentor to a world-changer like Alexander was indeed a dangerous mission, but Plato³ and Epicurus⁴ did better, did they not?"

"Yes," Marcus answered, "but what of dear Cicero whom you quoted, Seneca? Did he not flee from Julius Caesar, and then later die at the hands of Mark Antony, again for his involvement in politics? Even Titus Lucretius Carus⁵ who proposed—as you do—friendship, justice and moderation, died at his own hand. I wager the life of a soldier is safer by far! The assurance of living is higher."

Seneca laughed, "You are well-versed in the studies of the great writers—for a soldier, that is!"

¹ See endnote xi - Marcus Tullius Cicero

¹ See endnote xii - Socrates

² See endnote xiii - Aristotle

³ See endnote xiv - Plato

⁴ See endnote xv - Epicurus

⁵ See endnote xvi - Titus Lucretius Carus

Then Tigellinus, who had remained silent so far, now stepped forward and smiled: "Perhaps my friend is out of his depths among these men of words. I believe the sword holds greater interest for you. I have heard of your great campaigns in Britannia. Your exploits must surely have been gratifying!"

"Thank you, Tigellinus. Coming from you, I consider it an honor indeed. To meet you is a privilege few have."

Tigellinus smiled his cold sneer as he motioned Marcus to sit. "Come, we have much to discuss. Let us leave these philosophers to their talk, and let us discuss more important things. Here," he said, offering a flask of wine to Marcus. "Please refresh yourself."

"Thank you," Marcus replied, refilling his cup which was not yet half empty. "So, let us get down to business. What exactly is the story with these Christians? Tell me what you know. Nero tells me they are responsible for the fire which swept Rome?"

"Just so," Tigellinus answered. "It seems the sect started in Judea, a hellhole of a place. Nothing but trouble and contention those zealots have given us. Their leader was a carpenter who was crucified there. His followers claim he rose from the dead, and they have proclaimed him king, claiming that he will rid the world of our rule and establish his own kingdom. They subvert the loyal citizens of Rome all over the Empire, and refuse to bow to our noble emperor. We have done what we could to crush them and root them out, but we have thus far been unable to find any of their leaders, and no matter what we do, their numbers continue to increase. You understand, I'm sure, why they must be stopped. Your success with suppressing the Britannic rebellion has inspired Nero to call upon you for this most intricate task."

"Well, if the leaders of these Christians are anywhere near as secretive as those of the *Britanni*¹ rebels, it will be impossible to find them by open confrontation. We will have to infiltrate their ranks as one of their own, and get as close as we can to the leaders. Then once we have them all identified, make our move, and in one swift and unsuspecting stroke we will have them all."

"That is indeed sound advice. I see the wisdom of Nero's choice."

"Do you have any Christians here in Rome who are currently under suspicion, but who have not yet been arrested?" asked Marcus.

"Let me think. Yes, yes, there is a certain Demetrius, a Greek. We have him under watch as we have heard that he has in the past consorted with the Christians. But as yet, we don't have enough proof to arrest him. He's a goldsmith and works in the gold market."

"Excellent," replied Marcus. "Leave him to me. He will be my gate to the Christians. Give me two months, Tigellinus, and I will destroy them for you. I'll keep in touch with you either directly or through Camilla, the daughter of the late Procurator² Tiberius Paulus, whom I had the privilege of knowing in Britannia before his unfortunate death."

"Yes, I've heard of her," smiled Tigellinus. "So, Tiberius was an old friend of yours, eh? Well, let's drink to this. And who knows, perhaps you may be able to lay claim to his position now that it is vacant, eh, Tribune?"

Marcus looked surprised. "Procurator? Ha! I couldn't imagine it. But if Nero would make me a procurator, Britannia would be my chosen place of service."

¹ **Britanni**: generalized Latin term for the native inhabitants of the British Isles

"So it is, Marcus. The place for a soldier is close to the battle, eh? Politics and the Senate are the living death to many a good soldier. So, to war and the battle!"

Marcus lifted his cup. "To war!" he replied.



The party had ended, and Quinton was back in his home. Relaxing on his couch, he called Martha, who was standing by, to his side. She approached and knelt at his side, looking into his eyes as he began to speak. "There was a young man, one of Nero's commanders, at the feast tonight. I had never seen him before, but when I looked into his eyes there was something there. "

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, it is hard to explain, but when I caught his eyes, it was as if I had actually made contact with a person. There was a light in his eyes—not like the dull or dead eyes of all those others around Nero, but almost like the light I have seen in your eyes. They were deep and alive, only they were not happy and free like yours, but sad and searching. Do you know what I mean? I felt like talking to him, but it wasn't long before Tigellinus got ahold of him."

"That couldn't have done him any good," Martha answered, "to spend time with that devil."

"Hush, my little one," Quinton cautioned her. "You must be careful what you say. Tigellinus is a dangerous man. He has eyes and ears all over the palace, and his spies are everywhere. You must guard your tongue more carefully. "

Martha smiled, looked deep into his eyes and said, "You are a very wise man, and I see why Nero values your counsel and holds you in high esteem. You have a way of speaking the truth without offending him. You are truly a remarkable man, Quinton."

"Yet it is this very trust that has made me many enemies. There are those among Nero's court who seek to destroy me. I know not how long I will survive. Even Seneca is more cautious now. Times are dangerous."

Martha shot up a little prayer, as she often did during these intimate moments with Quinton. She was always seeking for a way to get through to him, and to find an opportunity to lead him to Christ. *Oh, Jesus, please give me the words to say to this man. You promised that You would give us a mouth and wisdom, so I claim Your promise, and pray that it will not be me speaking, but Your spirit speaking through me. This man is so caught up in the world of rulers and philosophers. I don't know what will get through to him, but You do, Jesus. So please give me the words to say.*

Her prayer was instantaneous, and the answer came just as quickly. Quinton hardly noticed the moment of silence that passed before Martha began speaking again. "Oh, Quinton," she began, "you must learn, as the river, to bend and flow with the current. Just as the water, when it comes to a little bank and to uneven places, gently flows over them without making a fuss about it. The huge boulders stand in the water, yet the river quietly glides around them, accepting them as obstacles which must be endured since they cannot be displaced. Even so should men treat such difficulties in their lives, instead of fuming and fretting or sitting in despair.

"As the waters constantly move onward, exploring everything—every little hole and corner within reach, neglecting none—they give a kindly wash to all. So is a wise man who desires to make his life useful and pleasant. He will always seek cleansing along his way through the world. He has

a good word for his fellow traveler and is prepared unto all lovingkindness. And as he does this—just as a river that grows broader until it reaches the ocean—so that man's life will become greater as it approaches its end, and he will have gained the love and affection of all whose love and affection are worth gaining, before the stream of life joins the Ocean of Eternity.”

“Martha, your wisdom amazes me. Seneca should sit at your feet and partake of your words of life. You are the drop of light to my life, Martha. When I'm with you, it's as if I find myself in another world. Your words are as drops of honey. You speak as the oracles. The wisdom of the sages comes through your lips. This Jesus you speak of must have been a special man to instill in you such love and knowledge.”

“More than a man, Quinton,” Martha continued, seizing—and thanking God for—the opportunity to tell Quinton more about her Savior—and his, if he would accept Him. “He was God's Son, sent to bring us life. He died for you and me, that we could know true love. He was a ransom to pardon our sins. The Devil claims your soul through sin, but Jesus can free you. He was the sacrifice to release you from these chains. This was why He came. All you need to do is believe and accept His forgiveness. Oh, Quinton, He is right now knocking on the door of your heart. Please let Him in! All you have to do is receive Him, ask Him to forgive and He will. Look around you, at the pitiful slaves of evil, demented madmen such as Nero, and ruthless monsters such as Tigellinus, who shall cause this empire to crumble under their own wicked blindness. But you, Quinton, you can see the light, you can see the truth, and you can have this same freedom and happiness that you have seen in me.”

“I look at you, Martha, and I see the beauty of love. I listen, and hear the words of wisdom. I would be a fool to turn from that, if all you say is true. If you are truly a sample of what Jesus can do, then, yes, I want Him. I want this love. Please show me what I must do, for I would rather die for this than for a monster like Nero.”

“Oh, my love! Oh, Quinton! Yes, I will tell you! Just believe, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. Believe in your heart that God, in His great love for you, sent His only Son to make an atonement for your sins. Believe in your heart, Quinton, and Jesus will give you the power to become a son of God, that you shall never perish, but have everlasting life!”

