



Angus lamented as he lay in the dark hold of the ship, breathless and in pain from his wounds, knowing he would probably never see his home or island again. What would become of Lachie? He would miss him. What of his mother? How would she survive without him? What of his young brother, the last man of his family remaining now that he was taken? His father had died some years ago, and Angus was now the third son to be taken by the Romans. His mother—if she was still alive—would be heartbroken to learn of it.

What lay in store now? Life as a slave? He touched his medallion. *Little good it ended up doing me, he thought. Still, who knows, maybe the gods have wished this so.*

OVERCOMERS II

“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.”

–Revelation 12:11

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Recommended age: 12 years and up.
(May be read by younger children at parents’ discretion.)

Cover by Jeremy

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FOREWORD BY JESUS

This is a story of people, real people who lived and died and loved. It was a dark time—a time when people were stepping out of a life of gods and goddesses, where life was lived in violence and the use of the sword was commonplace.

These people were human, with needs, desires, and emotions. Like all people they lived a life of love, sex, and even death—men who, since the time they were born, had learned to survive by dealing death to others without thought. Slavery was the normal way of life, and life was hard.

Into this came My disciples, bringing release from their chains and freedom, but in the spirit—for often they remained in the bondage they were living, but served in a newness of spirit. Some stood boldly and died as a testimony, but some resisted and fought on in the arm of the flesh.

There is a time to fight and not to stand by and watch others die, so some in this story fight and others do not. This is how it was. Like Sergeant York¹, they had to take a stand—not that to fight was the answer, but in some instances it was needed.

¹**Sergeant Alvin Cullum York (1887 - 1964):** American hero of World War I whose tale is told in his autobiography, and whose adventures were chronicled in the 1941 movie *Sergeant York*. Although reluctant to fight, York was drafted into the army, where he saw that sometimes it was necessary to kill a few in order to save many. See also ML#849.

Yet so it is today among Christians: Many will fight with force the rise of the Antichrist, while others will do so in the spirit or with My spiritual weapons as I empower them.

I try to show people how they are, like Titus—a man who betrays his friend through fear, for many who are your friends now while all is good, and maybe even agree in principle to everything, yet they are weak and in persecution will turn.

Or others like Decius—a man given to evil through his wrong choices, yet who turns to Me for forgiveness and finds it.

The Druid is like the many witches and Devil's disciples that are present today and seek to deceive and lead the people astray.

The fight in the arena may seem to be unrealistic, to overpower these two great beasts—but so was John's refusal to boil in oil.

Yes, I can do miracles, and things that human flesh cannot do, I can. And in the Last Days I will do miracles that make these seem like nothing. These people all learned to come to Me and listen to My voice. When it came time to give their lives as a witness, then I gave them grace and power and strength.

Some I delivered from pain and agony. Others I gave grace to endure and shine forth. To each it was according to My purpose as a witness to bring others to Me. These were My overcomers, and now they are here with Me to help and assist you, that you too might find the strength and courage to stand up in that evil day, to use all the new powers and weapons that I have given you so that, like Me and like them, you might overcome this world.

THE EAGLE, THE MISTLETOE, AND THE CROSS

PROLOGUE

1969

It was a grim day as Angus and Calum stood on the hillside overlooking the raging North Sea. Angus was 18 years old and his friend Calum was 19. They'd both spent all their life here on the Isle of Lewis in the Western Hebrides. They were out near Callanish where stand the Great Mystical Standing Stones¹. Angus and Calum were out for a hike as it was Saturday afternoon and there was no work today. Calum had climbed higher up the hill with his spyglass to look for birds nesting, while Angus stood watching the clouds move across the sky.

The clouds were now gathering quickly in the darkening sky, and the winds howled louder and louder as the waves swept across the shore. Angus loved to watch the waves roaring and breaking along the shoreline.

Aye, it's going to be a strong gale, thought Angus Ogg, as he pulled his balaclaver* down over his ears.

"Calum! Calum Moore!" he cried out, pointing out to the storm in the distance. "Come down and

¹**Callanish Standing Stones:** *Callanish, on the Isle of Lewis has a unique cross-shaped setting of Standing Stones, erected 5,000 years ago. An avenue and three lines of stones leads to a central stone circle, within which sits a central pillar and a tiny burial cairn*.*

* **Words marked with an asterisk** are defined in the glossary on page 291

look out there!”

“Coming, Angus! Hauld yer horses! A’m no deaf, ye ken!” a reply echoed, as Calum started down the hill towards where Angus stood. Calum was a runt* of a laddie but as bauld* as a lion. They had been friends all their life. They often watched Angus’ father’s sheep together on the weekend, after working in the local quarry and on the fishing boat.

“Looks like the gale is going to be hitting soon, Calum. We need to be getting back to the shieling* afore we get drenched.”

Soon Angus and Calum were trudging along through the wild gurley*, as the rain pounded the boggy ground making their journey more difficult. The lightning flashing lit the now-darkened sky and the thunder clapped like cannon roars making the hills seem even more ominous. These hills had a reputation of being haunted by wraiths* of the ancient Celtic Islanders, or so the locals said. The howling winds were skirling* like a banshee*, scouring the land as they trampled through the moor, making it feel all the more eerie.

“We canna make it, Calum,” yelled Angus, drenched by the heavy rains. “We need to find some form of shelter or we’ll catch our death.”

“Lord, help us now and bring us to shelter!”

The wild winds were sweeping the stagnant waters of the moors, making them seem at a glance as though they were running waters.

“There is a small cove* doon on the machair*,” shouted Calum over the loud winds. Then as he suddenly remembered something from his childhood he exclaimed loudly. “Angus, it’s no far from here! We can reach it in about fifteen to twenty minutes. I once went there when I was a wee wean*.”

“Is it no far from here then?”

“No, we can get to it by the old path over at the foot of the high point,” said Calum, pointing down

to the left where the ancient watch point of the isle jutted out above the sea.

“Let’s go then,” Angus cried. And soon they were climbing down the old beaten path.

Calum was droukit*, and was chittering* as the biting cold winds cut through him. Aye, it had come so quick they were completely unprepared. Angus at least had his Harris tweeds on and a balaclaver, while Calum was only wearing a thick Shetland wool pullover.

“Ye canna trust these weather reports,” mumbled Angus. “I always said my grandfather was a better forecaster than these so-called weather men.”

“There it is, Angus,” called Calum, pointing to a small opening barely visible just a few feet up on the side of the cliff. They climbed up and were soon in the shelter of the cove. They huddled together for warmth as it was a muckle* gurley and seemed to be growing stronger.

“Aye, it looks like we’ll be here for some time, Calum. It’s a godsend that we found this place—an answer to our prayers. It’s strange, though, that in all my years living here, I never knew of it?”

“Och, it was an accident I found it. I was playing doon on the shore with my dog. I’d gotten to collecting some o’ these shells from doon there, and then me dog Tam ran off. I heard him barking and as I came after him I came across this place. When I mentioned it to my father after I came home he got upset and said the place had a reputation of being haunted and to stay clear of it, so I never returned until now.”

“Let’s try to get some light in here,” said Angus as he pulled out his lighter. Then they scrambled around in the broken flickering light of the flame, trying to find some tinder. Soon, though, the lads had a small fire going and huddled around it, warming their frozen limbs.

Angus started to look around the cove. It was a dark cold place, and the dancing shadows cast by the fire played tricks on his eyes, making him imagine things. He then spotted something sparkling in the flickering light. It was lying in the corner of the cove and looked like an old piece of metal of some sort. Moving over he reached down and pulled out an old broken and rusted sword. As he examined it closely, he noticed an inscription on the blade.

He moved closer to the flames, cleaned off some of the dirt, grime, and mould. He strained his eyes in the broken light and was able to make out the inscription. It was in Latin. He tried to remember all his Latin from school and with Calum's help they had soon deciphered what they believed to be the inscription:

To Angus, for his loyalty and devotion. A remembrance of your service to my family. Claudius.

"It seems to be Roman, and most certainly has my name on it. It's uncanny, Calum. I wonder what story lies behind this. If only it could talk, what tales it would tell, eh!"

After a few hours the storm abated some but still showed no sign of stopping. The two lads, realizing they would be there for the night, prayed for safekeeping and curled up on the cove floor. Angus hoped his family would not worry, and that they would assume he had gone to stay with Calum, as he occasionally did on weekends. And Calum's parents likewise would expect him to be at Angus' home. So with a prayer that they wouldn't worry, they closed their eyes. They soon were off blissfully into deep sleep.

CODEX I

ANNO DOMINI 61 · 62

- 1 -

THE RAID

It was a cold, dark, chilly morning in 61 A.D. Angus pulled his tunic tighter around his shoulders. He shivered a little, glinting* out into the surrounding darkness which was pitmirk*. There was something sinister about the misty darkness of the morning air. Angus had been on watch all night and was looking forward to a hot bowl of soup and a bowl of porridge, or some fresh bannocks* and kebbuck*. Just then he heard a snapping twig in the still air and went rigid. Was it his relief? Or was there someone else out there lurking in the darkness?

His mind thought of the stories of phantoms and banshees, and he moved his hand to the sword that was hidden under his tunic. Sweat broke out on his face as he waited tense and nervous.

“Angus! Are ye there, lad?” came a familiar cry.

A wave of relief spread over Angus as he recognized the voice of Gilespie. Aye, his relief was here.

“Over here!” called Angus.

“Here, lad, have a wee dram,” Gilespie said as he offered Angus a small flask of the local brew.

But Angus was not one for the drink. He’d never really liked it, so he shook his head as he answered: “No, it’s all right. It’s not for me.”

Gilespie was a dour* fellow and always seemed to have a scowl on his face. Angus squinted as he stared, trying to see through the haar*. It was thick, which made it difficult to see properly. Angus thanked him and then excused himself, as he was rather peckish*.

It was the same every watch: fear and anxiety. He was always happy when it was time to return. *The responsibility of the whole village and its safety is a lot to bear*, Angus thought to himself. He then started to wind his way around the rugged hilltop overlooking the wild North Sea. The light was starting to peek through the misty sky and the early morning rays were sparkling on the sea below and starting to bring warmth to his cold body. It was the one thing he enjoyed about being on the lookout at night, the beauty of the evening sky and the early morning sky. Yes, the gods were being kind to him and blessing him with their paintings—glimpses of the heavenlies.

Then his mind swept back to the reality of his task. Fear! Yes, always the fear of death and of battle worried him. The Romans' forays into the Islands were becoming more frequent as they searched for slaves for the expanding empire. The isles had proved a great source of slaves and they were now coming more often. Angus had lost his two brothers, one cousin, and an uncle to the Roman raids. No matter how much they prepared, still they never were able to hold the raids at bay. The Romans had proved to be too skilled and trained in the ways of war, disciplined and unstoppable. But what else could one do but resist and fight?

Angus was 18 years old—a man by the standard of the Islanders; youth soon flees in these wild windswept isles; the hard life of survival swept the years of youth far from him. He no longer looked like a youth, as the hard living of the isles had made him

look older than his actual years.

Life consisted of working the crofts*, fishing the sea and warring with their many enemies. For beside the Romans, there were also the occasional raids from other Celtic tribes in Erin¹ and from the men of the North; also the rivalries of the tribes on this and other Islands made warriors out of all. If all could unite on the isles, then maybe they could manage to be a force strong enough to hold the Romans.

There was no family who had not lost at least one loved one to the raiders. Aye, it was a rough life, but what else was there? The men of the Orkneys, he heard, had built fabled towers that had held the Romans at bay—*brochs*² they called them. Some of the men who had sailed there before had seen them and heard of how the men of those places had withstood the Romans and defeated them. Aye, if only they had men skilled to do such feats here.

Angus trudged through the damp boggy ground across the moor to the sheltered glen where his village sat. He could see the smoke rising into the sky before him now. The light was slowly filling the land and everything was springing to life. The smell of the burning peat and the cooking of breakfast was filling his nostrils and feeding his growing hunger. Aye, he was looking forward to a nice hot breakfast of soup and bannocks.

The sound of the early morning hubbub reached his ears, bringing a smile to his face. The sun was now warming the cool air and Angus pulled off his shirt. He enjoyed the summer air; it was one of his favorite times of year. Some of the dogs picked up his scent and barked out warning, bringing the attention of the guards to him for a moment. But recognizing him, they soon turned back to their blethering*.

¹ Erin: Ireland

² brochs: pre-historic Scottish towers found in the Orkneys, built by the Picts as fortified dwellings

Angus smiled to himself, as he figured they were probably talking about the games of yesterday. There had been a great time had by all. Fighting with swords and fist, wrestling and games of skill such as bow and spear, as well as running and hunting. Angus reflected with pride on his participation as he had won the running events—all three, plus one of the wrestling bouts and came second in the competition with bow and arrow. He lost the sword fighting but that was because he was left-handed—at least he comforted himself with that thought. He had won one out of three of the wrestling bouts which he was proud of.

Yes, it was a great day, he thought, pride swelling up in him as he realized he would be the subject of talk in the village for months to come.

As he neared the outer stockade, his eyes caught movement down at the burn*. Angus moved quietly over the bracken*. He then dreep* down the rocks to get a better look. It was Katriona, the daughter of chief Lochiel. She was having a morning bath. He glanced back up the hill, over at the stockade to see if anyone was watching him. Then looked back down, where he watched captivated as the water ran down her snow-white skin. Each drop was glistening like jewels, scintillating in the morning light. Her raven hair was reflecting the light as the sun shone on it, giving a supernatural glow to her. She stood there listening to the singing brook and the wind rustling through the long grass, as she bathed in the crystal clear waters.

Angus sighed to himself. *Ah!* he thought, *if I had only been a bard, I could compose a poem or lilt* about her.*

Katriona was beautiful, sixteen years old and as yet not spoken for, as her father was chief and a man of fierce temperament and canny* with it. No one had dared to ask for her or presume to approach

him. Aye, it would have to be a man of great ability and renowned skill as a warrior to come before him for her hand. It was also said she was spae*, which was a gift of the gods. Aye, she was a different lass from all the rest.

Angus' eyes were riveted to this stunning apparition as though under a breef* and continued watching the water slowly run down her shapely form. Then as she turned and made her way over to the bank where her tunic lay, a shout suddenly broke the spell.

"Angus, over here! Come! I'll get some food for you!"

It was Lachie, his friend. Angus broke into a rather embarrassed smile as he greeted him.

"Aye, great Lachie," he replied, hoping he hadn't noticed what he had been doing. He started to climb up and head over towards Lachie, who had now turned and started back into the stockade.

Angus stopped for a moment, and glanced back over his shoulder to Katriona below at the burn. Lachie's call had alerted her that someone was near, and now she'd pulled her tunic around her and was looking up directly at him.

Their eyes met for a moment. There was no embarrassment or blush from her as she looked boldly into his eyes, but there was a certain exchange of spirits. He could see the power and strength of Lochiel in her eyes, but there was more ... something he could not put his finger on—something special, an aura.

She'd be a prize worth striving for, he thought. *There's a fire in her that I've never seen in another. If only I could get her as my bride.*

Angus then turned his gaze from her and made his way over to the stockade. Lachie was already ladling out a bowl of soup for him and soon the two of them were hunkered* down against the stockade,

with Angus gobbling a hot breakfast as though he had not eaten in days.

Lachie was a robust, energetic man, much older than Angus was and with a large bushy beard. Lachie had taken Angus under his wing at a young age and taught him all he knew. They both loved to hunt together, wrestle and dander* through the hills and glens. Lachie was a bit given to the clavers* and was blate* around the lassies, so Angus always pulled his leg and joked with him. But they were the best of friends and it was a great feeling to relax after a long night's work. The soup was hot and filling and Lachie was great company.

Angus was tall, well built and with blue eyes. He had long flowing hair and a moustache, but no beard. Around his neck hung a medallion with the engraving of mistletoe, a gift from a Druid to him for once saving his life. Ah, that was a tale to tell and gained him a lot of respect in the village. It would bring him safekeeping—so the Druid had said—and he always wore it. He also wore a silver arm bracelet in the shape of a snake around his arm. It had been a gift from his older brother just before the raid that took him prisoner to Rome.

Lachie and Angus sat back and enjoyed each other's company while they ate. Soon the two of them were busy discussing the next day's hunt.



Not many miles away, a Roman galley ship was plowing steadily through the roaring North Sea. Claudius, the commanding centurion on board, looked out over the horizon as he reflected on the past months during his time at home in Rome. He had been involved in the battle with the Iceni in Britannia just before his trip home to Rome and had looked forward to seeing his family. Some of the Britanni led by Queen Boadicea had rebelled and caused a lot of trouble. Later on, though, Nero discovered it

had been the fault of the Roman governor Suetonius Paulinus, who had acted too hastily and too brutally in trying to assert control over her territories after the death of her husband. The Ninth Legion had been destroyed and the Romans suffered several defeats. This had angered Nero severely. There were enough troubles in Britannia without making more, Nero raved, but at last the revolt had been put down and all was once more peace.

Claudius had met the queen a few times during his time stationed in Britannia. She was beautiful in a savage way. Twice during the brief war they had met across the battlefield. He had greatly admired her courage and remembered her standing in front of her warriors, her long hair flowing in the winds and her chariot fitted out with long blades in the center of her wheels—dangerous weapons that cut through the Roman foot soldiers like wheat. It was sad she had taken her life. Still what else had remained for her but death, or to be brought to Rome for the amusement of Nero?

He fingered the brooch that clasped his cape. It had been a gift from the emperor himself for his great services to the empire in being a part of the victory over the forces of the Iceni. He had succeeded in rescuing the standard, which was taken when the bearer fell. He had rallied the troops and inspired them. Tribune Marcus had then arrived and between them they defeated the army. The brooch was a gold engraving of an eagle, the well-recognized symbol of Rome.

Claudius had enjoyed his time with his wife and newborn son in Rome. His wife was of a noble family and it had been unusual for a centurion to take a noble to wife. Claudius had worked his way up as his family had been a mixed one, not pure Roman. Her father, Lucidus Valerius, a senator of Rome, had consented amid criticism and even given

them some land as a present before his death. He was a strange contrast to the other senators; he was kind and understanding and accepted Claudius as his own son. It had been a sad day when he died unexpectedly—murdered by an unknown assailant on his way home from visiting a friend. No one found out the reason why. It hadn't been robbery as his valuables were intact, and he had no known outspoken enemies. But that was how Rome could be sometimes.

Ah, Rome—a place of pleasure and excitement, but also of lurking fear. Rome had been changing over the years, and now under the rule of Nero there was unrest and division among many of the nobles. Rumors were rampant about a strange group of fanatics who followed a dead carpenter and were trying to take over the empire.