“I believe,” Quinton whispered, looking deeply into her eyes, “for I can see the truth written in your eyes. Yes, my love, I believe.”

“Oh, dear Quinton, I have prayed so long for this moment. Now you are His son, His child, and He will never leave you nor forsake you. And now we can never be parted, for though they may destroy our bodies, our spirits will live forever after in the presence of God in Heaven.”



Marcus was entering the goldsmiths' area and approached the shop of Demetrius. He smiled to himself, thinking how clever his plan was.

“Hello. Can I help you?” Demetrius asked, as he saw the stranger enter his workshop.

“Yes,” came the reply from the roughly shod and dusty traveler. “I am a stranger here, having come from far. I have seen many places, and seek to go to others still. But my goods are spent, and I find that I must seek a goodly man who may provide me with work, that I may earn my keep while I abide in this city.”

"I see," Demetrius answered. "Well, young man, come and be seated inside. Perhaps I can be of help." (Although Marcus was well over thirty years old, he was still a young man to the elderly Demetrius.)

Marcus followed him into the shop. "Please excuse the mess," Demetrius apologized, "but I have been rather busy of late."

"I can see. Business must be good in this part of the city."

"Oh, one cannot complain, my friend. So, you seek work, you say?"

"Yes. I have come from far, though I am no stranger to Rome, as you can probably discern from my speech. My name is Marcus Paulus. I have in my life traveled many places, even to the schools of Plato and Aristotle, seeking the meaning of life. I have found little of what I was looking for, and by and by I have come to return here to Rome. Now I seek to settle for a short while, and perhaps find some trade to ply. Would there be a place for me here, friend?"

"You are a seeker, you say? Well, I was a seeker too once. I'm sure I shall find your company most interesting. And as you can see, I do have a lot of business to attend to, and if it pleases you to stay and help me for your wages, I shall not say you nay," Demetrius answered. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Paulus," replied Marcus, "you may call me Paulus."

"Well, Paulus," Demetrius greeted him, "welcome to Rome. I am Demetrius. I pray you will find my hospitality acceptable. Will you dine with me and my family this evening?"

"I thank you for your hospitality, but I am meeting an old friend of mine in the city. But I would be pleased to dine with you tomorrow night."

"Very well. Then tomorrow it shall be. I can also introduce you to my craft and trade tomorrow. Can I expect to see you here at noon?"

"I shall be here," Marcus promised.

As he left, Marcus smiled to himself in pleasure. "Ha! These Christians fools are easily deceived. Why, if the Britons had been as unsuspecting as they, the campaign would have lasted only months! This might be easier than I thought. Well, let's see, what now? Oh yes, Camilla! Ah yes, beauty and relaxation, this is the life! Hmm, let's see, what do I need? The baths and the gymnasium? And then the theater and some drama or pantomime with Camilla? Yes, and a little wine, some flowers and, let's not forget the rose oil. Ah, the delights of Rome!"



It was a beautiful night. Camilla lay soaking in a bath of perfumed water. "Hmm, it's heavenly," she thought, "the smell intoxicates the senses!"

"Priscilla, Priscilla!" she called.

"Yes, mistress," came the reply, as Priscilla quickly entered.

"Make sure the bed is scented. Use some rose, cinnamon and aloe. Bring also the fine silk gowns from the East that you got from the merchant last week. Yes, the low-cut one. And the necklace from Egypt."

"Oh, Marcus, it's been so long!" she sighed to herself, anticipating his arrival. Standing up, she watched the soap sliding down her shapely curves. She clapped her hands and two young maidservants ran in and began to dry her down. After they left, she walked over to the window overlooking the garden and stood there, naked, watching the beautiful stars sparkle like diamonds in the sky.

Yes, this was her life: gold, jewels, silver, and handsome young men! This was Rome. What else

was there? She had been blessed with a great and noble father, a Tribune with a name honored in all Rome. She was rich, and had many of the finest young men of Rome clamoring for her attention.

Yet, she was empty. Why? Was it because Marcus had been gone? Perhaps it was, she thought to herself. Marcus was different. He was not as many others in Rome. In some ways, he was as much a son of Rome as any of the others; he was good-looking, had a good name, partied, and was always ready to have some fun. But yet, there was something different—his eyes, his concern. This was what had originally drawn her to him above any of the others she associated with.

Pulling herself away from her thoughts, she made her way back to the bedroom where Priscilla had just entered with her eveningwear. She picked up the silk gown and felt it slide through her fingers. “Ah, such beauty, such sensation. Silk is a masterpiece of the gods,” she told Priscilla.

“Indeed, mistress. Now come, let us make haste and put it on you!”

“Yes, yes. I can hardly wait. Oh, Priscilla, do make sure to light the censers, to keep out the stench of the streets.”

“Yes, mistress,” Priscilla replied obediently.

“Oh, Marcus, come soon, come soon. How I’ve missed you!”



“So, Tigellinus,” Nero inquired, “what think you of Marcus?”

“Your choice was indeed excellent, my emperor. He is a cunning man. I believe he will complete the assignment most efficiently.”

“Yes,” smiled Nero. “I am pleased that you agree with my choice. And when he has accomplished this task, what say you then?”

“Perhaps, as you had mentioned earlier, my lord, to bestow on him the title of consul. Then let him return to Britannia where his talents would serve Rome best, I believe. For I fear that Rome is not the place for this man, and he could end up being more of a threat than a help.”

“Hmm, yes, I tend to agree with you, Tigellinus. He is spirited and strong, wise and loyal. He will do the job and then, as you said, we shall return him to Britannia, where he seems pleased to reside. Not as you, eh? You are pleased to stay loyally by my own side ... either that, or you simply cannot think of abandoning the delights of Rome, ha ha!”

Clapping his hands, Nero shouted, “Enough of all this talk. Let’s enjoy life. Bring in the new slave girls and let there be festivities this night.” Then he turned back to Tigellinus, and continued, “Life is too short, Tigellinus. We must savor each moment before it passes.”



It was early morning as Marcus lay eating fruit with Camilla in her palatial bedroom.

“Marcus, you seem different from before.”

“What makes you say that?” replied Marcus.

“Before you were full of life and vigor, but now you seem to be more reserved, or at the least more calm. You were always the daring one, even reckless sometimes. But now you seem cautious. And you’re hardly even drinking...”

“Oh, it is nothing, really. A soldier needs a clear head to fight—a sharp wit. And I’m afraid the need for a clear head here in Rome is even greater than on the battlefields of Britannia! At least there you knew who your enemies were. Ah, for the carefree days of my youth...” Marcus lamented. “Now I am surrounded with responsibilities and a career, and it is easy to make enemies in high places. Yes, I

cannot afford some of my past luxuries. I walk a very tight rope between death and life, my sweet one. It is not only a matter of saying the right thing at the right time, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid those hasty words at a tempting moment! But with you, with you I can forget all those cares and worries. You are as a breath of fresh air to my soul, and as a light to my heart in all this darkness. With you I can relax and forget all the horrors of life."

"Oh, Marcus! Why not leave it all? You have the riches. Your father left a fortune to you. We could go to Greece together, leave Rome behind, and retire to a life of ease."

"Ah, my little one, still full of dreams. This will never come to pass. Once a soldier, always a soldier. If he does not die in the field, he will die in the weariness of the senate. No, I am a prisoner to my work. To live and die for Rome, however wretched it has become, is my calling—to protect the freedom of the entire world. I am sworn to protect the Empire. And though the empire is guided by men such as Nero, who, surrounded by their flock of vultures, indulge in all manner of lewdness, who am I to question?"

"Those are dangerous words, Marcus! Be careful. Nero has his agents everywhere, even in my home! Such words could spell your death. Many senators have been sentenced for less, and what of dear Burrus?"

"Yes true, my love, enough of words," Marcus responded, pulling her into his arms. "Let's enjoy life as it was meant to be. Love must grow by cultivation—as wild fruits double their yield under the hand of a gardener."

Kissing her slowly, Marcus quoted: "You want to know how many kisses would be enough for me? The number of sand grains between the tombs of

Libya's ancient lords and the temples where Egypt worships Jove in the shape of a Ram. The number of stars that watch the furtive love affairs of humankind while night is passing over in silence. That's how many would satisfy me. What can't be counted, can't be an unlucky number."

"I never knew you read the love writings of Catullus!" Camilla exclaimed. "You surprise me. There is more to you than meets the eye."

"But thus saying, you betray yourself," Marcus answered, "and confess that you know his writings also."

"Yes, Marcus, I often dream of one who would give his all for me, who would give of his love to fill my longing soul. 'Ah, sweet love—the elixir of the soul!' Come, Marcus, can you finish the quote?" she said with a laugh.

"How many kisses of thine can be enough? As many as the sands of the African desert or as many as the stars that behold the secret loves of mortals when night is still..."

Camilla studied this man—a man she realized she still knew so little about.



"So, Marcus, how goes it with your plans?" Tigellinus asked. They had met secretly at the baths to discuss how the plan was proceeding. "It's now been almost three weeks since we met last. What progress do you have to report?"

"It goes well, dear Tigellinus. Demetrius was an easy link. Ever since he employed me, he has come to trust me more and more. Soon I found myself delivering goods and messages to others whom I suspected were also Christians. Although some were suspicious at first, I quickly learned to speak like them, and have now been accepted as one of them.

"I have already attended several of their meetings, and they suspect nothing. So far, I have gathered about thirty names in all, and although there have been some outspoken members among these particular gatherings, I believe I have yet to meet the true leaders of this strange movement. But next week I have been invited to attend a meeting in another area of the city. Presumably some of the highest-ranking officers among these Christians will be present, and I believe this may be the moment we have been waiting for. But since I cannot say for certain, let us meet here again in ten days, and then I shall know whether we have all the information we need to crush these conspirators."

"Good news, Marcus. Nero will certainly be overjoyed. Come, let us drink to the success of your assignment."

As they drank, Tigellinus expounded much on the problems in Rome, and of the Empire and the Senate. Marcus, however, paid little attention to his words. His interactions with these Christians had not been as he had imagined, and although his mind was clear, his heart was heavy. Their words of love and forgiveness had been etched upon his heart, and no matter how he tried, it was impossible to shake them off. At nights, he was troubled with dreams, and the more he heard the words of Jesus, the more confused he became as to what he was doing.

Have they put a spell on me? he wondered. *I've heard of wizards and such who can put a spell on your mind. Is this the secret of the Christians?—sorcery?* He suddenly felt like he needed some fresh air.

Just then, Tigellinus abruptly ended his discourse and remembered that he had another appointment. He quickly excused himself, to

Marcus' relief. Marcus then made his way out into the streets and soon found himself back in the lush gardens of his villa.



"Master!" came the call. "Master!"

Marcus turned around and looked to see his servant Licinius approaching him.

"Yes, Licinius, what is it?"

"You have a visitor, sir—the Senator Quinton."

"Quinton? What on earth would he want here? Please show him into the garden," Marcus replied. His mind quickly questioned itself, attempting to discover the reason why Quinton should wish to see him. Then he flashed on the feast, and remembered that the impression the look in Quinton's eyes had made on him. *Hmm, yes, I did want to speak to him, I remember now. There was something about him that was different. This may be my opportunity to find out what.*

"Dear Quinton, it does my house honor to receive you," Marcus greeted his visitor as he approached.

"No, it is my pleasure. Why, all Rome speaks of the accomplished young commander returned from Britannia."

Marcus smiled. "Well, now that we have proved how honored we both are to meet each other, shall we dispense with further formalities?"

Quinton smiled at Marcus. "Very well, my friend, let us do away with such trivialities. Let me state plainly the reason for my visit."

"I am curious," Marcus replied.

"Well," Quinton began rather hesitantly, "I have been waiting to converse with you ever since we were introduced at the feast. You left our company early, and it has since been most difficult to find you. But I trust that you have found the city of Rome pleasant. "

Marcus nodded genially, and Quinton continued.

"I do confess, if I may speak freely, that there was something about you that struck me that night. Perhaps it is the fact that you have not been in Rome for these many years, or perhaps it was merely my imagination, but I saw that the eyes of all around me were either dark and cruel, dull and glazed, lifeless, frightened, or greedy. But your eyes were quite different. You had a clear look—I think trustworthy is a good description! There are few in Rome of whom I could say the same. But I felt I could talk to you man to man."

Marcus was stunned, and not quite sure how to react. "I see. Hmm ... Licinius!"

Licinius quickly entered the room, and awaited his master's order.

"Please have some refreshments brought to the garden for our guest."

"At once," he promptly replied.

Marcus' eyes followed his servant as he disappeared through the doorway, and then turned back to his guest. "I must say it is a surprise and honor that you deem me worthy of such trust. You have spoken plainly. Let me answer likewise. I too had a similar feeling when our eyes met. You yourself seemed different from the groveling scum who surround Nero, and those self-absorbed senators of his. Yes, your countenance greatly impressed me, Quinton, and my ears are open to hear whatever you may have to say."

"I thought as much, Marcus. In fact, I suspect even more. Let me say it like this ... though you wear the uniform of Rome, and give obeisance to your emperor, I believe you are in fact a Christian ... like myself."

Marcus' head swum with shock. He lost all sense. Good God, could it be? Why, Quinton was a

Christian!! Quinton, Nero's advisor, the most respected Senator and looked up to by all, rich and poor! This was the key he was looking for. Here was one of the top, highly-placed Christians from Nero's own palace!

"Are you all right, Marcus? You look quite pale. Do you feel unwell?"

"Oh yes! I'm sorry. It ... uuh ... it is some illness that comes upon me sometimes..." Marcus said, trying to regain his composure. "Sir, you are most honest and forthright with me with such dangerous information. Why?"

"I caught a glimpse of you at a Christian gathering, and after inquiring further, found that you regularly attend them; though I noticed you take great care to hide your identity. But that is understandable, and so do I. But do not worry," Quinton said, noting the rather shifty look in Marcus' eyes, "your secret is safe with me! I understand your predicament. Being in such an important position, you have a duty to protect those around you."

"I see. So you know everything about me," Marcus replied. "You are indeed a man of resources, Quinton." Marcus' mind was racing. Was Quinton trying to trap him? Was he a spy for Nero? Or was he truly sincere, as his intuitions had at first told him? There was no way to be sure, but he took a chance. "Well, I see I will not be able to hide the truth from you. Yes, I am a Christian. It was while in Britannia that I became one. But hearing of the recent events here in Rome, I thought it safer, both for them as well as myself, that no one know my true identity. However, in deed and in truth, I beg you to count me a brother."

"But of course. I'd thought as much, my friend. Well then, now that we both know where we stand,

I will come to the point of my visit. You see, I have heard rumors that Nero has come upon some new scheme against the Christians. I am a Senator, and as such there are certain things I know, but this secret is being kept from us. Therefore I wanted to enlist your help. I know that Nero trusts you, and is confident of your loyalties, and it seems you have gained the respect and good will of Tigellinus as well, and that is no small matter. I believe that Tigellinus is involved, or at least knowledgeable of whatever is happening, so I wanted to ask you to see if you could find out what is happening, so that we can be prepared, and take the necessary precautions."

The sound of footsteps broke their conversation, as Licinius came with his tray of fruit and drinks. After serving them, Licinius withdrew to the house, leaving them to their refreshments.

"So, dear Marcus," said Quinton. "Will you help me in this?"

Marcus could hardly believe it. It was like a Greek comedy. Here was Quinton asking the very man who was trying to destroy them to find out what plans Nero was making! Marcus looked down at the ground and took a deep breath. "I shall do what I can," he finally answered.

Quinton embraced him and put his hand on his shoulder. "Oh, and one more thing," he whispered, "just as a word of caution, I have noticed that you are quite friendly towards Camilla. I would advise you to be careful. Tigellinus has had his eyes on her for awhile, now that his wife is dead—don't ask me how. Nero will certainly not constrain him from getting her, and woe unto him that would stand in his way. If you wish to keep his good will—I say this for your own safety—you would do well to keep your distance from Camilla."

Marcus felt anger toward Tigellinus welling up within him at this remark, but managed to contain it. He simply answered, "Thank you for your good advice. I will keep that in mind."

"Very well. Then I will be seeing you again in a few days. Goodnight, and may God's blessings be upon you." With that, Quinton left.

Marcus was left more confused than ever. What do I do now? Here was Quinton, the one man he truly admired and respected, and he would be one of the people he would have to destroy for Nero. *Oh, I wish I was back in Britannia where it was all so simple. None of this damned intrigue and political backstabbing. What do I do now? I feel like I need some relaxation.*

"Licinius!" he called out. "Set out some new clothes. I shall be going to the house of Camilla for the evening, and I shall not wish to be disturbed."



As he entered the garden to Camilla's estate, he heard some shouting coming from the far end near the pavilion. It was Camilla, and she was crying for help! Quickly he moved through the trees, following the sound of the voices, until he could hear them clearly.