Claudius laughed to himself as he thought of such an idea! No, Rome was the eternal empire—and even if its emperor was for the moment rumored to have gone insane, the empire itself was here to stay. The glorious city of Rome was a gem that would endure for a thousand years. His own months in Rome had passed quickly and too soon for him. Now once more he was off to battle, a raid on some distant and largely forgotten coast.

He glanced back and saw the three ships following behind, each plowing through the waves toward the now approaching isles, their first stop. The northern isles had proved to be a great source of strong young slaves who were in high demand in Rome.

It was time to rouse the men and prepare for battle. A signal was sent to the other ships. The plan was to move in from two separate landing sites that had been determined on maps beforehand, Claudius leading the first group of two ships, and another centurion leading a second.

Claudius smiled to himself as he remembered the last engagement on these shores. It had been quick, ruthless, and had yielded twenty strong men and two pretty maids.

The next stop would be harder. Thankfully he would not be there though, as he was scheduled to return with the slaves after the raid. Yes, the Orkneys. If the Islanders there spotted them, it would prove fierce fighting due to their impregnable brochs. The only course to win a victory there was total surprise. Still, Bruno, who would be leading this force, was skilled in such operations.



Back on the isle a shout from the stockade brought Angus and Lachie to their feet in an instant, dropping their bowls of hot soup to the ground. They looked to the distant point where Domnal was pointing and saw the warning fire burning.

“Raiders! Raiders!” Lochiel shouted. “Women and children to the glen over the brae! Men arm yourselves and move to the shore! We canna let them past the shore or we’re finished!” Lochiel grabbed his sword and rushed to the shore, quickly followed by a horde of men armed and ready for battle.

Lochiel led the battle, his great sword curving through the air slicing and cutting his way through the first Roman troops tramping towards him. Aye, he was a tough warrior and his men, loyal and fearless, followed him without thought of their own safety.

The other two ships had landed unseen behind a rise in the landscape, and the Romans who disembarked there soon made their way around and over the hill. The second centurion, Bruno, smiled as he looked down on the scene below where the islanders were battling in the sea and shore with the soldiers from the first ships.

Within a short time the Roman reinforcements

had maneuvered behind down the crook of the hill across the bracken- and heather-covered moor and down to the battle below. The attack was brutal and fierce. The Celtae had no chance; and the disciplined Roman troops soon had them on the run.

The islanders had known that if the Romans made past the shore there was no chance of victory, and though they fought like lions they were put to flight with heavy losses. Lochiel had been wounded, and Gillespie and Lachie had helped him escape to the safety of the glens, while Domnal had led the other survivors to the hills.

Angus had been wounded in the leg, the arm, and side and was unable to flee.

The Romans soon had him chained along with twenty others. They were herded into waiting boats and then taken to the ships that would bring them to Rome.

Angus lamented as he lay in the dark hold of the ship, breathless and in pain from his wounds, knowing he would probably never see his home or island again. What would become of Lachie? He would miss him. What of his mother? How would she survive without him? What of his young brother, the last man of his family remaining now that he was taken? His father had died some years ago, and Angus was now the third son to be taken by the Romans. His mother—if she was still alive—would be heartbroken to learn of it.

What lay in store now? Life as a slave? He touched his medallion. *Little good it ended up doing me*, he thought. *Still, who knows, maybe the gods have wished this so.*

Angus looked at the others there. Aye, it would be a hard loss for the village. So many young men, and so soon after the last raid. A shadow came over him and caused him to look up. He found himself looking into the face of the centurion who was examining the

wounds on his body. The centurion spoke roughly to a man beside him, but Angus could not understand the conversation. However the man quickly left and returned with ointments and bandages, and began tending to Angus' wounds. Angus watched with interest as the centurion continued making his rounds and checking to see that the prisoners were taken care of.

Angus thought it unusual at first for a Roman to show care for his enemies, but then realized at once that it was because they were to be sold as slaves, and slaves bring better money if they are healthy and strong. So it was that the captives were well fed and tended to for the duration of the voyage—a voyage Angus thought would never end—and when the ships arrived in Rome the captives were as healthy as any of the Romans aboard the vessels.

The slaves were herded together and led ashore, and brought to a place where they were held for four days. Although chained, they were fed well and kept clean. When the day arrived for the auction, they were bathed and massaged with oils and brought to the market place where a great crowd had gathered. Rumor had it that even Nero had his representative among the bidders to purchase new slaves for the palace.

Tigellinus, of the Praetorian—who was rapidly gaining favor with Nero, rivaling that of the Prefect Burrus—was present. Several senators, distinguishable by their white and grossly oversized togas, were also among the crowd of buyers.

One by one the slaves were escorted onto the platform—men of the isles, of Gaul, of Egypt, and countless other countries under the iron rule of the mighty Roman empire. Now it was Angus who stood tall and bold with his head held high in defiance.

The bids started. Angus watched, eyeing the crowds, the senators, the nobles, the officers. His eyes

fell on the centurion who had taken them captive. The man's hand rose! He was bidding! Angus looked at him in wonder. Why was he bidding? Angus was young and strong, but the wounds he had incurred, though they had for the most part healed, left him for the present weak, and thus of little use for anything but menial tasks. But there were plenty of more attractive slaves fit for such duties. Why then was the centurion now bidding?

There were not many other bidders, aside from some plebeians hoping for a cheap chance at a potential gladiator. But in the end the bidding stopped and Angus found himself the property of the centurion Claudius.

- 2 -

A SECRET DISCOVERED

The following months passed quickly as Angus found his new master to be a kind one. He was schooled to learn Latin and trained in household duties. His master ignored his sometimes defiant look, and Angus soon found he took a secret liking to this commander of his enemies. Angus had decided that his only chance to ever get free was to cooperate and wait, and in the meantime learn what he could from these people who had conquered the world, and pray that his gods would engineer a way of escape for him in time.

After a period of eleven months, Angus spoke Latin quite well and could communicate enough for his duties and trips to the market. He was often allowed to go by himself, as he had proven himself faithful to his duties and master.

Claudius soon found out that he was being called off to sea again, and would be gone for a spell of one to two years in Britannia. During this time, the centurion's wife, Valeria, handled the overseeing of Angus' duties. Anthony, whom the centurion had placed over him, was the housemaster and took care of all the day-to-day essentials. Angus was his chief worker.

It was a sad day for all in the household when,

a year later, word was brought that Centurion Claudius had been slain in battle in Britannia. The household was disrupted for weeks and Angus discovered that Valeria would be moving to a smaller residence and selling half the slaves—including Anthony and himself.

Senator Gaius, an old friend of Valeria's father who had property in Gaul and other ends of the empire, had asked for Angus to help with his household in Rome. Gaius knew of the trust Claudius had put in Angus, and since he would be making a trip to his properties in Gaul later in the year, he felt Angus would be a beneficial addition to his staff.

Anthony found a new home with Senator Quinton, another friend of the late Lucidus.

Angus found Senator Gaius to be a very understanding and kind man. Aye, it would not surprise him if Gaius were partly the cause of his former master's kindness. Gaius always seemed to be involved in many duties to help the poor. He also spent time at many meetings with men and women of all levels of society, quite unusual for a Roman senator of nobility. People around him felt a great peace while with him and therefore spoke well of him.



It was now three months since Angus had moved to the home of Gaius and by chance (or was it?) there were no present duties for Angus to attend to. Most of the household were away on a trip with the mistress, Helvia. Aside from three other servants and himself, Gaius was the only other one home. So Angus found himself a quiet place in the garden to rest.

There was a nice patch of grass behind a row of beautiful scented rose bushes and he lay down there and started to drift off into a blissful sleep. Soon he was dreaming of the hills of home, of his mother,

Anu, sitting with him near the Great Stone Cross, telling him the tales of Samhain, Lord of Death. Stories of the mischievous kelpies* who played tricks on those who saw them, or the great goddess Danu and her battle with the firbolgs and the fomoirans*.

Then the noise of nearby talking awoke Angus, and he realized that Gaius was sitting on the bench beside the vines, and on the other side of the bush where Angus now lay concealed. He easily overheard the conversation.

"It's getting dangerous, Gaius. We can't keep having those meetings so openly. I've heard rumors that Tigellinus has a secret hatred for all believers and is trying to once more stir up trouble. Nero is getting more demented as the time goes by and I fear for our safety. I know in a short time you will be off to Gaul, but what of our work? Who will guide us now?"

"Dear Justin, you are much given to worry, but you need not fear," said Gaius. "Would our dear Lord leave us comfortless? Did He not promise to keep us and be with us? Luke and Martha have been running the church on the west side and have offered to take care of you while I am gone. There are rumors that Peter may even come to encourage the church in Rome. You need not fear. Why, there are many others in the senate and military who are coming to our meetings. Quinton, to whom Martha is bonded, has drawn closer and may even join us in God's time. So, my friend, do not fret, but let us hold fast to the faith in our Lord and Savior."

Angus lay there listening to this conversation. What did it all mean? He remembered stories he'd heard from other slaves and in the market. *Could Gaius be a Christian—one of those strange people who worshipped some dead carpenter they claimed had returned from the dead? No! Preposterous! They were out to destroy the empire. Gaius would*

never involve himself with such people. Then again, others had said these Christians were kind folk who helped the poor and weak, and Gaius easily fit that description.

Angus silently remained where he was and listened as Gaius and Justin spoke of other details concerning meetings to come. There was to be a meeting before Gaius' departure to Gaul in Claudius' residence. This piece of information surprised Angus. He had thought that Claudius' property had been sold!

After Gaius and Justin left, Angus returned to the house, where he engaged the steward of the house in casual conversation about Valeria and the estate, and learned that Gaius had persuaded her to keep the house, and rather to sell her father's old villa outside Rome. Gaius managed her investments for her, and saw to it that she and her son, the young Paulus, were always well provided for.

Angus was pleased by the news and happy for his former master's family. He determined to somehow find out more about Gaius, and if indeed he was working together with Christians, and what sort of people those Christians would be.



Angus quietly left the compound and made his way through the narrow streets. Fear rose in his chest. If he was caught, he would face punishment as a runaway, which could cost him all the liberty and trust he had gained over the years—if not more! *Why am I doing this? I could be risking my very hope of one day returning home, and all to discover the truth behind the story of a dead carpenter?*

He thought back to his isle and the Mystical Stones of Callanish where the Druids would hold their ceremonies. He remembered the great power of the Mistletoe and strong Oak, of the wild winds blowing through the Great Stones making the

waefu* sounds that filled the air with fear during the sacrifices. He had always wondered in amazement at their powers and abilities. They would read the future from the bones of the dead sacrifice and they could do magical things and curse those who dared to cross them. Why, they had more power than any chieftain, no matter how great their clann*!

Aye, Lochiel was one to fear, but the Druids—even Lochiel made sure to not offend Nielbauld! Angus could see the Druid in his mind's eye. Tall, robed in white, with his long white beard flying in the strong winds, his mouth muttering mystical chants and calling on strange powers.

Why am I so curious about the God of these Christians when I have the gods of my fathers? I have the great heritage of my Celtic ancestors? What need have I of another? Angus fingered the medallion that hung around his neck, remembering the day Nielbauld had given it to him.

But the symbol of the medallion seemed empty here. It was as though the love and peace he saw in Gaius was stronger and more tangible than the fear and power of the Druids. He had to find out if this had anything to do with the Christians, and what was so special about their carpenter that they would risk their lives and freedom for him.

He managed to avoid the frequent guards who patrolled the dark cobblestone streets. Twice he was almost caught but just managed to find an alcove to quickly hide in. His heart pounded like a drum and beads of sweat formed on his brows as he made his way across town. Finally his heart felt lighter and he heaved a sigh of relief as Claudius' house came into sight. He could see some movement at end of the street near the rear entrance to the compound lay. Angus quickly surveyed the situation and decided to climb over the wall near the baths. There was a line of hedges on the other side that he could drop down

behind, and so stay out of sight while he surveyed the scene to discover where the meeting was being held.

Once there, he could see a dim light in one of the windows. The garden was exactly as he remembered it, and he easily found his way to another line of hedges from where he could overhear the guests inside. He settled down and listened to the conversation within.

One man had started to speak and a hush came upon all that listened. "One day while Jesus spoke to the people, there came along a man who after listening to Jesus asked Him, 'Good Master, what is the most important commandment?'

"Jesus stopped and looked at him, then answered, 'To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul. The second is like unto it, to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the laws and the prophets.'

"The man stood quiet for a moment as he considered this then added, 'Who is my neighbor?'

"Jesus then told the story of a Jewish traveler who had gone to a distant city and was attacked and robbed by thieves who stripped him and left him wounded and naked in the road. A priest came by, and the wounded man called out to him, but the priest hurried off, lest he also be attacked. Some time later, a Levite of the temple came past, but this man also hurried on his way. The wounded man had almost given up hope when he heard the sound of a horse. Looking up from the ground, he saw a Samaritan riding toward him.

"Now the Jews hated the Samaritans and avoided their lands. There was no hope that this Samaritan would help. In fact, the Samaritan would likely finish what the robbers had started, and kill him. The Jew's heart pounded with fear as the

Samaritan stopped and approached him. But wait ... the Samaritan pulled out a flask of water, and gave it to the Jew. He helped him on to his horse and took him to an inn. There the Samaritan paid the innkeeper to look after the Jew until he was well enough to travel, and promised to cover any of the innkeeper's expenses on the Jew's behalf.

"Now which of these was the neighbor to the wounded man?' said Jesus.

"The Samaritan,' replied the man.

"Go thou and do likewise!' Jesus answered.

"That, my brothers and sisters, is my question to you: Who is your neighbor? The poor drunkard? The harlot? The Roman soldiers who persecute you? The idol worshippers? Yes. All of these are your neighbor and more. For we are sent to seek out the lost and bring them into His fold. Whether he is a slave or a free man, a robber or a soldier, an idol-worshipper or an unbeliever—all are called to come to our Lord. Brothers and sisters, all those you see who are in need are your neighbors, and God has called us to help them, to love them as He has loved us."

The words Angus heard touched him and stirred his heart with emotions he could not understand. The seed of faith had been planted.

It was still a good few hours before dawn when Angus returned to his quarters in the house of Senator Gaius. It did not appear that his absence had been noticed, and he had made the journey home in safety. It would soon be time to start work and Angus lay down for a moment, to reflect upon the result of his night's trip.

What little he had observed of these Christians and their teachings only made him eager to learn more—especially about the man Jesus. As Angus had listened to the words being said, he had felt his heart lighten. The words of Jesus now sunk deep into his consciousness and made him think. They were

not words as he had heard in the meetings of other religions. Angus had attended Roman ceremonies with Claudius, and seen the Greek and Egyptian slaves at worship. And of course there were his own memories of the Druid services and rituals to his own gods back home.

He would have to learn more about these Christians. But how?

- 3 -

A VISION ON THE SEAS

It was early morning and the sunlight was gleaming through the thick long grass surrounding the white sands along the shoreline. A rabbit popped up his head, looked left and right, hesitated a moment, twitched his nose, and then darted off into the long grass. A gull gave a lonesome cry as she swooped down to the nest on the cliff's side. Meanwhile, a small boat pulled up silently onto the sandy beach, unheard for the loud crashing of the waves. Five rough-looking individuals clambered out and moved stealthily along the white soft sands. They walked slowly, their eyes flickering from side to side eyeing the surrounding hills for any sign of movement.

These were hardened men of war, Iverni¹ raiders returning from a raid on the mainland, with a cargo of slaves. They were low on supplies and needed to take on some food and drinking water before returning home, so they had landed here. They climbed the brae and glanced through the rippling waves of rich green grass and bracken down to the glen below. Their eyes were constantly shifting and alert for the slightest movement, their ears listening intently for any unusual sounds.

¹ *Iverni: An Irish tribe*

“Whist!” came a quiet but firm voice. Everyone froze and followed the finger of the redheaded giant in front.

“There over yonder,” he said, pointing down to where a small burn trickled down a gully to a lush green howe* below. The other four men strained their eyes and made out three people carrying some packs on their back. They stopped and sat down at the burn drinking the crystal waters, quite unaware of the danger lurking nearby.

Aye, it was easy prey and most likely they were carrying some supplies in their bundles. The tall leader smiled as he fingered his gullie*.

“We need to strike now as there may be more of them further along the glen!” He eyed the glen, squinting against the sunlight, and pointed further down the burn where the stream turned and winded around a small hillock into a wee neuk*.

“There, we can scoot down the hill and wait for them over in the long grass,” he said brusquely.

The men soon disappeared and were quickly moving through the long grass to the spot below, unobserved by the travelers.

Katriona, Clohn, and Neil were returning from a trip to a neighboring settlement. There they had traded some of their fish and meat for produce. Lochiel and his clann were hunters and fishers. The neighboring clann, further inland, was skilled in tilling the land. Lochiel had arranged a pact with them where they traded and allied themselves together in time of war. The two clanns had often banded together to fight off the Heron—a wild clann that used to be at constant war with them. But in more recent years the Heron had signed a truce with the clanns, and were now allied to them also.

The trip had been very good for the three travelers. They had gotten many needed items, and were in good spirits as they walked along,

unprepared for what was to follow.

But that very morning Katriona had had a strange vision. She had seen the face of a man. He was not of Celtic origin. He had a dark skin and long flowing hair. His eyes were loving and deep, such as she had never before seen. He looked at her and she felt filled with love for him. It was as if the man wanted to speak to her. He was calling her. Then the vision had passed. She didn’t know what it had meant, and it had troubled her whenever it returned to her memory, but now her mind was on other things, and she was as oblivious as her fellows to the danger that awaited them.

Within minutes of their turning around the bend the three were overpowered and bound. Then they found themselves being herded with their supplies to the nearby shore and ferried off to the waiting ship.



It had all happened so fast. The three sat in a state of unbelief as the ship pulled away, bound for the Iverni coast.

The journey soon took a new twist as high waves rocked the ship with a ferocity that made even the hardened raiders wonder if they had displeased the gods in some way. Gale-force winds blew the ship in some unknown direction while heavy rains almost blinded the sailors. Skilled though these men were in the arts of sailing, they could do little in the face of such a powerful force of nature.

Katriona eyed these rough raiders as they worked trying to steer the ship and bring it to some coast in safety. She then looked at the other captives on board, who were chained to the ship as she was. They were a mixed group of Picts and Celts from the mainland. There were twenty-seven in all—a mixed group of men women and children. What would befall them all? Would they live to reach the Iverni lands? Were they fated to sink below the raging seas?