"Leave me alone, you beasts. I'll have you whipped!"

"Ha ha! You'll wish you could, my dear. You are to be brought before Nero for your insolence, so we'll just have our little benefit first. It would be a pity to have you wasted aimlessly to his wrath."

The two soldiers dragged the girl into the bushes near the fountain. Quickly, Marcus pulled out his sword and went after them. With one swift stroke on the head, he sent one of the assailants to the ground senseless. The other tried to disentangle himself from Camilla, who bit deeply into his hand,

making him scream with pain. Before he knew what hit him, Marcus had struck him on the temples with the hilt of his sword, and he collapsed on the ground next to his companion.

With both soldiers out of the way, Marcus helped Camilla to her feet and returned his sword to its sheath. She was quite a sight; her clothes were ripped and she was a little bruised. She threw her arms around him and sobbed, "Oh, Marcus! What will become of me now?"

Marcus took off his cloak and wrapped it around her. "Don't worry. We will think of something!"

As he escorted her back to the house, he asked what had happened, and she told him. "It was Nero. I think he took a liking to me when he saw me in the palace the other day. The next thing I know is that today Tigellinus came and asked me be Nero's mistress, but I refused. I can never lie with such a monster—a man who murdered his own wife and mother. Tigellinus got angry, but said that he'd give me one day to reconsider. I had just arrived back at my home this evening when these beasts came to get me, saying it was too late now. My lands are being confiscated, and I am to be arrested. Oh, Marcus, when the soldiers recover, Nero will hear of this, and you will be in danger."

"No, they never saw me. But they will come for you, so we must get away from here fast! Quick now, to the house. Gather some clothes and whatever riches you can. We must act speedily!"

Marcus meanwhile quickly found some cord and bound up the two unconscious soldiers, before returning to the house to help Camilla.



As they moved down the darkened street, Marcus scanned every corner, and his mind was bursting with confusion.

Damn! What can I do now? Every moment gets more and more complicated. I wish I'd never left Britannia. A thought then struck him. Yes, of course, Dorcas, Demetrius' friend! She will give me a hand! These Christians are known for their love—surely they would be willing to help.

He looked once again at Camilla, shivering in his arms. *Imagine that*, he thought. *One moment rich, not a care in the world, only existing for her own pleasure—and now homeless, hunted, frightened. How meaningless such a frivolous existence seems now.* But the thought foremost on his mind was Camilla's safety. It would only be a matter of time before they would be looking for her again, and he would have to find a secure and hidden place of safety for her.

"Camilla, I have a friend who can put you up for a few days until we can work out some plan to get you out of Rome," Marcus said, as they stopped to rest for a moment.

"Thank you, Marcus," she replied, sitting on a nearby bench to catch her breath. "I knew I could rely on you. I was so fearful. Of all the friends I have, there are none who would stand by me in the face of Nero, except for you. You have endangered your own life and future, Marcus!"

"Oh, Camilla, you don't know how confused my mind is! So much has happened these past few days, and I don't even know myself why I am doing this. I am placing myself in your hands, as much as you have placed yourself in mine." With that, Marcus shared all the events that had befallen him since his arrival in Rome.

After finishing he said, "There was something else. It comes back to me now. While in Britannia, I met an elderly landowner who had at one time been stationed as a centurion in Palestine, and he told me of a servant of his who once was dying,

but had been brought back to life by this same Jesus of Nazareth—the carpenter these Christians worship.”

“So do you believe all those stories about their carpenter God? Do you believe as they do?”

“I don’t know, Camilla. I honestly don’t know. I have been so confused these past few days that I don’t know what I think anymore. I see them sharing what little they have with their fellow man, with love in their hearts. I see them continuing on boldly in the face of persecution and with death all around them. I see them helping others in need. Their only crime against our mighty empire of hate and fear is that they preach love, even towards their enemies.

“And for that crime they are sought out, hunted down, imprisoned, tortured, and put to death. Yet even in the face of such tribulation, they stand strong and brave. They are willing to face death, even cheerfully—as if they were soldiers, proud and even honored to die for the sake of their cause and country. Sometimes I wish that my death could be as noble as theirs, but I hardly see the honor in dying for a crazed emperor who would kill me himself in a moment of random rage! Should I remain loyal to my country, my emperor, my sworn duty? Or do I betray the trust of those who have bared their souls to me, offered me bread, shown me kindness, and given me their confidence? There is to be a meeting of some Christian teachers tomorrow. I must go, as I need to find the answers I seek. But first, I will see to it that you are safe. Come now, let’s be off!”

Camilla held out her hand, and Marcus helped her to her feet. Then she hugged him tightly, and kissed him. “Oh, Marcus, you are a most unusual man. You are a great warrior, but you speak like a

philosopher. And you are also a marvelous lover—kind, gentle, understanding, respectful and not overbearing. I have always known our lives would be intertwined, but I never imagined it would be like this. I was proud and rich, and now I have nothing. My beauty cannot save me. I don’t even think you can save me, Marcus. But if the God of these Christians is as powerful as they say, then maybe, just maybe, there is hope that all this can come to a happy ending. But if their God is so powerful, how come He has not helped them? Or are the gods of Rome so cruel that they would give these people into the hand of a madman like Nero, who plays with their fates as a little child, for his own sport and twisted pleasure? Yes, Marcus, go, and find the answers that you seek, that I may find them with you.”

“If I find the answers, Camilla, you will be the first to know. Now, let us be off, for time is short, and I must get you to Dorcas,” Marcus said, taking her hand and leading her once again through the darkened streets of Rome.



The sound of knocking echoed through the house as Marcus hammered on the gate.

“Who on earth could that be?” Quinton mumbled, getting out of bed and wrapping his robe around him. “I need to see what is going on,” he said to Martha, who was still lying in the bed, and hurried to the gate.

Several servants had already rushed to answer the gate.

“It’s Marcus, my lord,” one of them informed Quinton, “and he is looking quite distraught!”

“Well, let him in!” Quinton answered.

“Welcome, Marcus!” Quinton greeted him, and ushered him in. As he embraced him, he whispered

in his ears: "No words here. Let us wait till we are alone."

"Come now," he said loudly. "Anthony, get some refreshments for our visitor, and Trebonius, prepare a room, that he may rest with us this evening. The rest of you may return to the house."

As they entered into Quinton's chamber, Martha was just rising from the bed, clutching a simple garment around her. Marcus' eyes met hers, and lingered for a moment on her pleasing form.

"Let me introduce you," Quinton began. This is Martha, my ... companion. She is from Palestine."

"I remember her from the feast," Marcus replied. "Once seen, never forgotten. She is a beauty indeed, from a land I have heard much of lately."

Martha smiled and then withdrew into the adjoining room, leaving the two men alone. "So, my friend, why the emergency?" Quinton inquired.

Marcus answered, "It is Camilla." He went on to explain the events that had come to pass, and how Camilla was now hidden with Dorcas and Demetrius. He mentioned nothing yet of his assignment from Nero, nor of his plan to infiltrate the ranks of the Christians in order to destroy them.

"I see now that you are in a most precarious position. They will suspect you, Marcus, as your acquaintance with Camilla is well-known."

Just then Anthony came with some fruit and a flask of wine. He set them on the table and left again. Marcus, feeling that now was the time, looked directly into Quinton's eyes, and said: "Once you unburdened your soul to me. Now, my friend, I must do likewise. You took a chance in being honest with me. Now I must be honest with you."

Seeing the anxiety in his eyes, Quinton answered: "Of course, my friend. Here, have a little wine. It relaxes the spirit."

"Well, where to begin? Let me see... Yes, after I arrived at the palace of Nero..."

Nearly an hour had passed before Marcus came to the end of his tale. "As you can see, I have deceived you and now humbly beg your forgiveness. I am a man confused and troubled. Can you help me?"

"I see your sincerity, Marcus. Perhaps we can help you, but not I. Wait one moment."

Quinton disappeared into the adjoining room, and soon returned with Martha at his side. Marcus rose to his feet, his eyes transfixed on her graceful, though simply adorned form. Her beauty clearly went deeper than her skin, and seemed to radiate from her very soul. Her eyes drew him into them as if they were deep whirlpools of light and love. Never had he felt such concern and compassion. His spirit connected with hers. It was almost as if he had been put under a spell—and perhaps he had, a spell of love.

He sat down and poured out his worries, his trials, his doubts and confusion. Questions poured from his heart like the torrents of a raging river. It was as though a floodgate had been opened and he could not stop it. She sat quietly and listened, understanding, and when she did speak, it was as if her tone and her words carried potions of magical power that soothed his worries and cleared his mind.

"God brings good out of evil," Martha said. "These perplexities of life cannot always be explained. Many times what we thought hurtful has been of greatest service; what we flinched at doing has made us happier; what we dreaded has come and gone and

left a blessing. Many times what we longed for has been denied us and has made us happier than if we had obtained it. We work and we see not the fruit of our labors here. But God sees, and when He releases us from our task on earth, He will disclose to us—to our amazement—what He, the great Artist, has formed and woven out of all the problems, evils, and perplexities that were strewn along our way. If we are in His will and putting Him first we have nothing to fear.

“And so, dear Marcus, that is why I was explaining to you why Jesus had to come. His love for you was so overwhelming, He was willing to feel your pain on the cross where He died, and to suffer for you. Will you not take this opportunity now, to believe in His gift of love to you? Don't let it pass, Marcus. Now is the time and your chance. Just open your heart and feel His love flow in. He will clear your mind of all these problems, and replace them with faith.”

Marcus hung his head, taking in these words that seemed too deep to understand, and yet he did understand them—somehow, deep inside, he understood, and he knew that this was the answer he was longing for. As he opened his heart to this love, to this God, to this Christ, it was as though a great weight was lifted off his shoulders. His heart grew light. His thoughts, which had been muddled and confused, now became clear. Tears of joy started to form in his eyes.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, “truly you are a servant of this most high God. I have such peace within myself that I could face a horde of barbarians alone ... no, that's not quite right. It's a different type of strength. True, the fear is now gone, but it is has been replaced not with the courage to destroy, but with the courage to help others find this same peace.”

“Then we welcome you again, as a true brother. Indeed, His kingdom is not won with swords. But our battlefields are the hearts and souls of man, and we fight with the weapons of love and faith. For the Kingdom of God is not a temporal kingdom. It will not turn to dust, as all world empires have, and as Rome one day surely will also, especially under the hand of men like Nero. But the Kingdom of God will endure forever.

“Love is the key, Marcus,” Martha continued, “for God is love, and His power is in love. As we share love with others you will find how powerful it really is. As love goes out it grows deeper; it begins to fill our heart and increase our joy—and then it doubles in power. And soon you will find that it begins to overflow, and spread to others, flowing from the heart like a stream which is most impetuous at its source, and which from thence flows out, not resting until it has bestowed its abundance even upon the lowliest of places.”

“That is right, Marcus,” Quinton added. “And then as you reach out to love those around you, even your enemies—as our Lord instructed—and those we find difficult to love of ourselves, you will find that God will give you the love you need. And as you continue to love others as you have been loved, and to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, you will find such happiness and peace in your heart that passes all the understanding and reasoning of the great thinkers like Plato.”

“We must make ready now, Quinton,” Martha suddenly interrupted. “We need to go see Luke and the others.”

“You are welcome to stay the night here, Marcus,” Quinton offered kindly. “I don't know how long it will be before Tigellinus learns of your involvement in all this. But you had best be careful. Let us meet

again at the Greek Tavern tomorrow evening. The keeper is one of us. He can arrange a place of safety for both you and Camilla."

"Thank you, Quinton and Martha," Marcus said gratefully. "But I shall return to my own home tonight. Staying here could only cause suspicion to come on you as well."



A sudden frantic knocking at the gate jolted Marcus out of his thoughts.

Licinius quickly went and opened up to see Martha, obviously troubled. "Marcus!" she instantly called out as she ran to where he stood.

"What's the matter? Is it Quinton? Quick, Licinius, a drink for the lady."

"Oh, Marcus! It's Camilla. They came and took her! It was Tigellinus' men. Someone must have betrayed them. They have taken her, Demetrius, and Dorcas to the dungeons beneath the palace. Quinton is at the Senate. He doesn't know yet. Oh, Marcus, if they are tortured, they may find out about us, and about you!"

Licinius returned with a flask of wine.

"Licinius," Marcus quickly instructed his trusted servant. "Can you prepare my uniform?"

"At once, sir," he replied.

"What do you plan to do, Marcus?"

"I'm not sure, but I have to get Camilla and the others out of there. If Tigellinus is already onto me, they won't be expecting me to show myself, and if not, well, all should be well. I am now fairly well-known around the palace, so I plan to use that to my advantage."

"Marcus," Martha began, "you can't. They..."

"Shhh! Don't fret. This is something I must do. You see to it that Quinton is warned. Let him know of my plans. If God is truly with us, we shall all still

meet you at the tavern this evening."

Then Marcus turned to his servant, who had just entered back into the room. "Licinius, escort the lady back to her home, and then return here at once. We have business to see to."

"At once, sir," Licinius replied, doing as Marcus had bidden him.



"Licinius," Marcus began when his servant had returned, "you have been my most faithful and trustworthy companion. You have been with me in my successes and my failures. Now it looks as if I stand to be defeated by the very ones I once swore to serve and protect. I am in trouble, and it will not be long before Nero and Tigellinus will be hunting for me. Yet I care not for myself. But I must do what I can to rescue Camilla from the palace dungeons, and her fate in the hands of our mad emperor and his henchman. I will not ask you to betray your loyalty to Rome for my sake. I have here some gold. Make your way to Greece. You will be safe there. For Nero will surely seek to take vengeance on you once he discovers that I have deserted him."

"Master, it was you who saved my life in Britannia and gave me my freedom. Since then, I have given my life for your service. My loyalty is to you, and not to the empire you serve. Where you go, I will go! Where you die, I will die with you."

"Dear faithful Licinius! One could never hope to find a more loyal companion. Go now, and put on the old centurion's armor and insignia that are among my vestures. You shall look every bit the officer you are worthy to be. Then, my friend, we must go and enter the very gates of hell, and may God grant that we will again see the light of day!"



"So far, so good," Marcus said, as they entered one of the palace courtyards. "No one seems to suspect anything. Now let's see. Yes, the corridor to the right leads to the lower section. Then the stairs over by the fountain lead down to another section of the prison. Maybe we should..."

"Master, look!" Licinius said, pointing to an upper floor.

Marcus looked up to see Tigellinus and two Praetorian guards escorting Camilla into a room. The guards stayed outside as Tigellinus and Camilla entered the room.

"What are they doing up there?" Licinius wondered aloud.

"I'm not sure, but one thing I do know—we know where Camilla is. And if we can get to her, we might be able to find out what has become of the others. I have a plan," said Marcus. "See that tree over there in the corner? Look, it reaches up and overhangs that balcony around the corner."

"Yes, I see. But why do you point it out?"

"Because there is a good chance that the balcony leads to the same room where Camilla is now, or at least to an adjoining room. In any case, if I can make it to that window, I'll be able to get in without attracting any attention from those guards by the door."

"You're crazy, Master! Why, that branch is clearly visible from both ends of the courtyard. If someone was to see you..."

"I know. But that is where you come in, Licinius. This courtyard is not a busy one; it is only used by the prison guards, and an occasional visitor to the prisons. If you position yourself there by the corner, you will have a clear view of anyone approaching. I leave it to you to create a diversion to attract the attention of anyone who might come by while I am in view."

"Well," Licinius sighed, "seeing that I will not be able to dissuade you, I wish you the best, and may the gods keep you."

"No, Licinius, not the gods, but the God of Heaven will be with me," Marcus answered boldly.

It was not long before Marcus had inched his way up the tree and had found his hold near to the branch along which he was planning to cross. From his hidden vantage point among the leaves, he could see straight into the room, which seemed to be empty.

"Dear God," he prayed softly, "You have brought me this far. Do not fail me now. I ask You to blind the eyes of any around, and get me safely into that room." With that, he carefully edged his way across the branch, holding on to the branches and leaves that hung loosely around him, and then swung himself onto the balcony.

As he did so, Licinius "accidentally" stumbled noisily over some pottery to cover any noise the guards may have heard. The guards peered over to see what had caused the commotion, and saw Licinius muttering to himself as he stooped down to replace the large pitchers he had so "carelessly" knocked over.

"Hey, be careful with those!" one of the guards shouted down. "If you break them, you'll pay for them!"

Marcus heaved a sigh of relief, and with a quick look around, entered the room. There was no one there. Seeing a door to an adjoining room, he made his way over and carefully opened it. Again, there did not seem to be anyone in this room either. *Strange*, he thought. *I am almost sure this is the room they entered.*

Inspecting the room more carefully, he suddenly spotted a beam of light beside a bookcase embedded

into the wall. He stopped for a moment and then walked over. Yes, there was a light shining from behind the bookcase, which in fact appeared to be moved slightly away from the wall. He checked the floor, which revealed the telltale scratch marks. *Yes, a secret passage. Of course! This place must be full of them.* Marcus pulled on it a little, and the whole bookcase quietly swung open, revealing a small torch-lit hallway. Entering in, he followed it to a narrow winding staircase.