Just then she had a vision, and clearly saw the hills of her home: There she stood above the machair looking out to the wind-swept sea from the watch point and beside her stood someone, a man. His face turned slowly toward her. It was the man she had seen some years ago as she bathed in the burn near her home, though much older and with a scar over his left eye. What could this mean? The vision passed and she was back to the reality of the storm and fears of the moment.

Had the gods shown her the future? She felt a peace come upon her. Yes. It was, she felt sure, a glimpse into the future. Somehow or other she was destined to return to the isle and meet this man again. She thought of that moment when their eyes had made contact and the sensations that she had felt being aroused within. There had been something alluring and magnetic in that gaze. She tried to remember his name. He had been one of the winners the day before in the games. Angus! Yes, that was it, Angus. A memory of pain swept her heart as she realized he had been captured by Roman raiders that same day. Did this mean he would live to return to the isle? Strange how that moment had stuck with her so long. He was handsome, but it was not that. The feelings of that memory had grown to feelings of love, and somehow she knew that the vision had something to do with the reason for this storm.



In the cold wet fields of distant Britannia the Roman legions had won a great victory over an uprising of clans in the southwest. Tribune Marcus had once more led his troops to victory, giving him a reputation above all in Britannia. He sat on his horse watching the prisoners being ushered along by his troops. The leader of these rebels, Garth by name, was taken and brought to the procurator, where he was made to kneel in chains before his

conquerors in the eyes of all the city.

The centurion in charge of the parade was Cornelius, who at the same time brought news that the Centurion Claudius Melitus had been discovered among several Roman prisoners held by the defeated Celtae.

That night in the Roman camp Claudius shared his story with the procurator, Tiberius Paulus. He had been wounded and taken captive along with some other of his company. The chief had spared him, believing a centurion might be of some use in a future bargain that had never come to him.

Tiberius prepared a message for Caesar detailing the success of the battle and announcing that peace once more prevailed in all Britannia. Claudius would be returning with the first ship back to Rome.

The first ship that came stopped for several days at a port in Gaul, where Claudius received a surprise visit from Senator Gaius Falco. Gaius had heard of the rescue of Claudius and immediately came to see him, telling Claudius all the news of how his wife was taken care of, that the properties outside Rome had been sold, and that the business ventures he was investing in for her were prospering. Gaius also told of Angus, and how he was working in his household now and had been of great help in its organization.

Claudius was thankful for all this information and to hear about Valeria. It still amazed Claudius that Gaius would treat him and his family as friends and equals despite being of a higher station and birth. Claudius was grateful to Gaius for his help. Gaius then left Claudius with a message to give to his wife, and departed back to Gaul. He would be remaining there for some months before returning back to Rome. After thanking Gaius for his help, the two men parted ways.



The Iverni ship, beaten and tossed by the billowing waves, had strayed far from its course. Now, as the storm subsided, they found themselves in greater danger than they had left—in full view of three Roman warships that were approaching them at full speed. There was no chance of escaping them. The only choice was to fight, and hope to inflict enough damage to convince the Romans to leave them alone.

The redheaded giant Coilus snapped out a command and the ship headed out straight into the approaching ships. The Iverni vessel scraped hard against the hull of the foremost Roman ship, and with a wild yell Coilus vaulted over the side, his broad sword swinging. He was followed closely by his barbaric hoard of screaming raiders who slashed and hacked their way across the deck towards the centurion—hoping that if they could capture him they would be able to bargain for their safety.

Although the Iverni were good fighters and well used to war, they were no match for the disciplined Roman troops. Coilus and his men fought like a wild animals inflicting as much damage as they could, yet despite their bravery they were quickly overpowered and defeated.

Coilus, his crew, and his captives, were soon chained and being led below deck to join the other Roman captives.

Katriona watched as the redheaded giant descended into the belly of the Roman ship, now a captive himself. Strange how fate can change the tide of events in a moment, if it was fate? Or was it the gods unfolding their special plans?

When they were all below deck, Katriona looked around to see her two companions, Clohn and Neil, chained near a strong-looking blond man. He stood out from all the others. He had a certain composure about him. There was no fear or bitterness or hatred

in his dark brown eyes that, despite the man's surroundings, looked soft and caring. His long blond hair tumbled around his shoulders, and his appearance was tidy and clean—unusual for the Celts, yet also not too rare.

She soon spotted Coilus, in a corner. His eyes brimmed with hate and pride, and his long red hair and bushy beard glowed like a fire around his face. Coilus looked around, his deep green eyes flashing like a trapped animal. His gaze stopped at the blond man across from him.

“Who are you?” he snarled at the man, sensing the stranger was somewhat out of place among these captives.

The blond man looked over to him. His gaze was firm but calm. It was not a look of hate, pride, or bitterness, but of a quiet confidence and strength that came from somewhere within him.

“My name is Aleric,” he answered slowly and quietly in the Celtic tongue.

Coilus stopped—sensing an authority in the man's gaze and voice.

Katriona was shocked to see Coilus pull back like a dog submitting to the command of its master. It was as though Aleric had cast a spell on him. Who was he? Was he a warlock? Was he some powerful enchanter? Who could he be to exercise such authority? No, it was not the power or authority of a warlock or Druid. What she saw emanate from his eyes was different—an authority of love, peace, and joy!

“You have reaped what you sowed, Iverni. Now you will die like the rest of us,” snarled another voice from near Aleric.

Katriona looked over to a young blond-haired man about her own age—handsome, clean-shaven, and strong. He looked similar to Aleric, as if the two could have been brothers. She looked into his eyes

and saw cold blue eyes filled with death, hate, and anger. She shivered a little, feeling afraid. This man radiated evil as strongly as Aleric radiated peace.

Suddenly she could see a vision. It was an arena of some sort and the younger man was there. He held a strange weapon like a spear but with three prongs. Beside him was a dark-skinned man with a sword. The young Celt's eyes were filled with the same malice. Then the scene changed and the young man lay still in the sand, dead! Yes, he would die as he had lived—a man of hate and bitterness.

Aleric turned to face the man. "We are all in the same boat now, Armirius. What good is it to turn on each other and fight? The Iverni and we are now in the same position, for God has seen fit to turn the tide of events. Let us now put aside this evil of hate and join together, for only in this will we have strength to survive and win."

The young man looked down submissively, mumbling something to himself.

Coilus glanced once more at Aleric, and then withdrew deeper into his corner.

Katriona gazed at Aleric, and wondered again at his power over people. Her eyes shifted to his fingers as they drew in the dust on the floor of the ship. He drew a shape that resembled a cross. But no, it was something else—an anchor. The top looked like a cross, similar to the great standing stone cross. She pictured the great standing stones as she leaned back and closed her eyes. Was this man drawing some magical symbol? It had been unusual for her to have so many visions so close together. *I wonder what the gods have planned for us?*



It was early in the morning and Centurion Claudius was again aboard the ship that would take him back home. The procurator Tiberius Paulus had given him a message to deliver to his daughter,

Camilla, in Rome, who Claudius had once met there.

Along with a legate of officials, Centurion Cornelius and a company of troops were also aboard, and they were on deck, speaking loudly with one another as they waited for the ship to get underway. Cornelius was due to return to Rome, and was of course full of stories of his own brave exploits in Britannia.

The conversation soon came to the subject of the growing sect of the Christians that was now a topic of conversation in all parts of the empire.

Cornelius mentioned that several years ago a landowner who owned property in Britannia had told him many things regarding this sect. This landowner had been stationed in Palestine under Pontius Pilate and had been present at the death of Jesus, the carpenter-God of these Christians. The landowner had told of a miraculous healing of his servant by this Jesus of Nazareth, and of signs in the heavens at the man's death.

Claudius was very thoughtful and wondered after all he had heard. In Rome during his last visit he had heard much concerning the Christians. Valeria had always spoken well of them, and even her father, the late Lucidus Valerius, had at times spoken in their defense. He suddenly realized that even Gaius only spoke good of them.

The conversation soon drifted to other matters of Rome, and soon they were discussing the victories of Tribune Marcus, of which Cornelius claimed to be an authority, openly declaring that, while Marcus was a great warrior, he was also arrogant and full of self-importance. "His reputation as a great leader, warrior, and strategist is only rivaled by his reputation as a womanizer," laughed Cornelius.

Claudius smiled, and turned his attention to the captain, who at that moment shouted out the order

OVERCOMERS II

to raise the sails, lower the oars, and prepare to
head out to sea.

CODEX II

ANNO DOMINI 63

IN THE HALLS OF ROME

Nero was indulging his desires, surrounded by women, senators, statesmen, poets, philosophers, artists, and those seeking to prosper from their affiliation to his power.

Tigellinus, who had now taken the place of Burrus as Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, sat to one side, deep in conversation with Aelius Junius—master of the gladiators and a close friend of Tigellinus.

Senator Quinton and Seneca stood to the side and were involved in conversations about the writings of Pliny¹, Strabo¹, and Cato¹ as well as discussing the fates of the Brothers Gracchus². (They had tried to use their power to help the poor, only to be assassinated by those who feared them. Their lesson had stood strong for many years as proof that you can't change the way Rome is. Yes, you have to accept Rome where she is and she will be kind to you, but she resists those who dare to change her beauty.)

“Yes, I agree with you Seneca, Rome was not so kind to those who tried to change the normal way,” said Quinton.

¹ *Pliny, Strabo, Cato: Roman historians*

² *Brothers Gracchus: Two brothers (Tiberius, 163–133 B.C. and Gaius, 153–121 B.C.) who tried to reform Rome. Both were killed.*

“But there are other ways to introduce change, that bring not the same trouble these brothers faced. It is in poetry and satirical writings, which do not incite the masses but speak to the intellect,” Seneca replied.

“Ah yes, these writers do have a way with words,” stated Quinton. “But will they change much?”

“They are the only way Rome will ever be influenced to change,” continued Seneca. “Change cannot be forced on forceful people. It must be introduced gradually into their thoughts. There are many satirical writings which are masterpieces on the danger of seeking after power and beauty. Though I would question some of the ideas about women put forth by Lucretius!¹”

“I am not so sure, then, Seneca,” Quinton replied. “Many things have been written, but few have changed. Look around and what do you see? Nothing but men greedy for power, seeking beauty to gratify their desires and lusts. Rome has read such writings, but the words are as empty as the deeds that are borne of them. There must be more than the mere written word to bring a man to change.”

Just then young Arrius Albinus entered with an absolutely stunning woman beside him. Arrius was the cousin of Tigellinus and, it was said, just as powerful and corrupt. He had been living in Greece and was visiting Rome on the invitation of Tigellinus.

The woman by his side was Lavinia Metellus, daughter of Laevinus Metellus, a retired magistrate and former governor of Greece. She was sister to Decius Lucian Metellus—Tigellinus’ right-hand man, and another cruel and ruthless character in Nero’s arsenal of henchmen.

Lavinia was a beauty to behold, and knew it too.

¹ *Lucretius: 99–55 B.C., Roman poet and philosopher who bitterly denounced the passion of love.*

Her countenance bore proof of having been raised as a special and privileged child, who was used to having her every whim tended to, and every wish obeyed.

She was dressed with more of an eastern flair than was typical of Roman nobility, and her garments were obviously chosen to display her bodily charms. Quinton could not help but admire the young woman’s beauty, though he much preferred the charms of his concubine, Martha, to the painted face of Lavinia.

But even as Quinton caught Lavinia’s gaze, he saw something deeper in her eyes. It was as though she was play-acting, yet all the time looking for something deeper and more meaningful from life.

Lavinia stepped down to the main room, passed many admiring glances, yet avoiding the direct gaze of all who watched her.

Quinton turned his eyes now to Arrius. The man was tall, handsome, and well built. His countenance revealed a man who enjoyed living in pleasure and thinking only of himself. At least they did not have the cruel and hard gaze of Tigellinus, or the power-hungry glint of Decius. There was some form of goodness left in this man’s heart, thought Quinton.

Arrius approached Quinton and Seneca with a broad smile. “Ah, dear Quinton, Seneca. I have heard much of you. The praises of the emperor fill the halls in Greece. They say your wisdom is so great that it overshadows the greatest thinkers in Greece. I am honored to meet with you.”

“I have often also been anxious to meet the cousin of the great Tigellinus,” replied Seneca. “Your athletic feats in Greece have been greatly noised abroad here in Rome. I hear also you are a great lover of poetry and the arts?”

“Ah yes. Poetry is indeed a passion with me, Seneca. Sport is my life, but poetry is my soul.

Horace¹, Naevius¹, Ennius¹. But most of all I enjoy the poems of love. Ah, love—this is the only thing other than sport that makes life worth living.” He looked over to Lavinia, who was now talking with her brother Decius.

Quinton smiled. “Yes, love is indeed a force quite unpredictable, is it not? It moves man to heights unattainable in life! Great acts of good and evil have been committed in the power of love. I also have read much on the subject and have at home a set of the writings of Pubius Ovidius². His book, *The Art of Love*, is well read here in Rome, as is *Heroides*. You must come to my home someday and we can discuss the nature of love and the power it wields.”

“It would be an honor, Quinton,” replied Arrius.

Arrius then excused himself and went to greet Tigellinus.

Seneca leaned close to Quinton’s ear, whispering, “He is one to watch, Quinton. He may not be as hungry for power as his cousin yet, but he is not far behind. And once that hunger has him, he will do anything to satisfy it.”

Quinton nodded, and knew that Seneca was right. As innocent as he looked, Arrius was one to be careful around.



The conversation around Tigellinus was of a distinctly different nature. Arrius found himself wandering into a discussion between Tigellinus and Aelius about rooting out the Christian elements that were creeping into Rome. Decius had disappeared from the group for a moment to greet his sister who had arrived with Arrius.

“Sounds to me like these Christians here in Rome are multiplying as rapidly as they are in

Greece,” commented Arrius.

“But not for long, not if I have my way,” replied Tigellinus. “You have only to watch one or two before you discover more. And once you have discovered a nest, you move in and arrest them for treason and plotting to overthrow the empire. I have even had the pleasure of arresting several senators who implicated themselves in this Christian mess—whether knowingly or unknowingly. Or if they cannot be safely arrested, they can be safely killed by other means, and that is only the start of Rome’s revenge against their name and families.” Tigellinus laughed.

“You have a strong hate for them, cousin. What have they done to you?” asked Arrius.

“To me, nothing, but to Rome ... their words of love, peace, equality ... they go against everything that Rome stands for. They seek to destroy our gods and substitute their own. They pull down the barriers between the classes and claim to treat all men as equals, but given the chance, they would stand up and proclaim themselves masters. That, my cousin, is reason enough to destroy them.”

Decius now returned to the group. “My good Arrius, it is good to see you at last back in Rome. Now we shall have us some fun! You must join me at the great arena of Rome tonight. I will introduce you to the life and loves of the city. Lavinia must come too. It will be her chance to be introduced to many important figures in Rome.”

“She has already been introduced to me,” Arrius answered with a smirk. “What other important figures are there?”

“More than you can count in that silly head of yours,” Decius answered. “And you would do well to remember it, my friend!”

“It will be our pleasure,” answered Arrius. “Let me inform Lavinia.”

¹ **Horace, Naevius, and Ennius:** Roman poets and writers of satirical stories on love, beauty, and friendship

² **Ovidius:** 234–149 B.C. Wrote books on love, and lovers

With that, Arrius excused himself from the group.

“He could be of use to us,” said Decius in a low voice once Arrius had left.

“Perhaps,” Tigellinus answered. “Now, where were we?”

“Your plan of revenge on the daughter of the late Lucidus Valerius.”

“Ah yes, Valeria. The poor woman. She has but just come out of mourning for the death of her husband—a cruel twist of fate itself, but one we could have not planned any better ourselves. Now fate will strike again, and it is her turn to be the victim. The evidence and witnesses against her have been gathered?”

“All is ready,” answered Decius.

“Then we strike tonight.”



Meanwhile, in another part of Rome, a meeting in Valeria’s home had just concluded. Now that Gaius was absent, Luke and Martha visited Valeria frequently to encourage the hearts of the few Christians that gathered at Valeria’s house for fellowship.

Angus had watched Gaius carefully and discerned the pattern for the Christian meetings, and often returned to Valeria’s estate and his hiding spot near the window to hear the words these Christians spoke to one another. The power of their words and the love they showed each other stirred his heart.

But it was difficult to accept the idea that all other gods and powers were false. Had he not seen the power of the Druids at the Mystical stones? He remembered the Druid foretell the death of the Ranaldseh, a cousin of Lochiel. And did Nielbauld also not place a curse on Chloda for her defying his words? Aye, and three days later she died. Was this

not proof of the powers of other gods?

These thoughts and others troubled him as he walked through the market. He was inspecting vegetables at a merchant’s stand when he became aware of a conversation at a stand behind him.

He turned to see Marius—a servant from the household of Tigellinus—trying to strike a deal with the wine merchant.

“I can deliver the thirty skins tonight, but it will cost you extra. What do you need that much wine for anyhow?”

“Ah, a victory celebration, I am told,” Marius answered. “Against the house of the late Lucidus Valerius, with whom my master traded frequent arguments. It turns out the late senator’s daughter is a Christian. She and her son are to be arrested, and Tigellinus will lay claim to the old man’s wealth and properties.”

Angus, in sudden shock, dropped his basket and spilled the contents to the floor. Marius turned around and for a few moments the two men’s gaze locked. Then, without picking up his basket, Angus ran from the marketplace.

His thoughts ran with him. He needed to warn Valeria, but there was a good chance that Tigellinus would discover that he had warned her. After all, Angus was known to many merchants in this marketplace, and perhaps even to Marius himself. He would be risking his own life and freedom to warn Valeria. But deep inside he knew he had to. He had seen her love and known her kindness. There was no denying the urge on his heart. She had to be warned, and he had to hurry.

Angus ran through the streets as if a horde of wild dogs were on his heels. His only thought was to reach Valeria before Tigellinus’ soldiers could. It took only a few minutes until he reached the gate, and he pounded on it frantically.

Rolf, the new steward of the household, and a giant of a man, opened it. "Ah, Angus ... how good to see you. But what is the matter? You look troubled!"

"The trouble is coming here!" Angus blurted. "I must speak to Valeria. It's important!"

"Come. Wait in the courtyard. I shall call her for you," answered Rolf.

Within a few moments Valeria appeared in the courtyard. She was dressed in a blue toga and a white tunic. Her black hair flowed behind her, and her dark brown eyes sparkled in the evening light. She smiled upon seeing Angus, remembering the help and blessing he had been while working for her.

"Angus, how good to see you again," said Valeria as she approached him. "Rolf said you were in distress. What is the matter?"

"Tigellinus plans to arrest you and little Paulus. He intends to prove that you are a Christian and are plotting against the empire," Angus blurted out, still a little breathless from his running.

Valeria was taken aback for a moment, but quickly regained her composure. She signaled to Rolf, who stood waiting a short distance behind her, and requested that a drink be brought for Angus.

"How did you come to know this?" Valeria asked.

"I overheard Marius speaking of it in the marketplace. I left straightway to tell you of it. I fear I may have been recognized in doing so. But there is no time to lose. The soldiers may already be on their way to arrest you. You must leave!"

"And what about you? If you have been recognized, you shall be in just as much danger. What are you going to do?"

Angus was at a loss for words, and looked into her eyes. They were kind, gentle, loving, and curiously calm after the news Angus had just brought her.

"Very well. You must come with me. I know a place where we'll be safe, but I shall need your help. I will dispatch a message to Helvia that I have borrowed you for awhile. I'm sure she shall understand. Now, quickly, there is a wagon behind the house. Hitch up the horses. I shall ready myself and Paulus, and we shall be out presently."

Angus nodded and hurried to do his former mistress' bidding. Soon they were on their way.

Valeria had dressed in simple garments, such as she often wore to her Christian meetings so as not to be recognized as a person of wealth. As the horses plodded along, pulling the wagon along a small dirt road, Angus found the courage to speak of the things that were weighing on his heart.

"Mistress Valeria, I am but a slave, yet you and your late husband treated me better than a slave. My master Gaius also has entrusted me with much. I know that there is something special about you and Gaius that causes you to be this way. There is something about you that pulls me as a bee to honey. There is something else you should know. I have seen you in your meetings with these Christians, and listened to the words that were spoken. They have lodged in my heart and mind. I long for freedom, to be back in my beloved isles, yet there is something about you people that makes the freedom I desire seem but as a trifle compared to the love and freedom I see in you.

"The words of your Jesus have given me peace, hope, and strength for the day. Mistress Valeria, I have felt so attracted to the power I feel in you that I would risk the wrath of Nielbauld the Druid, or even the wrath of the gods of Rome. They seem so petty compared to what I feel from you. When I heard of the plans to imprison you, my mind was torn and I knew I could not sit idly by and watch you die."

"Angus, you have shown great love and now risk

all to save me. I cannot thank you enough. But I have one thing I can give you that is priceless, and that is Jesus. His purpose in coming here was to free us from the bondage of fear and death. He has called you and you have heard His voice. Angus, now He asks you to open up your heart and let Him empower you. He gave his life here on earth to save you, Angus. He paid the price of all your sins and gave His blood to cleanse you.

“He asks one thing in return, and that is that you give Him your heart and let Him guide your life. You may never have the riches and power of this world, but you can store up great treasures in Heaven by living your life for others. Will you receive Him now into your heart?”

“Yes, Valeria, I will,” replied Angus.

His body physically shook as he prayed. It was a decision to put aside the gods of his fathers to accept this new religion. It was to put himself at war with Rome also. Yet he knew he could do no other, for the truth of the words of Christ burned deeply in his heart. Yes, now would begin a new life and what it would hold for him he could not even guess.

There was great rejoicing not only in the household of Valeria as another soul was added to the church but also in Heaven where the first step of a great plan was now being unfolded. The angels rejoiced; they sang and praised the Lord for His mighty works. This was the start of a great and master plan that would cover not only the streets of Rome with the words of God but the far corners of the empire.



Tigellinus was beside himself with anger when he found out that his intended victims had fled. Someone must have warned them, but whom?

He sent for Alexis, a man of no morals. He was of Greek origin, although a Roman citizen. He had

often used him in the past, as he always managed to get whatever information Tigellinus needed.

“So my dear friend, Alexis, you have been busy as usual in your various activities.” Tigellinus smiled, knowing only too well the many crimes he was involved in.

“Yes, as usual, Tigellinus. How may I be of service to you?” Alexis whispered. His voice had been damaged in a knife fight some years ago.

“I wish to find out two things. The first is where the wife of Centurion Claudius is. She has fled somewhere and is in hiding. The second is to find out who warned her of the soldiers’ coming, and where can I find that person.”

“And how much is this worth to you?” enquired Alexis, his eyes filled with avarice.

Tigellinus handed him a small leather pouch.

“This is for you in advance, and the same again when you bring me the information I requested,” he said.

Alexis opened the leather purse, taking the coins into his hand and discarding the bag on the table. He eyed the coins greedily as he dropped them slowly on to the table.

Tigellinus smiled to himself, knowing he could count on Alexis. And if he by chance failed?—Well, there would be plenty of people who would like to take revenge on Alexis. He watched Alexis pocket the coins and leave. *Yes, no one fails Tigellinus and lives*, Tigellinus thought to himself with a smirk, *but Alexis will not fail.*

THE RETURN OF CLAUDIUS

It was now morning and the early morning winds were cold and biting. Claudius shivered as he pulled his robe tighter around him and watched with interest as the ships moored at the dock.

The centurion on board stood up above on the deck and waved to Claudius.

Claudius smiled. It was Bruno, who had been with him when they last raided the northern isles. The soldiers started to unload the slaves. Since they would be stopping here for a few days before they continued on to Rome, Claudius watched with interest as the giant redheaded Iverni man was led off, followed by Aleric, the blond Celtae.

Hmm, they will make good gladiators in the arena, he thought to himself. He had been to a few fights and had met several of the trainers. He remembered once meeting the master of the gladiators, Aelius Junius. He was strong—built like a bull—but a tangible cruelty, an evil, radiated from the man. Claudius had not felt drawn to him as a person, yet the man was a good trainer and he provided Rome with some of her finest entertainment.

These prisoners made a great sight as they moved down the gangway and along the street. Claudius stood by the gate, watching. His attention moved to

a young woman with long black hair following along with some other captive women. She lifted her head and turned, looking directly into his eyes.

The woman had penetrating green eyes. It unnerved him slightly to think that she was reaching into some personal part of his soul. Who was she? She was different than any of the other women he had ever seen. He determined in his mind to try to find out more about her later, but for now he must go see Bruno and arrange for his passage to Rome.

Bruno was happy to be reunited with his old companion and soon they were exchanging stories of what had happened during the past years. Bruno was more than happy to arrange accommodation for Claudius and his companions and added Garth to his increasing collection of prisoners.

It was a week before they set sail for Rome. The journey was a smooth one and Claudius forgot all about the woman with the deep green eyes. Soon he would be back in Rome. Little was he prepared for what he would encounter upon his return.



Katriona watched as the ship pulled into the port. She had never left her isle before and it was all strange to her. The prisoners were starting to be unloaded and it was soon her turn. She was roughly pulled along by some soldiers and fell a couple of times as the chains around her legs made her stumble. As she followed the others along the street, she turned her head and looked straight into the eyes of a Roman officer standing in the crowd near the gate.

She felt a strange sensation and, in a flash of a second as their eyes met, she received a vision. It was the Roman officer standing over the wounded bloody body of a man. In the officer's hand was a sword and there was a wound on his head. He held a small object dangling on a chain—a Celtic amulet

like the one Angus had worn. Her eyes went back to the man on the ground at his feet. It was Angus.

What did it all mean? She was pushed again by one of the soldiers and stumbled along, losing sight of the vision. It was strange. Was this man destined to kill Angus? Yet she had seen Angus in her other vision in the isles with her. It didn't make sense. Yet one thing she knew: This man, this Roman, would cross her path again.

"No, Angus can't die!" she exclaimed. Then, a little shaken at her own reaction, she thought on why she had said that. Yes, she was in love with him. He couldn't die by the hand of this soldier, could he?



Alexis the Greek, true to his reputation, found out that Angus, servant to the household of Senator Gaius, had warned Valeria. As of yet he had not been able to trace her or her son, and Rolf—the household's faithful servant—had vanished with them, so Alexis still had his spies out looking for him.

Upon hearing the news of Angus being the one who warned her, Tigellinus issued a false report against him, accusing him of being involved in criminal activities. He then sent his troops to the household of Gaius to apprehend him.

Angus had known this was a possible outcome, but had nevertheless returned to Helvia in the hope that it would not come to this. He surrendered peacefully and was escorted to the prison to await Tigellinus.

Despite the pleas from Helvia that they wait for the return of her husband from Britannia, it was to little avail. The power of Tigellinus was next only to Nero himself.

During his days waiting in the dark cold dungeon, listening to the cries of the others imprisoned there, Angus had time to think of his new faith. What

was it that made him choose Jesus? The Christian faith was so different from all he had known, yet deep inside he just knew that it was the truth. He felt peace, and even if the chance of ever living to see the sun again was practically non-existent, he somehow felt that God had called him to this for some unknown reason.

His mind then flew back over the years to that moment in the isle when he had returned from watch and spotted Katriona bathing in the burn. He remembered the moment their eyes met and the emotions and feelings he had felt. Yes, he was in love with her, but now it was too late.

So long ago, and yet it was as if he was there once again. He could smell the peat burning, feel the breeze blowing across his face. Ah, gone forever was the chance to return, to see the sweet heather and embrace his father. A tear formed in his eye and he realized there would be no escape from here. At best he could only pray his death would be quick.

In the other cells he learned that there were other Christians who were awaiting death in the arena. Would this be his fate, or had Tigellinus some other sport in store for him?



Valeria had made her escape to a small city outside of Rome where some Christian friends of her late father, the senator, had provided a place for her and little Paulus. Alexis had his spies sent out to many parts of the surrounding towns and it would be only a matter of time until he had her tracked down. Although she did not know of Alexis, she knew very well that Tigellinus would not rest till he found her—as he had a reputation of always being successful.

True to his form, Alexis soon had tracked down Rolf the northern giant, and placed some spies on him, hoping he would lead them to his mistress.

Rolf, though, was wise and clever and managed to elude his followers after leading them far from Valeria's hiding place.



Angus lay there in the dark cold cell wondering about his fate when the door creaked open and in strode Tigellinus and his friend, Aelius Junius—trainer of gladiators.

Tigellinus walked up and studied Angus, then conferred with Aelius, who nodded his head in agreement.

“So you are the one who would try to foil my plans,” said Tigellinus. “You will find that I am a man of mercy.” He laughed coldly, sending a chill down Angus' spine.

“You will be given a sporting chance to live, my friend. Aelius has a special event planned for the day after Nero's birthday, and if you survive it maybe you can have your freedom. Pray to your gods for you will need their help.”

With that closing remark Tigellinus turned and left Angus to the cold dark cell, and his mixed thoughts.



Tigellinus was having dinner later that night when word was brought to him that a message from Britannia had arrived for Nero. It brought news that Centurion Claudius, who had been believed dead, was found to have been alive and had been a prisoner of the rebels. He had been freed and was now on his way home to Rome.

This brought a new aspect to the plans of Tigellinus. If Claudius was alive and on his way here, it would upset the plans he had. Claudius had a good reputation among the people and the military. Even Nero had been pleased with his success in Britannia. To hunt down his wife now would cause problems he was not ready to face. It was one thing

when Claudius was dead and her father also, as she was out of the mainstream of society and none would notice or speak up, but with the return of Claudius it would be wise to put a hold on his plan for revenge for the moment.

Tigellinus wrote out a message to send to Alexis asking him to wait as plans had changed for now. While Claudius lived it would be best to wait on his plan, but maybe his rescue and return to Rome could end with his death? After all, Rome was much troubled with robbers and murderers these days, and anything could happen. At least it would mean Valeria would come out of hiding and Tigellinus could always explain away what had happened.

He smiled to himself as he dictated a letter to be sent to some of Valeria's known friends. In the letter he explained that the witnesses who had denounced her had been found to be untrustworthy, that their reports were without proof and made only to falsely implicate the household of the late Lucidus. Tigellinus apologized for the trouble caused to her family, and those responsible were now taken care of. Valeria's properties and titles would be restored.

The charges of treason against Angus, however, remained in place, and he would be sentenced accordingly.



It took three days for the message to reach Valeria, and along with it came the word that her husband was found and would be returning to Rome soon. She realized the connection of these events, and knew that at least for the time being she would be safe.

It was with a sad heart, though, that she listened to the news of Angus' arrest and his conviction of treason for obstructing the justice of Rome. There was nothing she could do, nor Claudius if he were here. It was one thing to try to help a Roman citizen,

but another matter to try to help a slave. She felt it safer, however, to remain in hiding at least until her husband was home.

Valeria reflected on how she should have mentioned her beliefs to Claudius before. At the time of their wedding her father had mentioned that although love was a gift from God, still Claudius was of the Roman religion and not as she, a Christian.

Even though her father was a secret believer, as was she, still to live with one who was not of the same belief was hazardous. It was indeed one thing to work with those of a different belief, but to live that way as husband and wife was a different matter. Still, Valeria was strong willed, and so finally Lucidus had given in to his daughter and given his consent.

It was shortly after the wedding that Claudius left to go to Britannia; a year later her father had met his unexpected fate. Now here she was in hiding and Claudius was returning home. How could she face him whom she had deceived? She prayed and asked God to do a miracle in helping her to convert Claudius.



When the ships docked in Rome, Claudius said his farewells to Bruno and Cornelius, then made his way to his home. He enjoyed his walk along the cobblestone streets, finding a peace being back once more in Rome. This soon disappeared as he arrived home to find his house closed and barred. It had obviously been this way for some time. Fear, worry, surprise—all passed through his mind as he tried to grasp what could have happened. What had become of his house and family? He raced over to his neighbor Titus who had been a long time friend.

Titus was overjoyed to see Claudius and invited him in, explaining all that had happened. Claudius sat quietly, anger filling his whole being as he heard

that Nero had received reports that Valeria was consorting with traitors and involved in a conspiracy against Rome.

They had been warned by the servant Angus that the troops were coming to take her, and Rolf had managed to help her escape. Valeria had not been seen or heard of for six weeks now, even though the charges had now been dropped and she was free to return home, and so the house remained unoccupied.

Claudius was furious, but Titus restrained him from doing anything rash—especially in the face of Tigellinus.

“Leave it be, Claudius,” Titus said. “You would but face death to do this. Let us work together to find your wife and son and bring them back.”

Claudius then inquired about Angus and found that he had been imprisoned and faced death in the arena as a traitor to Rome. Claudius was sad at this news, but there was nothing he could do to change things. It would be a loss to him and Gaius, but now he had to concentrate on finding and restoring his own family.

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GLADIATORS

At the gladiator training school, Aelius had returned from the docks where he had been inspecting the new arrival of prisoners brought in by Bruno. Four of them in particular were of interest: three Celtæ—Aleric, Armirius, and one called Garth, and lastly a giant of an Ivernian named Coilus.

In discussing it with Decius, who was also a great lover of sports in the arena, they agreed to purchase these four regardless of the cost. They had dinner with the merchant and finalized the purchase.

Aelius also discussed his ideas for the fate of Angus, and as it would be the day after Nero’s birthday, it should be a spectacular event.



At the palace Nero was celebrating his birthday with great gusto. There would be a recreation of some historical war in the arena with two hundred men fighting to the death. Then, after dinner, a Greek play, the story of Arethusa and Alpheus the river god, would be performed in his hall for all his guests.

Nearby to Nero at the feast sat Tigellinus. He was not attentive to the talking, though, as his mind was elsewhere. He was expecting Alexis to arrive as he had sent word for him to come. His eyes kept moving

across to the great stairway watching to see all that entered.

Then he spotted a beautiful woman descending the stairs. It was Lavinia, but Arrius was not with her. She wore a beautiful gown with an eastern flavor. Her father had often traveled in the eastern part of the empire he ruled over and beyond, bringing her gifts from the Far East.

Coming behind her, around the pillar at the top of the stairs was Alexis, followed closely by Maccinus the poet. Maccinus had come on the special invitation of Nero. He was short and plump and was known to be unable to control his drinking. Although he was undoubtedly a talented man regarding his poetry, he was drinking himself to poverty and death. Still Nero, a great lover of the arts, favored him for now and had requested he come and entertain him with some of his latest works.

Tigellinus himself was not one for poetry or arts. He held them all in contempt. Pleasure and riches were all he lived for. He waited patiently as Alexis made his way over to him through the crowded room. He threw a watchful glance over at Lavinia as he waited. If she had not been the companion of his cousin, then he would have made advances to her himself. She was definitely beautiful and had a great charm about her.

Turning back to Alexis, who had now made it through the crowds, Tigellinus motioned for Alexis to sit on the couch beside him, which Alexis quickly did.

He looks troubled, Tigellinus thought. I wonder what is troubling Alexis?

“Ah, dear Alexis. It is always good to see you. You came earlier than I expected. How is it with you?” Tigellinus could see his eyes twitch nervously.

“Thank you, Tigellinus. I came as soon as I heard you wished to see me. It has been some time

since we met. My spies had just located Valeria’s place of hiding when we received word to drop the investigation. Since then, she has again vanished. But we are keeping close watch on the servant Rolf, in case we discover anything that might prove useful should you desire for us to take up the search once again.

“But I have now also discovered that her husband Claudius lives and is back in Rome, and that Nero plans to promote him for his exploits in Britannia. He is a strong man, and powerful. If he discovers I was involved in his wife’s troubles, he could come after me.”

“Ah, so that’s the worried look, my friend,” Tigellinus said with a chuckle. “You fear Claudius? He may have powerful friends, Alexis, but not as powerful as me! It is my wrath you should fear, not his.

“But as for the tidings, yes, they surprised me also. Claudius is back in Rome for the moment, but Nero will soon see the benefit of keeping this great officer out in the field where he can win victory and honor for the empire, and keep us all safe from the barbarian hordes. You will see. The next time Claudius leaves Rome, we will see to it that there will be no more reason for him to return to it.”

“But what if Nero does not decide to send him off to the wars?” questioned Alexis. “What if, on the virtue of his services, Claudius requests a station here in Rome?”

“Then Rome is known for its murders, is it not? One dark night our poor Claudius may not return home. It would not be the first time such a thing happened in Rome. I am not one who will be thwarted, Alexis. Mark my words. One way or another, my vengeance will come against this household. Thus I wish for you to keep the household of Claudius under close watch. I want full reports on

the activities of any man, woman, or child who visits that house. As for the servant Rolf, he is too careful. Take care of him. We may learn more by his death than by watching him alive, if Valeria is forced to replace him with another. Do this cleanly, and I shall double your fee.”

Tigellinus handed the man a small but heavy bag of coins. He could see the greed creep over Alexis’ face as the man’s eyes lit.

Yes, Alexis would kill his own mother for a gold coin. He is a man devoid of a conscience, a perfect tool in the hand of a skilled master such as myself, mused Tigellinus.