As he descended the stairs, being careful not to make himself heard, he could hear the unmistakable voice of Tigellinus, and it was clear that he was not in a good mood. "This is your only chance, you witch! Tell me if Marcus is involved in the Christian movement? Was he the one who rescued you? If you talk, I may yet be able to find some way to save you from Nero's wrath..."

The tirade continued as Marcus drew slowly closer. Coming to the end of the stairway, he found another door which stood open. Through it, Marcus noticed that the room turned to the left in a kind of L-shape. Tigellinus and Camilla were out of sight. He also noticed a small curtained alcove directly to his right. This was probably where the bed to this hidden room was. Marcus quickly entered and hid behind the curtain, his movements drowned out by Tigellinus' own voice, which seemed to be growing angrier by the minute. No sooner had he hidden behind the curtain, but he heard a loud slap, followed by a frantic scream.

"My patience is running short!" Tigellinus shouted. "Tell me what I want to know, or you shall suffer the justice of Nero!"

Marcus managed to control his own impulse to leap out from his hiding place, but he drew his dagger in his ready hand and uttered a short prayer:

"Dear God, please help me! I don't know You very well, but give me wisdom to know what to do, and the strength to do it. But above all, help me to get Camilla out of here."

As he finished his prayer, he noticed that a silence had entered into the room. Had Tigellinus heard his whispered prayer? His heart began to pound, as he could not see through the curtain, and he had no way of knowing what was happening on the other side. His courage returned however when he heard the voice of Tigellinus again.

"Well, my pretty little flower..." Somehow his voice seemed calmer now, and his temper controlled. "...I'll give you some time to think it over. I must see Nero and report to him all that has happened. In the meantime, you may stay here. It may not be as comfortable as your mansion, but you can be thankful that I rescued you out of that dungeon. You see, I really do care about you. I'll send a guard down to bring you some food. I hope you will come to your senses and tell us what we want to know."

With that, Tigellinus turned and stormed out of the room. Marcus heaved a sigh of relief, and sheathed his dagger. "Dear Jesus, You are indeed a mighty God. Thank You for answering my prayers," he whispered in thankfulness. Marcus heard the door closing behind Tigellinus, and a key turning to lock it. Hearing Camilla sobbing, he instantly pulled aside the curtain and came out.

"Camilla!" he exclaimed as he turned the corner and saw her lying on a couch, her face bruised and stained with tears. She stopped sobbing and looked up in unbelief.

"Marcus! But how? Oh, Marcus, you're here!"

"Yes, my love, I'm here. Now we must act quickly. The guard will be back in a few minutes. You stay

here. I'll be behind the curtain. When he enters, you'll have to keep him occupied. Then I'll come out from behind, and get him before he has a chance to call for help."

Camilla nodded, dried her tears, and tried to regain her composure—and her courage.

No sooner had Marcus returned behind the curtain when his attention was riveted to the door, and the unmistakable sound of a key turning in the lock. The door creaked as the guard swung it open, and entered with a small tray containing a loaf of bread and a flask of wine.

"So, where are you, my little beauty? Nero has prepared a most gracious banquet for you. Here! Eat, drink and be merry while you can."

"Why don't I give you a little merriment while I can?" she suggested with a wink.

The hapless guard hesitated only a moment, and a moment was all it took. In a flash Marcus leaped out from the curtain, grabbed the surprised guard from behind, and now held his dagger to his throat.

"One sound from you, and you're dead," Marcus said. "Do you understand?"

The guard managed a gulp, and followed it with a quick nod.

Before another word was said, Camilla disarmed the guard. Then, pulling down the curtain cords, she handed them to Marcus, who quickly bound up the guard while Camilla gagged him with a strap she had ripped off her dress. Then Marcus unfastened the guard's helmet, picked up the flask of wine, poured it out on the floor, and struck him on the temple, rendering him effectively unconscious. Marcus then unfastened his own uniform, and quickly donned that of the Praetorian guard.

They moved speedily up the stairs, and into the outer room. It would be too dangerous to try to bring

Camilla across from the balcony, so they headed towards the door.

"Wait here. There may still be another guard out there, unless he left with Tigellinus." Marcus fingered his dagger and looked down towards the ground, so as to hide his face should someone be there to see him. Then he opened the door. Thankfully there was no one there.

"Quick, Camilla, let's go!" Within moments they had descended the stairway and joined with Licinius at the bottom.

"What now, Master?" Licinius asked.

"It will be at least an hour or two before Tigellinus returns, and the guard is tied and locked in the secret chamber, so we have a little time. We just need to get out of here now without arousing suspicion from any guards. With this Praetorian uniform, we may be able to bluff our way out."

"Well, I don't see that we have much choice, so we might as well try," Licinius replied.

As they approached the gate, one of the guards called out, "Hey! Where are you taking the prisoner? I thought she was to be kept in the chambers!"

"She has consented to the will of Nero, and Tigellinus has instructed that she be brought to his own residence," Marcus answered, trying to disguise his voice. He then motioned towards Licinius with his head. "This centurion is to escort her there immediately, while I tend to his other prisoners—and you know Tigellinus does not like his orders questioned."

The guards looked nervous. They knew all too well the fury which Tigellinus was capable of.

"Please, don't let us detain you!" the second guard finally answered back, opening the gate for them.

"See to it that you protect her with your life," Marcus called out to Licinius in the presence of

the other guards. "If she escapes, you can be sure that Nero will require your life for hers. Now go, and let no man stop you!"

With that, Licinius took firm hold of Camilla and walked through the gate. Then with a silent prayer that God would keep Licinius and Camilla, Marcus headed back into the prison grounds.



Walking boldly back towards the prison, Marcus made his way into the lower dungeons. It was a horrible experience; the damp and darkened corridors echoed with the sounds of moaning captives. The foul stench almost made him vomit. But he continued, deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of passageways, and towards the maze of cells he knew had been reserved for the Christians. "Dear God, please help me find them!" he prayed earnestly.

Though he knew of these dungeons, he had never been in them himself, and he had no way of knowing for sure that he was moving in the right direction. But somehow he did know—somehow he felt that he was not alone. It was almost as though some unseen guide was leading him by the hand. Then he noticed a passage to the left, guarded by a Praetorian soldier, and not the usual prison guard. "Is this it, Lord? So now what do I do?"

Marcus made his way down to the door and spoke to the guard as he felt the words coming to him: "Tigellinus has asked me to check on his prisoners. He doesn't want them disappearing before they are questioned, like some other Christians have."

"They're both still here. I can assure you. If they disappear, it will definitely not be during my watch. Come and see." Pulling the keys from off his belt, he opened up the door, and they both stepped in, Marcus following behind the guard, who carried in his torch and lit up the room for Marcus to see.

"There," said the guard. "See? Tigellinus has nothing to worry about."

As Marcus recognized Demetrius and Dorcas, who were both chained to the walls, they also recognized him, and let out a gasp. The guard, alarmed, turned around, but it was too late.

Marcus, who had meanwhile unsheathed his sword, speedily struck the unsuspecting guard on the head with the hilt. The guard crumpled to the ground. Marcus then took the keys and unlocked their fetters.

"Come, Demetrius, quick! Put on this man's uniform. I don't have time to explain, but just trust me, and I'll get you out of here."

As Demetrius did his best to attach the armor onto himself, Marcus dragged the unconscious guard over to the wall, and chained him up in place of Demetrius. Then they locked the cell behind them, leaving the keys, and proceeded back up to the higher levels.



Marcus was thankful that he had been given a tour of the prison grounds shortly after having been given his assignment by Nero. His knowledge would be the key to their freedom, as they headed towards a different gate from the one he had sent Licinius and Camilla through earlier.

"Hold!" said the guard. "Where are you going?"

"We are under orders from Tigellinus," Marcus answered boldly, and then pointed to Dorcas, "to take this prisoner to the hall of Justice immediately."

"I'm sorry," the first guard answered, "but I'm not sure I know you. Junius, have you seen this man before?"

Marcus hesitated for a moment, not sure how to respond. He cast a quick glance over to the second guard while pondering what to do. His eyes froze for

a moment, and then quickly turned back to the first guard. He knew this man, Junius—perhaps from an earlier command. Junius seemed to have recognized him as well. Marcus was beginning to get worried.