Alexis pocketed the bag and left. Tigellinus then turned his attention to Lavinia, who was engaged in conversation with Quinton on the far side of the room, wondering where that cousin of his could possibly be.

Just then Arrius entered the room, accompanied by Poppaea, Nero’s wife, and three other young women.

Tigellinus smiled. *Arrius the womanizer. Beware, Cousin, that you do not overstep your boundaries.*



Claudius, now promoted by Nero to the rank of Tribune, walked in his restored garden with Titus. Although Titus was not a Christian, he knew of some, and had frequent contact with them. He confessed his own suspicions that the original charges of Valeria being a Christian could well be true.

This was news for Claudius, who questioned Titus further about the nature of these Christians and their beliefs. Titus was clearly sympathetic to these Christians, and he explained how they were not trying to destroy the empire, but that the changes they speak of and try to bring about are changes to men’s hearts and lives, not their governments or kings. They were building a spiritual Kingdom, not

one of this earth.

The idea sounded strange to Claudius, even if he had heard similar explanations and tales from Cornelius and others. And if his wife was indeed a Christian, that might account for several things about her and her father that had always seemed odd to him. In view of what Titus was saying, it was entirely possible that Lucidus could also have been a Christian, and that this could very well have been why he was so mysteriously murdered. If that was the case, he understood why Valeria would keep such beliefs secret. Still, it hurt him to think that this woman had married him, lived with him, and borne his son, and yet all that time had kept this a secret from him.

Titus excused himself as he had other business to attend to. Titus was in charge of the docks in Rome, and all the commerce that passed through. He was a man of much influence and money. He was a careful man, and not one to speak up strongly for or against any idea. Rather, like many in Rome, he simply tended to his business and flowed with whatever current happened to pass his way. This made him trustworthy enough for the moment. Claudius knew Titus would not risk his reputation or business by reporting on any man for one side or the other, and although he doubted that Titus would stand up for him against Tigellinus, still he considered the man a good friend.

His thoughts went back to the Christians. Even Senator Gaius was one who had spoken up for the Christians, and his actions sounded like he at least was a friend to them. Things started to clear up in his mind.

If Valeria’s father had been a Christian, then Tigellinus was most likely behind his death, and would not rest until both he and Valeria had met a similar fate. Claudius considered the possibilities.

He had many friends in important places, both in the senate and in the army, but he knew that his own influence and patronage was no match for that of Tigellinus, who wielded almost more power than Nero himself.

His thoughts were interrupted for the moment by blaring trumpets and cheering crowds. There was much celebrating in the streets on Nero's birthday. Claudius suddenly remembered he had personally been invited by Nero to attend the feast at the palace—an invitation best not refused, especially by a newly appointed tribune. There was still an hour before the festivities at the palace would begin, so Claudius decided to visit the house of Camilla and deliver the message from her father.



Aelius was inspecting his new purchases. They had the makings of great gladiators, he thought. A day of hard training proved his original impressions correct. These four would make a name in the arena.

He rubbed his hands with glee. “Surely the gods have smiled on me,” he said to himself. “Now back to the event at hand: tomorrow's special event in the arena.” He had worked out a great finale. After the usual gladiator battles he would surprise the crowds. He had planned for Angus to close the night's entertainment with a special show that would delight Tigellinus.

Meanwhile, in the confines of the prison where the gladiators all stayed, they were discussing their future. Coilus and Garth were not bothered with the thought of killing for sport. Their lives had been spent in war and killing, and this was little different. They had a sporting chance, and that was all they needed.

Armirus saw things differently. He saw the chance to excel and become famous. Great gladiators

could buy their freedom, he had been told, and even become Roman citizens. Here was a chance to make something of himself. He envisioned himself with all the women he could desire and drinking and reveling to his heart's content.

Aleric, his brother, was different. He sat quietly meditating. For him to have to kill again and again was not to his liking. Aleric had become a Christian many years before, when as a slave in Gaul he met some Greek Christians.

He had since then on several occasions had to fight and kill in battles. But now he was faced with having to fight and kill for the rest of his life, for sport, and against those who he was learning to like and draw close to. He silently prayed, *Dear Jesus, You called me to follow You. I have tried to be a sample of Your love in this cruel world. But death and hate and evil abound here. Now I am faced with having to fight and kill day by day to stay alive. It tears my soul apart to do this. I ask, Lord, if it can be possible, that You deliver me from this somehow!*

You have done great miracles to free Your people and to deliver them from their enemies and from the hands of those who imprisoned them. I ask for such a miracle—that You deliver me from the hands of my enemies. I give You my life, and promise to spend what time I have proclaiming Your name. Grant me this desire Lord, and I will proclaim Your name from the hilltops.

NERO'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

Katriona found herself sold to the house of a certain merchant called Philip—a Greek who had been passing through Rome on business. Philip was a secret Christian converted in Corinth by Stephanas, and since he was a man of influence and had business in all parts of the empire, he had been able to spread the faith quietly around the countries as he traveled. He was often used as a messenger to go to Rome and other areas where the church was budding. At the same time he would bring also financial help to those churches in dire need. He had just brought a message to Martha that John the apostle was planning to establish a school to teach the Word of the Lord in Ephesus.

While he was there in Rome, just before leaving on another of his trips, he had felt the urge to go to the auction of slaves, where he saw Katriona. As she stood there on the platform his eyes met hers and he heard the Lord speak clearer than ever he had in his whole life. *Philip, this is My servant. She knows it not as yet, but I have called her to be a witness to Me. Free her and bring her to Me.*

Katriona stood there, her head held high, proud of her heritage as daughter of a chief. As she had glanced around at the crowds who were assembled

there, her eyes locked with one who seemed different from all the rest. He was an older man, but his eyes were kind and gentle.

Then she saw, in a vision behind the man, a glowing figure. Light and love radiated from this figure. She looked into his eyes and recognized the man she had seen in the vision the day she was captured. Above him in the clouds lay a cross. There was a sword piercing the cross and blood all around. Then the vision was gone!

This man—the kind-looking man—was bidding for her. She watched with interest as the bids went back and forth, but the kind man could not be outbid, and so Katriona was purchased and became the property of Philip of Greece.

Philip was to leave for Athens the next day and arranged for Katriona to come. They left early in the morning along with twenty other returning merchants.

Katriona followed her new master, wondering what her future would hold. Greece, she had heard, was a place of learning and arts. She wondered if it would be the start of some great adventure. She thought of the face of this man with the loving eyes she had now seen twice in vision, and reflected on her other visions—of Angus, of Armirius, and of the Roman officer in Britannia. Some said that to be spae was a gift of the gods. Others said it was their curse. She could not help but think it was the first, and that the gods were blessing her with glimpses of the future to guide her.



Claudius entered the hall of the great palace and made his way down the stairs, it was bustling with people and the poet Maccinus was in the middle of one of his spellbinding recitations.

Claudius glanced around the room until he saw the great Seneca and Nero busy in conversation.

Nero spotted him and raised his hand acknowledging him, then returned to his discussion. Nearby sat Tigellinus, deep in conversation with Decius, his faithful right-hand man.

Claudius was soon mingling with the guests. There were a few he knew, so he tried to spark up some conversation here and there. As he was discussing his time in Britannia, Camilla came over to thank him for delivering the message from her father earlier, and to apologize that she had not been home at that time. She then asked him how Marcus was.

Claudius was happy for the opportunity to converse with the beautiful Camilla, and discussed at length his time in Britannia. He praised Marcus and his victories that had led to his own release and could see the glow in Camilla's eyes at this mention of the one she loved.

A lucky man, he thought, to have such a woman waiting for him.

Camilla excused herself for a moment and returned with another rather stunning woman who she introduced as Lavinia, the daughter of Laevinus Metellus, magistrate in Greece. She was also, as Claudius well knew, the sister of Decius, who was talking with Tigellinus. Despite all this, Claudius found it relaxing and enjoyable to be with her. They spoke of many things together, and continued their conversation even after Camilla excused herself and left them.

They moved to a quiet spot near the window overlooking the gardens below. Lavinia was more than just a pretty face. Claudius soon found out she was a woman of education, deeply versed in politics and religion. They discussed many ideas of the great philosophers together.

Claudius was glad for the many times he had listened to the great orators and discussions of

men of learning. He was not as most men of war, only versed in the writings of history and war. No, Claudius was well educated in all the ideas that were the talk of the learned men of Rome.

It fascinated Lavinia that here a great soldier was discussing with her the works of Aristotle and Plato. Soon they moved onto the more common discussion about the infamous sect of Christians.

Claudius, more on guard now as he knew the danger of such talk, was very vague in his conversation, not committing himself to anything that would seem favorable to them. He was surprised to hear Lavinia question what was wrong with the Christian belief, as Christians generally spoke of a love for all regardless of their belief. They spoke of respecting the order and power of the rulers, and of living in peace.

It surprised Claudius how much she knew about them—far more than he did, even if she confessed to never having met any Christians personally. It seemed Christians were the topic of almost every conversation throughout the empire these days.

Their discussion was interrupted by the arrival of Arrius with Camilla.

“So Lavinia, I see you have kept yourself busy.”

“Oh, let me introduce you,” Lavinia answered. “This is Tribune Claudius, son-in-law to the late Senator Lucidus Valerius, recently promoted after his adventures in Britannia.”

“Ah, I have heard of you. I am sorry to interrupt your conversation, but we are leaving for the arena as the games will soon be starting. I have come to call you, Lavinia, and Claudius, you are welcome to join us.”

“Thank you, but I have other plans. It has been nice meeting you, Lavinia and Arrius. Maybe some other time we can continue our discussions. I wish you both a pleasant evening.”

Arrius made his way towards Tigellinus, followed by the others. Tigellinus then stopped talking. It was plain that he had just found out about Claudius being there, and his eyes scanned the crowd until he found him, and their eyes met.

Claudius could see the hate in Tigellinus' eyes smoldering within, and a chill went through his whole body. Tigellinus then turned and left with the others, and Claudius went and poured himself some wine and sat down wearily.



The cheer went out across the arena as the armies marched in and saluted Nero. Two hundred gladiators formed two armies that were to battle to the death. To the victors, each man left standing, would go a prize of one bag of silver.

The war commenced and carried on for several hours. It was a terrible thing to watch, but the crowds were fascinated and spellbound by it.

Camilla excused herself after the second hour, for although she had enjoyed many a fight in the arena before, there was something about this slaughter that turned her stomach. It was not a contest of skill but just plain butchery.

Lavinia stayed to the end, but even she had felt disgusted by it all. Nevertheless, she wanted to stay in the element of Tigellinus and the others, who seemed thrilled and enthused by the carnage and savage killings the spectacle offered. At the same time, she could not keep her gaze and thoughts from wandering along the rest of the crowds. Was this “The Great Rome”? Was this what life was all about? Murder! War! Hate! Was this all Rome now stood for?

She thought back to her conversation with Claudius, and another before that with Quinton. These two men were different. They had a different outlook to life. *If only people like them could define*

the life of Rome, she thought. Her thoughts again turned towards the Christians. She was curious to meet some and see what they were like first hand.

It was late in the evening when the spectacle was finally over, and too dark for any further entertainment. Lavinia left Arrius at the gate of the arena and walked back with some friends of Camilla's. As she walked through the garden to her room, she thought of how she had always dreamed of coming to Rome. Now that she was here it did not hold the same power and fill the longing she had thought it would.

She was staying as a guest in the house of Camilla tonight. She had enjoyed Camilla's company, and her tales of Marcus, the great conqueror in Britannia. Camilla's father, the procurator, was also a subject of much of their talk, so Lavinia felt she knew them both intimately.

She could not settle down and decided to go for a walk outside in the garden. While there she sat down near the pool and watched the birds splattering around in the water, and mused on how simple life as a bird would be.

A long creak interrupted her thoughts, and she turned to see a secretive figure enter a gate that had been opened by Anna, one of Camilla's maids. Lavinia stepped back into the shadows to watch the exchange.

Lavinia listened as they spoke about a meeting, a man called Rolf, a fight, the arena and ... Yes! ... the word "Jesus"! They were Christians! This was getting interesting.

Lavinia moved closer and made out something about a meeting at the house of someone named Martha. Anna nodded, responding that she would do her best to be there.

Lavinia saw her chance. If she followed Anna tomorrow wherever she went, she could perhaps

finally discover some Christians, and see what they were really like.



Angus was moved from the prison in the great palace to one in the gladiator school. There he would stay for the rest of the night, to await his turn in the arena, which had been delayed until the next afternoon, since the great war in the arena had taken longer than anticipated.

The gladiator prison had been quiet, except for some more recent prisoners that were brought into his cell. Angus was glad for the company, especially when he discovered that three of the new prisoners were Celts, and the fourth an Iverni.

It was a long night and one of strange unbelievable tales for Angus. He discovered that Centurion Claudius had been the prisoner of the largest of the Celts, a man by the name of Garth, and that he had returned to Rome with them, and was now a tribune, and how others, from his own tribe, had also been taken captive and brought to Rome aboard the same ship. As he pushed for further information, he learned that Katriona, daughter of the chief, had been among the captives, but none knew where she now was.

But even though the Iverni in the room had been responsible for her capture, strangely enough, in these circumstances, Angus felt no hatred or desire for revenge against this man. Instead he felt only a kinship with a fellow captive. And yet his heart was deeply pained at the news of Katriona's capture.

Then his eyes caught something in the light. Aleric was drawing with his finger in the dirt. It was the shape a fish—the symbol of these Christians! He remembered seeing it at some of the meetings at Valeria's house when he used to spy on them!

He waited his time patiently and when the others had drifted off to sleep he moved over to Aleric and

started to talk with him. Aleric was also, it seemed, waiting, and when they started to converse, he explained that when he had first entered the cell, he could hear a voice speaking to him, telling him that he needed to talk with Angus alone. So it was that a bond was made that night between Angus and Aleric—both Christians doomed to die in the arena.

Aleric told Angus his story, one of being kidnapped and sold as a slave, of being converted, and of a kind noble man who bought his freedom and helped him return home, only to be taken prisoner once more.

Despite of all this, and their coming fate, Aleric seemed to be cheerful and full of faith. He spoke of Jesus as his closest friend, as one who meant more to him than life itself. Aleric then laid hands on Angus and prayed that he would be filled with the power of the Spirit. Whatever the outcome of his coming fight, Angus knew that he had that night been filled with the power of God. He would never be the same again. His time with Aleric had given him a strong faith that God could do a miracle, and that even in this moment of seeming defeat there would somehow be a great victory.

There was a commotion down the hall and suddenly the door burst open and two more prisoners were pushed in. Angus instantly recognized them as Clohn and Niel from his own clann. They had also been purchased by Aelius and had just arrived.

It was a joyful reunion, but they soon grew somber as they spoke of all that had happened since they had last seen each other. The two newcomers listened in silence as Angus spoke of the Christians and his new faith. Although neither Clohn or Neil could understand his new faith, they still felt bound to Angus by kinship and friendship, and told him they would pray to the gods that he would find a victorious way out of his current circumstances.

Angus asked Clohn to exchange clothes with him, so that he could die as a free man, rather than as a Roman slave.

THE FIST OF ROME

Arrius had been out with Decius drinking and womanizing after he left Lavinia, and was now on his way home alone. He had not been spending as much time with Lavinia since their arrival in Rome. They had been lovers and enjoyed many pleasures together but had drifted apart since they arrived.

Arrius looked around at his surroundings. The area was a poor area and he did not often travel this way. The streets were quiet and gave him time to think, as he saw all around him the filth and squalor that people must live in.

Suddenly the silence was broken. A scream rang out just as he passed a small alley. Pulling his sword from its sheath beneath his toga, he swiftly ran down toward the sound. There he saw in a narrow alley a man lying on the ground, seemingly wounded, and a girl being assaulted by two men. Should he ignore it? Rome was full of such happenings in these areas, and it was none of his business.

Something stirred within Arrius. For once he thought not of himself, or of money or power. Here was a woman in danger; who she was mattered not, but it was in his power to do something and he felt a surge within of something noble. He ran toward the men, his sword in hand.

One of the men, hearing the running, turned and let out a yell of warning to his companion. It was too late.

Arrius was upon him and with one stroke felled him to the ground. The other man took to his heels, as it was one thing to attack a helpless man in the dark unexpectedly, but to engage an armed man who was obviously skilled in the art of fighting was a different matter.

Arrius laughed as he watched the terrified man run down the alley. Turning to the woman he asked how she was. A soft foreign accent betrayed she was from the eastern part of the empire. He took her hand and pulled her to her feet.

As her face came into the light he was stunned at her beauty. It was not beauty like that of Lavinia, or like the many other women he had known. No, this was different. She was fresh, natural, and there was something pure about her.

She asked how her father was, and Arrius, realizing that there had been a man lying on the ground, moved over to examine him.

He was alive, but unconscious, and bore a deep wound to his arm.

Arrius lifted the man and, following the girl, carried him to their home, where he was invited to come in.

As he sat there in the house talking with this girl and her family, he felt a strange feeling growing in his heart, and realized it was love—not lust or desire, but love! Something had reached down under all that egotism and greed and desire for pleasure and power. Somewhere under his carefree image was a tender heart, a longing for something greater than himself, a longing for true love and acceptance. He had read much on love. He prided himself as a great scholar on the subject. But now, for the first time, he felt he had actually found it.

The girl was called Ruth. Her father, Jacob, was a merchant from Palestine. They had moved to Rome some twenty years ago, just after her birth, and now owned a thriving business dealing in gold and silver. They had been out visiting some poor families and sick people when they had been attacked.

Yes, Arrius felt drawn to these people, and would find the power of their simple influence greater than all the influence of his cousin, Tigellinus. It was a meeting that marked the point when the paths of these two men would separate.



Tigellinus was looking forward to the day, for this afternoon would be his much-awaited revenge on Angus for helping his enemy escape. There was much to do today, though, before he could relax and enjoy the moment.

Decius had planned a swoop on some suspected Christians, and had heard of a meeting taking place later that evening in the house of a merchant named Jacob. Alexis was also due to report to him about the movements of Tribune Claudius.

Nero had also requested that Tigellinus dine with him, for he wanted to discuss some problems and troubles in parts of the empire. Tigellinus looked forward to this, as it would be a good opportunity to suggest the possible return of Tribune Claudius to the fields of Britannia.

A guard entered the room and saluted. “Tigellinus, Alexis the Greek is outside desiring to see you.”

“Show him in.”

Alexis entered and made his way over to Tigellinus. “Good morning. I bring good news! My men have prepared an ambush for the servant Rolf. They will strike tonight during the games. The watch on Claudius has thus far produced no results. He has only visited known friends, and as yet his wife

has not turned up.”

“It is but a matter of time, Alexis. We will have our results. Now I want you personally to make sure Rolf is taken care of. Report to me the moment the deed is done. You will find me at the games.”



Titus was busy in his office at the docks when word was brought to him that an officer from the Praetorian guards was outside to see him. Titus admitted the unexpected visitor, curious as to what sort of business a Praetorian would have with him.

“So how may I be of assistance to you?” asked Titus

The Praetorian, a rough-looking individual more suited to be a keeper of dungeons than an officer of the distinguished emperor’s guard, glanced at Titus and saluted. “I have been sent by the great Tigellinus to inform you that your household is under watch for collaborating with the Christian conspirators who are trying to destroy the empire.”

Titus was shocked at the news and fell into his seat. A cold sweat broke out over his body as he imagined the horrors of deep dark prison cells. “It must be a mistake,” he spluttered. “I would never do a thing like that! I am a loyal subject of Rome and have always been a true believer in our glorious empire!”

The officer, smiling at the effect he was having on the man, continued. “Then, to remove yourself from any and all suspicion, Tigellinus trusts that you will prove your loyalty by reporting to him any contact or word from your friend Claudius or any members of his family that may or may not involve Christians. If you prove loyal and your reports prove truthful, you shall find yourself handsomely rewarded, but if you are caught in a lie”—he paused a moment for effect—“then you will suffer the torments of Nero’s dungeons until the end of your days!”

Titus visibly shook with fear as the tone of the officer’s voice lowered, and a smile gleamed across the soldier’s face.

Yes, this officer was probably one of the guards who worked in the prisons, where Tigellinus kept many of his enemies deep down in the lower cells of the great palace.

Titus answered, his voice shaking a little, “You may tell Tigellinus that I will prove to be his most loyal servant, and that I intend to comply with all his wishes.”

“Tigellinus shall be most pleased with your decision, and I pray you live up to it, for if I have to return to this place, it will only be to escort you to your doom!”

The soldier turned and marched out, leaving a shaken and frightened Titus sitting in his office.



It was midday when Decius arrived to collect his new orders from Tigellinus.

Decius, although having a reputation as a womanizer, was not a man of beauty. If anything, he looked quite repulsive. He was built like an ox—strong, burly, and with a scar across his face. When he grew angry, it would grow red and glow, adding to his fearful countenance. Decius was wearing his uniform instead of his usual toga, and was escorted by three of his trusted men: Secundus, Vitus, and Junius.

Tigellinus was quick and to the point. “I have here the orders for you to arrest Jacob the merchant, and all within his household, including any who are visiting at the time of your arrival! The charges against him are treason and conspiring with Christians to overthrow the empire. You have full authority to kill any who would stand in the way of these orders.”

Decius took the orders from Tigellinus, looked

them over, and smiled with glee.

“By Mars! I will see to it immediately. This Jacob once refused me on some business, to the end that I lost two hundred gold coins. I bore it patiently then, for the sake of the man’s daughter. May I have this one request now, to be given the man’s daughter for my own pleasures of vengeance before she is sentenced to the arena?”

Tigellinus nodded, knowing only too well the kind of desires that beat in Decius’ breast. Within moments Decius and his three companions were on their way.



Arrius was finding the company of this humble family very relaxing, and a refreshing change from his regular encounters with Roman society.

Jacob was a man of some wealth, although you could not tell from his meager surroundings. He gave, it seemed, most of his profits to helping the poor and needy around the city. This was something quite strange to Arrius, who had always lived for himself and not cared about others. He found that he was feeling quite drawn to these humble folk, and especially to the man’s daughter, Ruth.

There was a sweet innocence about her, and he could feel his emotions stirring within him. His decision to intervene and save her and her father was the first unselfish thing he had ever done. This in itself had brought on an unusual feeling of peace and satisfaction. He was beginning to understand how what they were saying could be true, that one could find joy and happiness by giving to others, rather than just trying to live for selfish pleasure!

Jacob excused himself as some other guests had come and left Ruth, her mother Dinah, and her brother John to keep Arrius company.

After about half an hour Arrius realized it was time he should be leaving, as it was now midday and

as yet he had not gone home. Sleep was beginning to catch up with him.

Suddenly there were the sounds of loud shouting and banging of the door. Arrius and Ruth moved to the window of the upper room where they were all seated, and looked down. There were four Roman soldiers—one of whom he instantly recognized as Decius.

Thoughts flashed through his mind. What were they here for? Why would Tigellinus send Decius here?

Of course! They are Christians! That was what was so different about them, and now Tigellinus had sent to arrest them! What to do? He felt his emotions pulled and twisted within. Shouts from downstairs and the sounds of furniture being smashed drove the reality of the situation home.

John took his mother out a side door that led down to an alley on the side of the house. Ruth ran to the stairs going down to the rooms below. She screamed as she saw a soldier rushing at her. She turned and moved quickly back. Not wanting to draw attention to the way by which her mother had fled, she headed up to the roof, followed closely by the soldier.

Although Arrius had been momentarily frozen, he suddenly snapped out of it and realized Ruth was in danger again. He darted up the stairs behind the soldier and came out on the roof in time to see the soldier holding Ruth against the wall, twisting her arm behind her. She screamed in pain.

Arrius moved in quickly behind the soldier. The soldier, hearing the approach, turned and let go of Ruth—only to be met by a fist in the face from Arrius.

The soldier reeled, but quickly recovered and pulled out his sword, only to be taken aback to see that his attacker was a Roman. “Who are you, and

what are you doing here? You are interfering with the orders of Tigellinus himself. Stand aside, fool, or share the fate of these traitors!”

“I’m afraid I cannot let you arrest either of us,” Arrius said calmly.

“Then I’m afraid you’ll have to die,” the soldier retorted, and lunged forward.

Arrius quickly pulled his sword out from under his toga, and deftly parried the soldier’s first blow.

The man dove at him again with sword swinging. This time Arrius ducked, swung up under the advancing soldier, and launched him over the edge of the roof, sending the man plummeting to the pavement below.

Arrius looked down and in a glance could see the soldier was dead. He took Ruth by the hand, returned to the room below, and led her through the same door John had taken her mother through.

Ruth was dazed by all that had just happened, and followed like a docile lamb. Arrius looked back, making sure they were not followed or seen as they moved deftly down the alley. As he turned onto the next street he glanced back again just in time to see Jacob and four servants coming out of the door in chains, closely watched by Decius and two other soldiers.

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ANGUS’ TRIAL

It was the afternoon after Nero’s birthday, and Camilla had made herself ready for the day’s entertainment at the arena.

Lavinia had declined to go with her, as she had other plans for the evening. After everyone had left, Lavinia prepared herself by dressing in simple clothes and removing her expensive jewelry. She washed off all her makeup, and found a shaded and hidden spot in the garden to wait. She smiled to herself as she thought how she must look. No one would recognize her like this. She laughed. What would her father have thought if he could see her like this, hiding in the shadows of the garden like a little girl playing hide and seek?

The creaking door soon caught her attention as it had before, and she saw Anna making her way furtively through it. She would not be missed. Priscilla and Vestus were still on duty, and the house was largely empty since most had gone to the games. Lavinia, careful to keep her distance, followed Anna through the streets. Although there were quite a few people around, they were all busy going to the games and no one seemed to pay any attention to either of the two women.

The air was full of excitement and the hubbub of

the streets added to the excitement Lavinia felt. She was full of mixed feelings of fear and excitement; she had never in all her life done anything like this before. If she was found or spotted in the presence of Christians, she knew her life and reputation could be in grave danger. And yet she knew she could not rest until she had done this thing.

Soon Anna neared a turn and went down into a quiet side street, which opened to a nice-looking villa. Lavinia moved behind some bushes and watched as Anna knocked at the big gate.

An old man came and opened the door, looking Anna up and down. Anna then picked up a stick, drew the picture of a fish on the ground, and then erased it with her feet.

The old man smiled and stood back to let Anna in.

After a few moments Lavinia moved over to the gate. She could still make out parts of the sign of the fish on the ground and in spite of the fear welling up in side of her she boldly knocked on the door. A few moments later the same old man opened the gate and asked her what she wanted.

Lavinia, her heart beating like a drum, quickly traced the symbol of the fish on the ground with her sandals. Then, looking back at the old man, she saw him smile as he stood back to let her in. She felt a wave of relief wash over her as she quickly erased the picture and then stepped inside and made her way confidently to the main building in front of her.

At the door a young girl greeted her with a “God bless you, sister,” and then directed her into a large basement room where there were about fifty people either standing around or seated on the ground. At the far end of the room sat four men and a girl, quietly talking together.

Lavinia moved over to a far corner from those in the front, and hid as much as was possible in the

shadows. Just then one of the men up front arose and started to talk. He led the crowd in some sort of prayer and then started to tell a story.

“There was a great and important man. He was a very rich merchant and traveled the world buying and selling. From these journeys he had amassed a considerable fortune and wealth. On one journey to a far-off eastern country he came across a rich man who showed him a large pearl he had found many years before.

“When the merchant saw the pearl he was stunned at its great size, and purposed to have it at any cost. But the price was so tremendous that the merchant realized he would have to sell his entire fortune—all his family’s wealth, houses, businesses, everything—to be able to purchase this great pearl.

“He made his decision, and departed to his homeland where he sold all his great treasures. Then he returned to the rich man to buy the pearl, and when he held it in his hand, he rejoiced inside, cherishing this greatest of all treasures.

“This, my dear brothers and sisters, is as the Kingdom of Heaven. What we give up here in this life to obtain it is nothing in comparison to the riches we will receive. All this world has to offer is fleeting, and will pass away, but the Kingdom of Heaven will last forever.

“Our dear brothers, those who are captured and who pay with their lives, have only set aside the burdens of this world, and go on to inherit a greater and eternal reward. What this world can offer in treasures and worldly pleasure is but a trifle compared to what Christ offers in return, as even Moses chose the reproach of Christ over the treasures of Egypt, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the children of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.

“One day Jesus was conferring with some of

His disciples when a rich young nobleman came by. ‘Dear Master,’ he said, ‘what need I do to inherit this eternal life?’

“Jesus looked at him, knowing that he was a man of great wealth, and said, ‘Thou knowest the commandments. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Love thy neighbor as thyself.’

“The young man smiled. ‘This I have done since my youth. What else need I do?’

“Jesus replied, ‘Go, sell what thou hast, give to the poor, and come and follow Me.’

“The young man paused and his face fell. He turned away and walked back sorrowful. Jesus, with sadness in His eyes, turned to His followers and said, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.’

“The life of faith is not one that is easily chosen. There is a price to pay, a price of laying aside the things and love of this world. That is why so few great men of riches and wealth are willing to take up the cross of Christ, for their hearts are with their treasures, and their treasures are upon earth. They can hardly perceive the riches of Heaven.

“What comparison, my dear brothers and sisters, can there be to the treasures of this world, that corrupt and rust and are taken by thieves, to the treasures of our heavenly Kingdom which abide for ever?”

Lavinia listened with great interest to these words. They pricked her heart as she thought of her life and the empty things that filled it. She looked at the people listening to this man, and saw that there was light on their faces, and peace in their souls. They were truly free—man and woman, rich and poor, free and slave, all were one in this gathering. She could see no barriers between them, no rules of society that kept one person from another. Each

was free to be as he was, and there was a feeling of contentment, of peace, and of love about the whole room. Yes, there was something here, like that great pearl, that was worth any risk to be obtained. But how?



It was as planned. Shortly after noon Rolf had finished his shopping at the market and was making his way home down a quiet narrow street. Alexis and three of his cronies were hidden in the shadows near the bend waiting for their victim to arrive.

As he neared the turn in the alley they jumped out, taking him by surprise. Alexis struck out with his dagger delivering the first blow and driving the dagger deep into Rolf’s back.

Rolf responded by swinging around and knocking his attacker with his elbow, sending Alexis flying against the wall, where he fell senseless to the ground. Spotting a sign overhead, Rolf leaped for it, ripping it out of its hold and using the pole as a weapon to defend himself.

He swung it around and hit one of his assailants in the face, sending him sprawling to the ground next to Alexis.

The other two were more wary now and circled Rolf—one with a sword in hand and the other with a long dagger.

Rolf hurtled the pole towards the nearest man. It hit the man square in his chest with great force, knocking him down.

The second man now quickly struck out with his sword. Rolf turned, but the blade aimed for his heart now struck deep into his side.

The other man had by now recovered and both started moving in for the kill.

Rolf then noticed a large rock on the ground near his feet. Diving down, he rolled over, picked up the rock, and threw it towards his attacker.

The unexpected rock hit the thug directly in his forehead, rendering him unconscious.

The other assailant, now seeing his companions scattered on the ground, turned and ran into the shadows, disappearing out of sight.



Tigellinus sat behind the emperor watching the games as the last fight drew to a close. He was impatiently waiting for the final event—the special revenge he had planned for Angus.

At last the announcement was made that the last event would be starting. A loud trumpet sounded and a great cheer went out from the crowd.

Angus stepped into the arena escorted by two Roman soldiers. They marched up to the emperor's box and saluted.

Angus eyed the box, making out the figures of Tigellinus and Decius behind the emperor, and Senator Cassius who he had once met at Gaius' home.

The guards unchained Angus and gave him two javelins. Then they left the arena as a hush came over the expectant crowd.

Angus turned and surveyed the stands, wondering what motivated such people to sit enjoying bloodshed and gore. He had in his own country seen the Druid sacrifices, but those were nothing compared to the bloodlust that raged among these Roman citizens.

The noise of a gate being pulled open brought him back to reality. What was in store for him? Gladiators? Lions? Bears? He knew of Tigellinus and his twisted ideas. The ground started to shake and tremble and a loud roar brought fear to his heart. Out of the gate raced a huge beast such as he had never seen or imagined. Large as a horse but much broader, gray in color and looking almost like it was armor-plated. It was ugly and had a huge horn on

the end of his nose.

Angus stood, looking on with a mixture of fascination and horror. He moved to the side of the arena and watched this strange creature as the crowds went wild with excitement, envisioning the spectacular end of this fight.

Angus watched nervously. How could he fight this fearsome creature? His mind raced as fear started to well up inside of him, until suddenly he remembered Aleric and his words of counsel.

Yes! Prayer! He could commit it all to the Lord and trust in Him for the outcome. *Help me, Jesus. I am lost and can do nothing in the face of this monster. You are all powerful. You promised, Aleric said, to care for Your children. You can do miracles if need be. I claim Your power, O Lord. If it be Your will, deliver me from this end, that I may yet be used as a tool for Your glory.*

The rhinoceros had stopped and was stomping on the ground with one foot as it looked around. It panted and shook its head, then saw Angus! It started for him at a great speed.

Angus started to run alongside the wall as fast as he could, but it gained quickly on him. He could hear it closing in and feel the ground trembling under him and the hot breath of the rhinoceros on his back. The crowd was shouting in anticipation.

Just then, as if directed be an unseen force, Angus swerved around and dove between the creature's legs, rolling under and coming to his feet on the other side. With one strong throw he let fly one of his javelins, burying it into one of the creature's sides.

The rhinoceros stopped and shook itself against the wall, breaking the javelin. It turned round and watched Angus, more wary now of his opponent. It started gouging out the ground with his foot, then burst into another run toward him.

Angus was desperate now, zigzagging as he ran. His heart was racing, feeling as though it was ready to beat out of his chest.

He was hoping the javelin would have slowed the creature down somewhat, but the beast continued charging with as much force as it had before. Angus reached the other wall just in front of the beast and swerved again, changing direction.

The rhinoceros swerved too late, and ran into the wall with a loud thud, its great horn gouging out a chunk of rock and plaster.

Angus turned again and ran as fast as he could around the beast, where he drove the javelin as far as he could into the beast's neck, and forward into its head, rolling aside just as the beast collapsed beside him.

There was a moment of stunned silence and then the crowd realized that Angus was alive and the great beast was dead. There was a tremendous roar from the crowd as they went wild with excitement.

Angus stood trembling, and voiced a prayer of thanks to the Lord.

Meanwhile, in the emperor's box, Tigellinus had risen and moved over to speak to Decius, who soon vanished out of the box. Tigellinus then returned to his seat behind the emperor in time to hear Poppaea commenting on the great skill of the fighter.

Tigellinus smiled and spoke quietly. "Let's wait a few moments, my lady, for the entertainment has only begun."

The noise of another opening gate brought a hush to the spectators.

Angus had meanwhile struggled to his feet and was standing beside the great beast when he heard the rumbling of the gate. As he looked around to locate which gate his new enemy would appear from, a roar broke the silence and a huge tiger stalked stealthily out into the arena—its eyes flashing like

fire as it scanned the arena for its victim. As soon as the tiger's gaze reached Angus, it started to move almost silently towards him, watching him like a cat with a mouse.

Angus looked around for some means of defense and spotted the remains of one of the javelins that had broken when the great beast had fallen. He moved over to it and reached down, his eyes never leaving those of the great cat approaching him.

Then, as if sensing danger, the tiger broke into a run toward Angus, who ducked and held the broken javelin up just as the tiger leapt on him.

Angus rolled to the left as the spear sliced into the tiger's hide, his side and face now bleeding where the claws of the tiger had caught him. Angus grimaced in pain as he quickly got up on his feet and moved around the dead rhinoceros, still keeping his eyes on the now wounded and angry cat.

There was no way he could now win over this creature unless by some miracle of God.

Just then from the crowd above a large man stood up and pulled out a huge sword, twirling it 'round his head in a circle and letting it fly with all his might. It flew into the air in an arc and landed in the arena just two feet from Angus.

Angus did not delay for a moment. He ran to it, grabbed, and swung it around his head with a great yell while charging towards the tiger.

The same instant the tiger charged towards him, roaring in fury, and leaped into the air.

The great sword and the tiger met in midair, the sword slicing through the tiger before both landed on top of Angus with a heavy and lifeless thud.

All was quiet, and then as Angus crawled out from under the great tiger the entire crowd burst into exclamations of approval and delight in the great spectacle.



Rolf had made use of all the events in the arena, while everyone was watching the fight after he had thrown in the sword, to make good his escape out of the stands.

One man, however, had not missed the action—and that was Decius. He immediately set off with some men to apprehend him.

By the time Decius had forced his way over to where Rolf had been, it was too late. Rolf was now gone. Decius, though, was not to be robbed of his prey and he was soon in hot pursuit of him.

Rolf was running through the quiet streets, but the wounds of the fight with Alexis had weakened him and he was losing a lot of blood. He staggered a bit and ran into a small alley where he collided with a group of merry makers, and then everything around him went black.