Junius, however, quickly turned to the first guard, and whispered something in his ear, at which the first guard appeared slightly flustered.

"I'm sorry, sir," the first guard apologized, "I have not held this post for long. Please, do not let us stand in your way."

"And that is all the better for you, soldier," Marcus answered gruffly. "You can be glad I am in a good mood, or Tigellinus would have surely heard of this! Now open this gate and let us through."

"Yes, of course, right away!" the first guard answered nervously.

Marcus, Demetrius and Dorcas were now on their way to safety.

"So who was he?" the first guard asked Junius when Marcus was out of earshot.

"I don't remember who he is," Junius replied, "but I'm sure I've seen him before, and that he is pretty important."



It was a happy gathering in the Greek Tavern near the edge of the city, as Demetrius, Dorcas, Camilla, Quinton, Licinius, Martha and Marcus gave thanks to God for their miraculous escape.

"So," said Quinton, "Luke has found a safe place for you all to hide until such a time as, by the mercy of God, this persecution will have abated. I myself shall be fine, as I have not yet aroused any suspicion. My friend, Seneca, however, has killed himself, though many suspect it was Nero's doing. Seneca was a good Senator, and close to us in many ways. I pray his death, and the rumors of his involvement in a

plot to overthrow Nero will not reflect negatively on my house. But you, Marcus, you have really stirred up a hornet's nest here, and I fear for your safety. We shall all miss you, and you as well, Camilla. But you must make haste, and go."

"Yes, Marcus," Martha added. "We have heard word from the apostle John, one of the closest followers of Jesus. He has gone to Ephesus, and is establishing a great Christian work there. It would be good for you, Marcus, if you could find a way to get there. Our Lord has used you to do mighty things, and I feel He may be calling you to proclaim His Word to many others, even to Britannia, and the distant regions you know so well. Go, find the apostle John, and may God make you a blessing to many!"

"Demetrius," Martha continued, "you have many friends in Greece. You will be safest there."

"But what of you, Martha, and you, Quinton?" Marcus asked.

"God has different callings for each of us, Marcus," Martha assured him. "Our place for now is here in Rome. There is more persecution to come, and we must use our position of influence to help our brothers as long as possible."

Quinton came and embraced Marcus. "Farewell, Marcus. I shall miss you. In this short time that I have had the privilege to know you, as a fellow Roman, and as a brother in Christ, I have come to know you well, and grown to consider you in many ways as my own son."

"As a soldier, used to battle and bravery," Marcus replied, "I must say that I have found your bravery to be a truer courage than that of any soldier of Rome. To stand in front of a hoard of barbarians with a sword in your hand is one thing; to choose to risk your life and position that you might help

others, or to face the arena boldly, singing and smiling in the face of death, this is real bravery—the kind that the people of Rome shall never be able to erase from their hearts! I shall miss you too, Quinton, my dear friend.”

“Godspeed, and until we meet again,” Quinton answered.



When word was brought to Tigellinus that his prisoners had escaped, he raged like an angry bull. His fury lashed out at the unfortunate guards. Then, calming down, he realized Nero would explode in fury of anger if he discovered the truth. He would have to find a way to pacify him. He would ask Poppaea—Nero’s new and favorite wife, who still owed him a few favors—to intercede for him, and place the blame on Marcus. After all, had it not been Marcus who had caused all the trouble? And had it not been Nero who had trusted him? Then Tigellinus went and paid a visit to Quinton, the Senator, asking him for his support in front of Nero, if it would be needed. Quinton smiled and agreed, rather amused that Tigellinus would ask him. At least he knew now that Tigellinus suspected nothing. But he prayed that it would not need to come to pass, as if he would be forced to side with either Nero or Tigellinus, it would put him in an awkward position.

Marcus, Camilla and Licinius made their way out of Rome, and to a small coastal town where preparations were being made for a ship to take them to Ephesus.

Nero, thanks to the intervention of his wife, was pacified for the moment, and after offering a sizable reward for the capture of this “enemy of the state,” thought little more on the matter, but continued to indulge himself in his own pleasures and pastimes.

Quinton, thankfully, was not required to speak on Tigellinus’ behalf, but he had won the favor and trust of Tigellinus by his willingness to do so. He was now in a much stronger position to be able to help his fellow Christians in Rome.



“Marcus,” Camilla said as they finally found themselves alone. She had not said much in the past few days. Everything had happened so fast that she barely knew what had happened. Now, they were on a ship, being carried away to a city she had only heard of, and had never been interested in before. But even such thoughts did not occupy her mind as much as her thoughts about Marcus.

“I have come to see things in you that I never saw before. When you first returned to Rome, I thought you had changed, but now I see an even greater change has come upon you. From the time you first met these Christians, you have become a new man. You radiate warmth, peace, and a calmness you never had before. Though I always loved you, there was a cynical side to you. You were flippant. Yes, you were brave and loyal, but ... I can’t explain it. But now, when I am with you, I no longer desire all the things of my past—the riches, the parties, the meaningless days of endless chatter. I want only to find this rest and peace you have, Marcus.”

And so it was that Marcus won his first soul to the Kingdom, and she would not be his last.



It was a beautiful sunny day as Marcus, Camilla and Licinius stepped off the ship, which had safely arrived at the harbor of Ephesus.

“Well, Camilla, welcome to a new beginning! Let this be the start of a new life together, and may God make it a long and fruitful one!”

“Amen,” Licinius chimed in, smiling at the two lovers. “And God be with Quinton and Martha and our brothers in Rome.”

“Yes,” said Marcus. “There may be dark times ahead, but God will turn them into light, as we proclaim His Gospel to the nations. But come now. We must go and find John.”

And so the three Christian friends walked down the gangway onto the shores of a new land, and onto the threshold of a new life—a life that was only just beginning.



GLOSSARY

alcove: *an opening in a wall or structure, forming a room or space of its own*

amphitheater: *a round or oval structure with multiple levels of seats rising upwards and outwards from a central field or arena, where spectacles and contests are held*

amulet: *an object worn, especially around the neck as a charm against evil or injury*

antiphonal: *occurring in two parts, each in response to the other*

aqueduct: *a bridge-like structure, often built by the Romans, on top of which, and through a conduit, water would pass and be transported to various parts of the country*

brandish: *to wave (a weapon) around, often in a threatening manner*

cacophony: *a confused jangle of sounds*

concubine: *a mistress, or woman who lives with a man without being married to him*

crestfallen: *discouraged, depressed*

dejectedly: *disheartened, in low spirits*

deliberately: *with careful consideration, so as to avoid any mistakes*

edifice: *a large, impressive building*

enrapt: *filled with delight, fascinated*

fishmonger: *one who sells fish*

illustrious: *well known; distinguished*

impetuous: *passionate, forceful*

indignant: *angry*

indulge: *yield to the desires and whims of, to an excessive degree*

legionnaire: *soldier of a legion*

manipulation: *trying to influence someone, often by indirect or devious means, into doing something to another's advantage*

nonchalant: *appearing coolly unconcerned or indifferent*

pallia: *an outer cloak or mantle worn by ancient Greeks and Romans*

perturbed: *to be disturbed or made anxious*

praetorian prefect: *the head of a regiment of the praetorian guard, the personal bodyguards of the emperors of Rome*

procurator: *a civil employee of the Roman emperor who managed affairs such as finance and taxes, management of imperial estates and properties, and governing minor provinces*

quay: *a wharf or dock where ships can be loaded and unloaded*

resolutely: *determined, unwavering*

OVERCOMERS

sardonically: in a mocking or scornful manner

scapegoat: one that is falsely blamed for something, in place of one who is really to blame

senator: member of the senate, or supreme council of ancient Rome

traipsing: walking or tramping about

trident: a three-pronged spear

vying: striving for, desiring

ward: a person under the care and protection of another

ENDNOTES

i - The phoenix

In ancient Egyptian mythology, a fabulous bird associated with the worship of the sun. At the end of its 500 year life span, it would build a nest and set it on fire, consuming itself in the flames. The phoenix would then be miraculously revived from the ashes, and rise to live another 500 years.

ii - Gladiators: the *Murmillo* and the *Retiarius*

Murmillo: one of the most common classes of the gladiators, who specialized in sword fighting. They had limited body-armor, and carried a sword and shield.