It was a shock to his pursuers when they came upon Rolf. He lay on the ground motionless, his huge form mangled with dirt. One of the Praetorians bent down to examine the body. Rolf was dead.

“There is a great wound in his side,” the soldier remarked. “He must have escaped an earlier fight, but I do not see how he could have come this far, or even done what he did in the arena with this wound.”

Decius looked with amazement at this giant of a man, and for a brief moment he was filled with respect for this dead enemy.



Back in the arena Angus was the hero of the night. The crowd was ecstatic and Tigellinus knew he would have to give him his life or see the crowd go mad. He whispered to Nero who stood up and hushed the crowd.

“Citizens of Rome, tonight we have seen this great warrior, as if born of a legend, defeat two of the greatest beasts to prowl upon these sands. Angus

the Britanni, we pardon the wrongs done by you, and release you from the death you would rightly have received. The clemency of Rome releases you to live and train in the school of our greatest gladiators, that by distinguishing yourself among those, you may in time earn your freedom as a citizen of our great empire.”

SACRIFICES

Lavinia had left the meeting early and made her way home. Her mind was filled with more questions about these Christians. There was something special about being with them that she had never experienced before. Their words were alive and real, and had penetrated deep into her very soul. They were not as the cunning words of Plato, or the frivolous words spoken in the parties and gatherings of her friends.

As soon as she reached home, she went quietly to her room, closed the door, and put off her clothes, hiding them away so no one would see them. When she had donned a toga, she called a servant to make ready the bath. Soon she was lying in the sweet, perfumed waters relaxing and reflecting on the night's events.

It was not long afterwards that Camilla returned from the games and joined Lavinia in the bathhouse. She was so full of excitement from the games, and as she undressed in front of Lavinia, she told of the man who had defeated the great rhinoceros and a tiger, and of some man who had thrown a sword to the unarmed man in the arena.

Lavinia only half-listened to the account. Her mind was still pondering the words of the Christians

she had heard that afternoon.

When Camilla had finally made an end to her tale, and was sitting in the water, Lavinia smiled and commented, “I guess I chose the wrong day to miss the games.”

“Most certainly you did,” Camilla replied. “It’s a good thing I was there for you, or you wouldn’t have known anything about it, and just imagine how embarrassing that could have been at our next party.”

Lavinia considered responding, but decided not to, and simply laid back in the pool and closed her eyes.



It was with a sad heart that, two days after the games, Valeria received news of Rolf’s death. She listened to how he had helped Angus, and had perished in the attempt to escape. Still, she knew God had received him, and that he was now in a better place. Angus was alive, and that was good news—even if he faced life as a gladiator.

So much was happening. She decided it was time to see Claudius and tell him all. She called to her servant to prepare some traveling clothes. She would return to Rome.

There was so much to do. She had to arrange for Paulus to come also, and let all her Christian friends know so they would not worry. Was this all a mistake? Was she acting too quickly? She did not think so. It was now or never. She had to deliver her soul before Claudius so that she could stand before him with a clear heart.

Angus had given his freedom to save her and her son. Rolf had given his life to save her and Angus. It was the least she could do, and she knew that it would somehow work together for good.



Tribune Claudius had been summoned to the

palace by Nero. Between many other words, Nero had mentioned a possible posting for Claudius back in Britannia. Claudius sensed the hand of Tigellinus behind the idea.

His thoughts on the way home were interrupted as he spotted Clarinda—one of several new servants he had purchased to restore his household—running towards him.

“What is it?” he called. “Is there trouble at home?”

“It’s the mistress—your wife, Valeria,” Clarinda stammered. “She’s at the house—with your son, Master Claudius!”

Claudius was overjoyed and ran ahead of Clarinda back to his home. Gone were any thoughts or worries from his meeting with Nero. He only thought of once more being in the arms of his loved one.



Arrius arrived back at his villa and entered by the back gate as he often did when coming home with female friends. Ruth followed behind in a daze. She had been shocked by the whole affair at her house and seemed to be in a trance.

Arrius knew it would arouse no suspicion if he were seen, as he often came home with women at late hours. After bringing Ruth to his room he went and fetched her some spiced wine and returned to the bedroom. He sat next to her and handed her the wine.

She drank it slowly, seemed to pull out of her daze, and then began to cry. Realizing what she had been through, Arrius put his arm around her to comfort her and reassure her that all was all right.

Ruth stopped her crying and calmed herself. A voice spoke to her heart, and she knew it was the Lord encouraging her. *I am in control. Trust in Me. I will let nothing happen to you or your loved ones that*

will not work together for a greater good.

Her attention returned to her surroundings, and she saw Arrius beside her, his protective arm around her. Her eyes made contact with his, and a flutter of emotion swept over her heart.

“You ... you saved my life,” she finally managed to whisper.

Arrius said nothing, but there was something deep and searching in his gaze.

Ruth lowered her eyes, feeling suddenly shy to be alone in the bedroom of this powerful man.

The voice in Ruth’s heart suddenly spoke again. *Fear not this man, for he is one of My own, and I have brought him to you for My purpose. There is no need to hide your feelings, or the love I have put in your heart for him.*

Arrius looked long and deep into Ruth’s dark brown eyes, and felt himself sucked like quicksand deep into her very soul. He pulled her close to him and gently kissed her lips. His senses reeled and he felt intoxicated by the emotions he felt stirring within as he gently began kissing her neck.

Ruth responded ardently to his touches, and they soon moved to the waiting bed.

It was some time later that Ruth arose and went to wash, leaving Arrius lying upon the bed reflecting on the moments of love and tenderness that had passed between them. She was not like the others he had loved. She was different. He had not just partaken of her body, but of her spirit—a spirit of peace and love, a spirit that seemed to fill her being with a radiant glow.

“Tell me, Ruth, of this man called Jesus. I wish to hear of Him, and how He can bring into a life and family what I have seen in yours, for truly, if these things come from Him, then I can see why there are those who are ready to die for His name.”

Ruth smiled. The Voice in her heart had not

misled her. Hours later Arrius knelt down and opened his heart to confess Jesus as his Lord and Savior.



Valeria was pacing the room, worried as to how Claudius would receive her. She was filled with a mixture of feelings and emotions. She was happy and excited to see Claudius again, but also apprehensive about how he would receive her. Would he be angry? Even worse, what if her faith scared him and he reported her to Tigellinus?

She looked around the room at the scrolls of her father’s library. Claudius had been an avid reader. Would he be as ready to receive the true words of life as he had been to draw on the conjectured philosophies of these scrolls?

She stopped and closed her eyes. *Jesus, You promised to help us in time of need. You said You would give wisdom if we ask of You. I need Your words to explain all these things to Claudius. You have put us together. You must have a plan for Claudius as surely as You have one for me. Please, Jesus, help me to reach his soul, so that together we might be one with You.*

Just as she finished her prayer she heard the gate being opened and saw Claudius entering the garden. He looked well and she could see he was excited. He hurried down the path, and soon came rushing into the room. He stopped for a moment to look deeply into Valeria’s eyes and then rushed over and grabbed her, holding her tightly in his arms.

“Oh, Valeria, you don’t know how much I have missed you,” Claudius said.

Valeria started crying, and Claudius brushed her cheeks with his hands. She looked up at him and kissed him.



Back at home Titus poured himself a drink.

He was still shaken from his encounter with the Praetorian, and been carefully keeping watch on his neighbor's house. Now, to his delight, he had spied Valeria coming home, and had sent a hasty message to Tigellinus.

As Titus waited for what would inevitably happen, he was filled with a wave of guilt. He was betraying his old friend. His father had been a man of honor and great standing in Rome. Now here he was, a traitor, selling out his friends for fear. He felt overwhelmed with shame for what he had done, and was trying to drown the feelings in drink.

Earlier that day, at the docks, he remembered that as he had been going about his business, he had spotted someone who appeared to be following him. When he turned, the man, who looked somewhat familiar, ignored him and passed by.

He plucked his beard nervously at the memory of walking home in fear, and jumping at shadows. Yes, he had done the right thing to report Valeria's return. He had recognized her in spite of the cloak she had worn, and if he had not been watching, he could have easily missed the quick and furtive way that she and her child came to the house and entered it. And after all, loyalty to the empire was the greatest and noblest loyalty, was it not?

But in spite of his mental attempts to justify his deeds, Titus still felt torn to realize that he was betraying the trust of Claudius, his friend, for the fear of Tigellinus, who he had never met, and this thought troubled his soul. He felt sick with shame at his cowardice. He knew Claudius would be overjoyed with the return of his wife and child, and here he was trying to end that and destroy his friend's family, just to save his own life.

His goblet was empty. He filled it again.

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VISIONS AND WITNESSES

It was early morning and Arrius sat on the edge of the bed with Ruth sitting between his legs on the floor. Her head rested in his lap and he stroked her long black hair. She reached up and felt his powerful arms, wondering at how one who was so strong could be so gentle. They were looking out into the garden through the window. The birds were singing and playing around a small fountain outside. It was beautiful, peaceful, and relaxing. The wind rustled through the leaves in accompaniment to the birds.

Ruth had been telling Arrius stories about Jesus and His love. Arrius seemed to be very open to all she had to say.

"You don't know, my sweet one," said Arrius, "how much these stories of Jesus bring a peace to my heart. I lived for selfish lust and pleasure all my life. My only thought in life was to fulfill my own desires and needs. I have enjoyed life to the full, excelling in sport and love, yet never finding fulfillment or happiness. Now I see how lost I have been—lost to the true riches of giving and sharing and helping others. I now find strength in the words of Jesus."

A loud knock on the door interrupted them. Arrius gathered his toga from the floor and wrapped it around him as he rose and went to the door.

One of his servants stood there, and the man told Arrius that Senator Cassius was outside wanting to meet with him.

“Show him to the garden and serve some refreshments. I shall be out shortly to attend him.”

After his servant left, Arrius turned to Ruth. “My love, I’m afraid my duties call me. You are free to remain here as long as you wish, and I promise that so long as you are within these walls no harm shall come to you. I cannot promise the same if you step outside. But I look forward to speaking more of these things, if you choose to remain here.”



“Cassius, it is good to see you. What brings you to my home at this early hour? How may I help you?”

“I am sorry to come at this hour, but I come as the bearer of sad tidings. A messenger recently arrived from Laevinus Metellus, bringing news to me, and also news of your family. Your younger brother has been killed in a fight, and your mother is sore ill over it. She has gone into a daze, and refuses to come out of it, or even to acknowledge or speak to any who come to her. She is growing more ill by the day, not touching food or drink.

“Laevinus requests that you return to attend the burial, and to see to your mother. I believe he hopes your presence will instill in her some hope and fight so that she will pull out of this.”

“Thank you, Cassius. I appreciate your promptness in delivering this news. I shall make arrangements immediately. But please, come in and rest awhile.”

“No, no,” Cassius protested. “I must be on my way. I am delayed already in going to the senate.”

“Then I thank you again for your trouble, my friend. Good day.”

Arrius returned to his room and sat wearily

down beside Ruth.

“You have received bad news?” she inquired.

“Yes, my love. My brother is dead and my mother is ill. I must go visit them in Athens.”

Ruth could see worry in his eyes. “But there is also something else troubling you.”

“You have seen through me into my thoughts, my love. I worry for you. You will not be safe here in my absence. You must come with me to Athens.”

“Oh, Arrius, I would love to, but I could not bear to leave without knowing the fate of my father and mother and brother. I have other friends I can hide with and who can help me here. I must stay and do what I can to find and help my family.”

“I expected and feared as much,” replied Arrius. “But I understand your desires, and will not try to persuade you against them. Nevertheless, let me help you as much as I can. I have a small villa on the outskirts of Rome. A trusted servant of my father tends it. No one has used it for many years and it will be the perfect place for you to stay. I will give you Lucilius and Sabina, my own trusted servants who need not make this journey with me. They will care for you and see to it that you have everything you need.”



“So, my friend, this once you failed! And to make matters worse, your failure to kill Rolf ruined the spectacular vengeance I had planned against Angus, and cost me a great sum in dead beasts of terror that should have lived.”

Alexis shivered as he felt Tigellinus’ cold glare eating into his very soul. Decius stood nearby, listening with a sardonic smile on his face, relishing the sight of Alexis squirming.

Tigellinus paused as he looked at the cringing figure of Alexis with disgust, then he relented and broke into a smile.

“However, you were partially successful. Rolf is dead after all, from wounds inflicted by you. As for Angus ... well, he may have avoided my vengeance for the moment, but he is safe within the compound of the gladiators where he may yet find other opportunities to face my vengeance.

“I will therefore give you a chance to redeem yourself. There is a merchant whom we arrested. Alas, he died under questioning. But he has a wife, a son, and a daughter, and these escaped arrest and have gone into hiding. We caught a few other small Christian fish in the bargain, who are to be fed to the lions tonight. But I commission you to find the wife, son, and daughter of this Jacob, who escaped the hand of my Praetorians.”

At this, Tigellinus turned towards Decius with a glare. It was Decius’ turn to suppress a gulp in his throat. Then he turned back to Alexis and continued. “If you succeed in this, you will receive twice what I promised you for Rolf. But if you fail, you shall go to the lions in their stead. Do you understand?”

Alexis nodded.

“Good, because it is a sad thing when my Praetorians and my Alexis disappoint me on the same day. Now go—both of you, and leave me alone.”

Alexis gave a short bow while Decius saluted. Then they both turned and left the room.



Philip had not spoken to Katriona since he had bought her. During the journey to Athens he had been involved with his companions, leaving her with the servants and other slaves who traveled in a group together.

It was a pleasant trip and Katriona enjoyed the comfortable weather and scenic views along the way. Once they reached the great city of Athens, they passed by it along the outskirts and continued until

they reached a nice villa that was Philip’s home. There Katriona was shown to a room that was to be hers.

Helena, who was in charge of the household, explained as best she could that Katriona was to stay in these quarters until the master called for her.

Katriona looked with surprise at the room. It was much larger than any room and even many homes she had known back on the isle, and in contrast to how she had been welcomed to Rome, here she was treated with great friendliness.

It was two days before Philip called for her. Just the evening before she had received one of her visions—this Man she had seen a few times now appeared to her. He looked at her and held out his hand beckoning her to come. “I have called you. You are Mine.” Then she saw that His hands were pierced and his feet were marked with blood. “I have opened the door for you,” said the Man, and then vanished. This vision troubled her. What could it mean? She drifted into a restless sleep.

Katriona came to the room of her master and opened the door. Philip was sitting at his desk leafing through some documents. She wondered what was in store for her, but was not worried. She felt he was a kind man.

She slowly approached him and he glanced up, acknowledging her. He motioned to a chair and she sat down while he leafed through another letter.

She examined Philip’s face as she waited. *It is the gentle face of a man of deep love and kindness*, she thought. He was older, and his hair was starting to gray. He wore a beard, but as was common in this region, was shaven around his mouth.

A young man came in and smiled at her. Philip stopped working and motioned to another chair. The man sat down beside her.

Philip spoke to her in soft tones. The young man who had just entered interpreted Philip's words.

Katriona turned to the man in amazement, realizing he was also from the isles.

"Katriona, you must be troubled as to what has happened to you over these months, and wonder what is to be your future. You need not worry. No one here will harm you. I am a Christian, and my Lord Jesus commissioned me to buy you. He said you were His called and chosen and I was to bring you to Him."

"I know not this Jesus!" Katriona answered in fiery tones. "Where is He? I belong to no one! I am a daughter of a great chief. Who is he that would rule over me? You may own my body but not my spirit!"

Philip paused, but continued in a gentle manner. "There is fire in your spirit, and that is a good thing. You ask who is Jesus? He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the One who came and died for you to redeem you from the pain of death.

"Jesus is the Son of God who came to earth to save you from the penalty of sin. We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. There is none who has lived without touching evil, who deserves to escape death and corruption. But God, who loves each one, for we are His creations, desires for us to live with Him, and so He sent His Son to open the door to His Kingdom, that we might be shown a way in.

"And that way was for God's Son, Jesus, to be taken and crucified for the sins of us all. He was hung on a cross, His hands and feet pierced with nails. ..."

At this moment Katriona lost all contact with what Philip was saying. The vision came back to her. *The Man with the blood on His hands and feet! The Man with the loving eyes! The cross in the sky with the blood. The door being opened!*

It was but a few moments later that she came back to reality. Looking to her interpreter and then to Philip she said, "Tell me of this Jesus that I may know of Him."

Philip had watched as this sudden change came over the woman, and marveled at the unseen workings of God's Spirit to change the heart and mind of a person. He continued to tell Katriona all that he knew and had heard from the apostles about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

SEEDS OF WRATH

It was a cool morning. The rays of the early morning sun were starting to pierce through the darkened sky giving a glow to all it touched.

Katriona sat in a secluded seat in the garden with her shawl pulled over her head. She was watching the changing color of the sky, the sparkling grass and flowers reflecting the entire color spectrum as they caught the rising sunlight.

She had been thinking about her childhood and how she loved the cool winds. She reminisced of her early morning bathing in her homeland, of listening to the winds whistle along the hills and rustle the long grass. She remembered the waters of the burn singing to her as she swam in their waters.

Then a vision came to her, not of the past but of the future. She was in a boat—a small boat. The winds were blowing through her long tresses. Her face was flushed from the cold winds. Beside her sat a young child, a boy about two years old. There was a man rowing, but his face was obscured. The winds were rough and the sea billowing, tossing the boat back and forth. It looked like the raging of the North Sea of home.

Then it was gone just as quick as it came! Who was the boy? Was it her son? Who was the man?

What did it all mean?

A voice calling out broke her chain of thought. It was Philip and he had some others with him.

“Ah, my dear Katriona,” he said through his interpreter. “This is James and his wife Julia, and Timothy. They are visiting our city and will be staying with us. James is an elder of our church in Corinth and will speak to a gathering tonight. It would be good if you could come. Now let us come in and have breakfast together and you can all get to know each other better.”



Decius, Secundus, and some other of the Praetorian officers stood transfixed as they watched Tigellinus seething with rage and shouting like a wild man. In a moment of inattention, Angus had escaped from custody while being transferred to the compound of the gladiators.

“Incompetent fools!” Tigellinus now screamed. “I’ll have you whipped to blood and bone unless you find him.”

As if this had not been enough, Nero had earlier that day openly disagreed with Tigellinus on some matter, and sided instead with Petronius. Tigellinus slumped down in a chair and rested his head in his hands.