Retiarius: a class of gladiators that fought without any body armor. Their primary weapon was a net, with which they tried to ensnare their opponent, often a more heavily armored gladiator. Because of their own lack of armor, they could move about swiftly and freely, making it easier for them to dodge the strokes of their opponent.

iii - Rome: from Republic to Empire:

Although Rome began as a kingdom, their king was eventually deposed, either by a revolt of the people or by an invading force. From then on, it became known as the Republic of Rome, governed by consuls who were elected each year by the people. These consuls also served as generals and were in command of the army.

At this time, laws were made by the Senate and the Assemblies. Judges decided how to apply them in court. Verdicts and judgments were written down and explained, so legal books not only listed the laws but also advised on how to interpret them. Governors took local customs into account. In Republican times the death penalty was rare, but during the Empire capital punishment was more common.

As Roman territories expanded, the Republic became embroiled in tensions and civil wars. It was out of these wars that the Empire was born. Julius Caesar and his forces eventually managed to gain complete control over the Republic. Upon his assassination, Caesar's nephew, Titus Octavius defeated all others who sought to take Caesar's

place. In 27 BC, Caesar Augustus was crowned the first emperor of Rome, ushering in a new era of imperial rule, which was to last until the fall of the Roman Empire.

During the time of the Empire, most new laws were devised by the emperor. Other laws, though issued by the Senate, still had to be approved by the emperor. The power of judges was limited, and they were no longer allowed to change or interpret laws.

iv - Fortune tellers: the augur and the haruspex (plural: haruspices):

The Romans believed strongly in supernatural forces. They had many ways of predicting the future and learning the will of the gods. **Haruspices** were special priests who examined the innards of sacrificed animals. It was thought that the shape of an animal's liver, and the presence or absence of blemishes on it, would reveal the attitude of the gods towards public projects and government policies.

The **augurs** were a group of 16 prophets in Rome. They examined the sky for flocks of birds, cloud shapes, lightning, and other natural events. They believed that these things were omens that could tell them the opinions of the gods.

v - Nero Claudius Caesar (37 – 68 AD):

The fifth emperor of Rome. He became infamous for his personal corruption, extravagances, the burning of Rome and the persecution of Christians. After a series of manipulations and orchestrated eliminations by his mother, Agrippina, Nero found himself the absolute emperor of Rome at the young age of 17. His early rule was one of generosity and clemency. He forbade contests in the circus involving bloodshed and banned capital punishment. Greatly interested in art, Nero inaugurated competitions in poetry, in the theatre, and in athletics as counter-attractions to gladiatorial combats.

In the meantime, his closest counselors, Seneca and Burrus, took it upon themselves to govern most of the empire while Nero indulged in his own pleasures and pursuits. They also encouraged him to act independently from his mother, who sought to rule the empire through her son. He eventually

had her put to death on suspicions that she was plotting against him. This was followed not too long after by the murder of his wife Octavia on the same charges, though it was commonly accepted that it was because he had fallen in love with Poppaea Sabina, the young wife of the senator (and later emperor) Otho.

Seeing that he could now do what he liked without fear of retribution, Nero's behavior began to drastically change, and his extravagances and almost insane fascination with his own "gifts" of artistry became more apparent, as he stooped to perform even lewd roles in public plays. The great fire that ravaged Rome in 64 AD illustrates how low Nero's reputation had sunk by this time. Taking advantage of the fire's destruction, Nero had the city reconstructed in the Greek style and began building a prodigious palace—the Golden House—which, had it been finished, would have covered a third of Rome. Nero, himself suspected of setting the fire, tried to shift responsibility on the Christians, who were popularly thought to engage in many wicked practices. Thus began the first of many Christian persecutions by the emperors of Rome.

However, not long after, the army revolted, and the legions of Rome proclaimed Galba emperor. The Senate condemned Nero to die a slave's death: on a cross and under the whip. Tigellinus resigned, his personal guards abandoned him, and Nero was forced to flee the city, after which he is said to have committed suicide.

vi - Ofonius Tigellinus (? – 69 AD):

The chief advisor to Nero from 62 to 68. He was notorious for the influence his cruelty and corrupt behavior had upon the emperor. During this time, he was Prefect of the Praetorian guards, the personal guards of the emperor. He actively encouraged Nero in his vices, and was later suspected of being involved in setting the great fire that led to the first persecution of Christians. When Sulpicius Galba raised a rebellion against Nero in 68, Tigellinus gave up his title so that he would not have to risk his life in a struggle to save Nero's regime. He committed suicide a year later.

vii - Sextus Africianus Burrus (? - 62 AD):

Prefect of the Praetorian Guard from 51 to 62 AD. Together with Seneca, he was a chief advisor to the young Roman emperor Nero, and played a key role in helping Nero assert his power over the empire. He was killed in 62 AD, and his command of the Praetorian guards was handed over to Tigellinus.

viii - Queen Boudicca (also spelled Boadicea):

Ancient British queen who in 60 AD led a revolt against Roman rule. Boudicca's husband, Prasutagus, was king of the Icenii (in what is now Norfolk) under Roman supervision. When Prasutagus died in 60 with no male heir, he left his private wealth to his two daughters and to the emperor Nero, trusting thereby to win imperial protection for his family. Instead, the Romans annexed his kingdom, humiliated his family, and plundered the chief tribesmen. While the provincial governor was absent, Boudicca raised a rebellion throughout East Anglia. The insurgents burned Camulodunum (Colchester), Verulamium, the mart of Londinium (London), and several military posts. Her forces were said to have massacred 70,000 Romans and pro-Roman Britons, and to have cut to pieces the 9th Legion of Rome. The governor later returned with reinforcements, and in a desperate battle regained the province. Boudicca took poison or died of shock.

ix - Titus Petronius Niger (? - 66 AD):

A Roman governor, who after becoming consul, swiftly rose to prominence within Nero's most intimate and trusted circle of courtiers. His close friendship with the emperor earned him the enmity of Tigellinus. It was this enmity that eventually led to his death.

x - Lucius Anneaus Seneca (4 BC - 65 AD):

Born to a wealthy family, Seneca was banished from Rome during the reign of the emperor Claudius. With the help of Claudius' new wife, Agrippina (the mother of Nero) he managed to return to Rome. He built up an influential circle of

friends, chief among whom was Burrus, the Praetorian Prefect, and became tutor to the young Nero. The death of Claudius and inauguration of Nero brought both Seneca and Burrus to their height of power as Nero's advisors. Seneca's involvement with many of Nero's controversial acts did not earn him much respect. After Burrus' death in 62 AD, he retired from his powerful position as virtual co-ruler with Nero.

xi - Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC - 43 BC):

Roman orator and philosopher. Julius Caesar had him banished for his views. Later he was able to return to Rome, where although he did much philosophical writing, he was never far from politics. After trying to persuade Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, to declare war on Mark Anthony, a powerful and influential Roman general, rather than rule together with him, Octavian instead sided with Mark Anthony, and Cicero was executed.

xii - Socrates (469 BC - 399 BC):

Greek teacher and one of the great philosophers of his day. Although he declined political office, he became involved in several legislative counsels.

His belief in one God, and his resultant and often blatant disregard for the worship of traditional and mythological gods, goddesses and forces brought him into disfavor with the court of which he was a member. This, together with his sometimes controversial judgements on matters, which he made according to his own pious principles rather than according to the often devious motives of the majority of the court, eventually led him to be tried on charges of "corruption of the young" and "neglect of the gods whom the city worships."

Once on trial, his refusal to compromise his beliefs that he was an envoy sent by God to enlighten the minds of men, and his pretentious plea of defense in his own favor greatly angered the court, and he was sentenced to death.

xiii - Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC):

Greek teacher and philosopher who had been a pupil of Plato, who later became tutor to Alexander the Great.

OVERCOMERS

xiv - Plato (427 BC - 347 BC):

Greek philosopher and educator, and a pupil of Socrates. After Socrates' death, he and other fellow pupils fled Athens, and founded the Academy of Plato, where he pursued and taught philosophy till his death in 347 BC. It was at this school that Plato met and tutored Aristotle.

xv - Epicurus (342 BC- 270 BC):

Greek teacher and philosopher who wrote on such topics as justice, friendship and simple pleasures. He founded the school of Epicureanism in Athens, which competed for recognition with the already firmly established Academy of Plato, and the Lyceum of Aristotle.

xvi - Titus Lucretius Carus (94 BC? - 50 BC?):

Latin poet and philosopher known for his single, long poem *De Rerum Natura* (On the nature of things). He committed suicide at the young age of 44.

xvii - Gullus Valerius Catullus (84 BC - 54 BC):

Roman lyrical poet, and writer of passionate poetry. His prose is considered the finest lyric poetry of ancient Rome.