“Even Nero doesn’t realize how great a thorn these Christians are becoming in the empire’s side, refusing to worship and offer even token sacrifices to the gods of Rome. And they are becoming more numerous and bold by the day. We have managed to arrest and condemn a few, but not nearly enough. All the people can see of these Christians are their supposed good works and loving words, but mark my words, the glory of Rome will come to naught if such teachings continue to spread and infect the populace. It is the gods of Rome who have brought us victory and power over the earth. If the people desert

and neglect them, the gods shall desert and neglect us, and then what is to become of—”

Tigellinus stopped in mid sentence. His expression of weariness brightened to a smile. “But why didn’t I think of that before? It’s so simple. Nero will surely be pleased, and it will give us the chance to rid the empire of these Christians once and for all.”

Tigellinus turned and dismissed the men as he left the room, leaving behind the stunned group of men watching in amazement.

They stood in silence for a moment, then Secundus whispered, “What’s so simple? What was he talking about?”

Decius shrugged his shoulders. “Who knows what goes on in the mind of Tigellinus?”



Nero had been in an angry mood. Nothing had been able to pacify him. He had been raging in one of his notorious fits when Tigellinus arrived. But Tigellinus was not unprepared. Behind him strode a group of three new slave girls he had just purchased, and when Nero spotted them entering, he ordered every man from the room, except Tigellinus.

“Ah, Prefect, how often you remind me of the little good there still remains in this wretched city,” Nero said, calming himself from his earlier tirades. “The burden of Rome, how undesirable it has become. If only all of Rome were a quiet and peaceful garden. But no, it is a rotting beehive of stench and endless mutterings. I have tried so hard to please Rome, and yet Rome can still not please me.”

“But yet Rome can, and I know how,” Tigellinus answered. “Augustus claimed that he inherited a Rome of brick, and turned it into a Rome of marble. Let it be said of Nero that he turned the Rome of marble into a Rome of gold. The upper streets are filled with whispers and mistrust. The lower streets

are filled with stench and disease. And the plague of these Christians spreads throughout the city.”

“And what is your solution to these problems?” Nero asked.

“Fire. Let us burn the old away. In the chaos that ensues, we can conveniently dispose of some of your detractors in the senate. Then we can blame the fire on the Christians, and the people will rise up in anger against them, and deliver them into your hands for execution. And just think of how many more people we can fill the arenas with then, to the delight of all Rome.”

Nero sat back, growing quiet and deep in thought.

“Burn Rome? Will that not anger the gods?”

“Is not Nero the greatest of all gods of Rome? If it pleases him, it pleases them.”

“If it pleases me...” Nero giggled like a demented child. “With the city destroyed, I could build a new Rome, a greater Rome, an eternal Rome. Very well, Tigellinus. For the good of Rome. Now, won’t you introduce me to those girls of yours?”

Nero’s eyes inspected the girls as they approached. He raised his hand and dismissed Tigellinus.

Tigellinus saluted Nero and turned to leave, eyeing the girls as he passed by. It was a pity he had to give them to Nero. Still, the gesture had had its desired effect. It also reminded him that he needed to spend some time relaxing himself. Things were starting to look more promising now.



It was early afternoon in Rome and at the compound of the gladiators Aelius had just received a message from Nero. The governor of Greece had asked for some of the gladiator champions of Rome to perform for a feast being held there in honor of the emperor and gods of Rome.

Aelius had decided on twenty seasoned gladiators, along with two of the Celts—Coilus and Aleric, who were well on their way to making a name for themselves as gladiators, as were Garth and Armirius. But Aelius sought to keep these last two Celts in Rome, as after Angus’ performance in the arena Celtic gladiators had suddenly become very popular.

Clohn, the only other Celtae, had become ill after his arrival in the gladiator compound. Neil had been sold to an Egyptian official who needed a guard for a good price. As for Angus, no one seemed to know what had become of him. He had vanished into the dust after his escape.



They were somewhere off the coast of Macedonia. The crew was battling with a great storm. It had come in suddenly and had caught them all unprepared, as if by the anger of the gods, the captain feared. The ship was being driven helplessly by the strong winds and waves, and finally was tossed against a great barrier of rocks close to some indiscernible shore.

By some miracle Aleric and Coilus made it to the shore where some other wounded and exhausted men lay unconscious. Realizing that this was their chance to escape, the two were soon making their way inland towards a group of hills, where they would be able to rest and hide. After some time of walking they came to the shelter of some trees and stopped to rest. They decided that their next course of action would be to find some form of the shelter for the night, dry their clothes, and then try to make their way to the nearest port to look for a ship heading to Gaul.



Alexis had, with his usual skill and many contacts, finally located Jacob’s wife and son, and right in the middle of a nest of Christians. He sent

word immediately to Decius while he continued his search for Ruth. She had seemingly just disappeared—just like that infernal Angus. But Alexis would not give up! He would succeed. He knew that this time his life depended upon it.

Decius was quick to respond to the message from Alexis, and within a few hours his men were escorting Dinah and John to the prisons, together with six other Christians—including Anna, Camilla’s servant—in chains.

Tigellinus was in good spirits at the news. Even the fact that Ruth and Angus were still missing did not bother him so greatly. His new plan of setting fires throughout Rome would succeed where all before had failed.



It was a shock for Camilla to find out that her servant Anna had been found among a group of Christians and arrested with them. Anna had been with Camilla’s family since birth, yet the proof against her was beyond argument. Camilla brushed it all off and continued in her world of pleasure and selfishness. What did it matter? After all, Anna was but a slave, and obviously a dangerous one if she was mixed up with the Christian sect. *I should not get so attached to slaves*, she thought.

Lavinia, though, was more perturbed when she heard it. The actions against these Christians were becoming bolder and more commonplace. Perhaps it was time to forget her fascination with them, and keep out of harm’s way. But no, the words she had heard were too real, too convicting to her heart. She resolved simply to tread more carefully.

A few moments later a servant came to the room and informed her that Arrius was at the door and desired to see her.

She went to meet him and immediately could see he was troubled. She invited him in to have a drink,

and sat down beside him. As she listened to the news of his brother and mother she was silent, then he asked her if she would accompany him.

Should she? Yes, she did feel she should go with him on his trip to Athens, as she knew his family well. She also wondered if this was a plan arranged by God. Maybe Greece would be a safer place for her to be for now. And if she went with him she could try to find out if there were Christians in Athens, where it would not be quite so dangerous as in Rome.

She agreed to go and said she would be ready by the morrow. She would let Camilla know at once and then make her preparations.



All was still and the birds sang their praises of thanksgiving while the whistling winds played music through the trees and the leaves rustled in accompaniment as they were stirred by the gentle breeze.

Angus slowly opened his eyes to greet the early rising sun as a new day dawned. A new day, a new dawn. What would it bring forth? What should he do?

He felt lost as he realized he could never make it on his own. He’d never be able to reach home, and even if he did, what for? He could never go back to his old life. He was so different now, and back in the island they would never receive his new faith. What of Katriona? Where was she? What had become of her? Could he leave his new friend Aleric, back at the gladiator compound, to his doom?

“Dear Jesus,” he whispered, “I need You. For some reason You have seen fit to save my life and bring me here. You engineered my escape. Now what should I do? Where should I go? Give me a sign. Give me some guidance.”

He sat down in the quiet of the woods waiting to see if he would receive some vision or if a voice

would sound from the heavens. But alas, nothing came. Angus rose up and started off on his journey. He carried a sword that he had taken from a guard as he had fled from Rome.

I need some food first, he thought, *so let me see what I can find in the forest.* He walked cautiously through the woods, his ears attentive to the slightest sound—his chains still dangling from his wrists. Nevertheless, it was beautiful to feel free again and to enjoy the beauty of the woodland.

Then he stopped suddenly and froze. What was it? He heard voices a short distance away. He stealthily moved through the trees, as a tiger eluding its searching hunters. Was it some woodsmen, or farmers? Or was it a band of robbers and cutthroats? Or maybe soldiers hunting for him? Surely no travelers would be out at this time of morning, way out here in the woods.

He soon found shelter behind some bushes and peeked out. In front of and below him he could see a group of ten people emerge from the trees in a small grove. They all sat down together in a small clearing. They did not look like robbers or farmers or travelers. What were they doing out here in the forest? They seemed a happy carefree bunch—men, women, and children together. An older man seemed to be directing them and they all closed their eyes and prayed.

Of course! thought Angus to himself. *They are Christians! That explains it.* That was why they were out so early and such a mixed bunch of people. It was obviously meant to be a secret meeting. Should he reveal himself to them?

The answer came to him clearly. This was the Lord's doing. Angus had prayed for help and guidance, and then suddenly stumbled across this secret group of believers. Yes. He would reveal himself to them. He stood up and stepped out of the

bushes, at the same time calling out to the group of Christians.

“Hello there! May I join you?”

The people turned, shocked at this unexpected intruder. Was he some spy? Were they surrounded by Roman soldiers? Or was he part of a band of robbers waiting to slay them all?

From Angus' appearance, they assumed the latter. He was fearsome looking in his strange Celtic garb, and bloody, with a large scar above his left eye from his fight, a sword in hand and chains hanging from his wrists. He could see their uncertainty and apprehension and called again.

“Fear not. I am also a Christian! I mean no harm to you. I need some help and food.”

His words did little to calm the suspicious group, who thought them part of whatever trick he was playing.

The older man stood up and calmed the others down. He waved to Angus to come down. Angus slowly moved towards the camp when one of the men exclaimed excitedly, “It's the Celtic gladiator who escaped after the arena fight!”

Everyone looked at him in admiration, as the story of this mysterious Christian Celtae who had been condemned and then absolved after his heroic fight against the two great beasts had become the talk of Rome. Angus entered the group with a hero's welcome and soon he was heartily eating of some food one of the women set before him, and relating his tale to the astonished listeners.

The old man, relieved that his leading to call Angus over had been the right one, asked how they might assist him.

An idea came to Angus as they spoke. He needed to meet with Valeria, the wife of the recently returned Centurion Claudius. She would be able to help him.

One of the group, a rougher looking individual,

then mentioned that he knew of her, and that as far as he knew, she was still in hiding. But he had some friends who could possibly get in contact with her.

In the meantime the older man, who had introduced himself as Carinus, suggested that Angus clean up and try to fit in better so that he would not stick out so obviously. “I have a small holding on a nobleman’s farm. The master is away on business for a month, and so I am now watching over it. We can probably arrange for some new clothes for you. And I wager that after a shave and haircut you will hardly be recognized. Otherwise I guarantee—especially with those chains—that the first patrol of soldiers you come across will likely be your last.”

Angus readily agreed and soon the party of travelers returned to their households. Angus went with Carinus and the rougher man, who both came from the same estate. Once there, the rough-looking man, Oberon, who also worked as a blacksmith, removed Angus’ chains. The man, despite his coarse appearance, was gentle as a lamb, and played with a group of children on the farm when he had finished with Angus.

It pleased Angus to see such a rough, hard-looking man playing with the children as if he was one himself—not like his long-ago former home where even young children soon lost their playfulness in the hard life of survival.



Ruth stretched out on the soft bed, enjoying the sensation of the smooth silk on her skin, the soft cushions, and the wonder of how the Lord could care so well for His own. Here she was, in the rich home of a great noble Roman, waited on hand and foot by servants. Arrius had left that morning with Lavinia to Athens, leaving Ruth with a supply of gold for use in case of emergency.

“God sure does work in strange ways beyond our

comprehension,” she said to herself. She lay there remembering the stories from the Scriptures—of Joseph and Daniel and of Moses and Esther—how God often did things in ways that had not been expected. But one thing was always sure—God’s undying love and concern. He was always ready to comfort and care for His children.

She thought of Arrius—young, strong, handsome; a man of standing and high place in Rome, cousin to Tigellinus, their most hated enemy and greatest persecutor. And yet the Lord was using her to reach into his heart, and bring him into His Kingdom.

It was a love she had not expected, but God had given it to her, and now she was in love with this handsome young man, and she wondered where this love would lead them both.

Now she must find out what had happened to her family. It was over a week since her escape, and they would be worried about her. She decided to start by contacting Martha, for if her mother and brother had sought help from or left messages with anyone, it would be her.

IN THE ARENA

The games in Rome had been a great success and the new Celtae were proving as popular as Aelius had hoped. Garth had won five straight fights. Armirius seven. Of course, Aelius had arranged it so that their opponents weren't the most formidable, as he knew the people simply enjoyed watching them win.

But today Armirius faced a more worthy opponent—a great Ethiopian gladiator who had remained undefeated in thirty-six contests. The bets were mixed and high, just as Aelius had anticipated. He knew, as well as the spectators, that the fight could go either way, and in either case he would have a new and very popular champion.

It was a good fight. Armirius seemed to have the upper hand and was driving the Ethiopian back. Twice he almost snared him in his net, but the Ethiopian had been too nimble and eluded it each time.

Now as Armirius closed in again, the Ethiopian suddenly dove for his feet and knocked him over. Before Armirius could recover, the Ethiopian's sword was at Armirius' throat, and his eyes on the emperor's box, watching to see what the fate of Armirius should be.

The signal was given, and the Ethiopian drove

his sword home. Armirius was dead.

Aelius was dismayed. He had hoped that Armirius could have won, for it would have been much more spectacular for Armirius to face Garth in the next challenge of champions than for the Ethiopian to face him.

Garth watched from the sides with sadness as the blood of Armirius soaked into the dry sand. Was this to be his fate also? Would he be the next one to see his life's blood ebb slowly into the dust? Was death but a breath away from him also?



It was to the jeers and chants of the crowds that Anna and her fellow captives were herded out into the darkened arena. The flickering lights burned on each side of the great ring, and there in the center they gathered together. A great peace fell on each one as they faced their end. Anna stood bravely in the arena, her ripped clothes hanging from her frail body. She stood straight, her body covered with welts and swellings from the cuts and lashes she had received; yet she felt no pain.

As she had been beaten, she had seen a great light, and a tall glowing Figure appeared beside her and reached out to her. Immediately her pain had gone as if He had taken it upon Himself. He reached out and mopped her brow and smiled at her.

"Well done, My little one!" He said. "We are awaiting your coming, so fear not. Soon you will be rejoicing with us in the halls of Heaven."

Now in the arena this same feeling of peace came upon her. She stood tall and brave along with her fellow brothers and sisters, and she felt the presence of her Savior once more beside her. There was nothing man could do to harm her. She was bought and ransomed by the blood of Jesus. She was graduating from the pain of this life to her reward.

"Hear, you Christians," the powerful voice of

Tigellinus shouted across the arena. "You have been charged and found guilty of treason against Rome and her emperor for failing to acknowledge the gods that have made us great and carried us to victory!

"But even now Rome is merciful before you. Confess that you have been misled and beguiled by those who would see the great and eternal Rome destroyed. Come and kneel before your emperor. Beg forgiveness from the gods of Rome whom you have angered, and your lives shall be spared."

The Christians stayed where they were, close together. Not one made a move towards the emperor's stand. Finally an elderly man stood forth, walking but a few paces towards the emperor's box.

"It is not the gods of Rome who are to be feared," the old man proclaimed, his voice thundering supernaturally across the arena, "or even the ravenous beasts of Rome like Nero and Tigellinus who rule her. The one true God and creator of man is greater than all, whose Kingdom is ruled by love, not fear. The weak fear those who are greater, and thus Rome fears the one true and eternal God, and seeks to destroy those who follow Him.

"But the Kingdom of God cannot be destroyed, for it rests in the hearts and minds of those who know and love Him. Rome can only kill the body. It cannot destroy the eternal spirit that belongs to He Who created it. Our judgment is of God, and not of men, and we shall stand and kneel before Him, and Him alone. For the gift of God unto all men is eternal life through Jesus Christ—"

The man's voice was broken by a great shout and clamor from the crowds as several gates along the sides of the arena opened and lions started emerging from them.

The roar of the beasts mingled with the roars of the crowd, and Tigellinus smirked. These Christians were so predictable. Still, he marveled that not a

man or woman among them had stepped forward and knelt before Nero.

The Christians, seeing the beasts enter the arena, gathered closer together, and prayed in soft and silent tongues among themselves. Then, as the lions began circling the group, the Christians lifted up their voices in songs of praise to their loving Savior. Their voices carried across the hushed grandstands, filling the air with heavenly sounds that touched the hidden corners of many hearts.

As the lions descended on the group and began their grisly carnage, the crowds remained quiet. It was unearthly the way they could sing and smile and overcome the fear that should have filled them. Others were beginning to question whether there was really something to this God of these Christians? Was He truly able to deliver them from the pain and fear of death? Some were filled with awe, and some disgust. Yet others simply relished every moment of the bloody spectacle.

One man watched from behind one of the barred entrances to the arena—a gladiator used to seeing death and dying people. Yet this man was troubled by what he saw. The sight of these Christians dying with praises on their lips moved him. He was a man of strength and used to living by the sword, dancing with death. But these were different—women, children, old men, all being butchered at the whim of a despotic, demented creature who called himself a god and emperor of Rome.

Garth had heard a lot about these Christians, both good and bad. But now he couldn't help but compare the way Armirius had died—as he had lived, by the sword—to the death these people were now facing without fear, when it would have been a simple matter of denial for them to walk away from it.

Camilla had not gone to the arena. She had been trying to brush aside the thought that her servant Anna would be on the sand. *But it's her own fault for involving herself with these conspirators*, she thought. So she sat in her room, drinking, eating, and trying to clear her mind of these nagging thoughts that were pricking her conscience. But the fate of Anna troubled her deeply, although she tried not to admit it to herself. She had grown fond of Anna through the years and missed her.

I need a rest and change of scenery, Camilla thought. *Yes, a trip out to the country away from all of this.* She would have Priscilla arrange her items and make plans immediately. It was strange to have gotten so attached to a servant. *If only Marcus were here, he would help me.*

She sat down to write some letters, canceling all previous engagements and letting her friends know of her plans.



CODEx III

ANNO DOMINI 64 · 65

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A NEW DAY

Aleric lay in the sand, watching the rhythmic movement of the waves crashing along the beach and leaving glistening pebbles sparkling like precious jewels in the sunlight. The turquoise sea and golden sands added to the beauty of the picture. A crab popped out of his hole and scurried across the sand only to dive down another hole and disappear a few meters ahead. In the distance, a few fishing boats could be seen setting off into the horizon.

Craning his neck, he watched the gulls swoop down into the sea only to rise again with tiny morsels of food, and fly back to their nest high in the cliffs above. Ah yes, freedom! It was great to be free. How man the world over longs for freedom, dies for freedom, yet seldom ever finds it. Aye, it was not in the world of man that freedom could be found. It was only in the heavenly Kingdom that true freedom would at last be realized.

Aleric relaxed as he lay there in the sand, listening to the waves lapping along the shore. He felt he was being lulled into another world, floating out into the unknown caverns of the mind. Dreams of love, adventure, and romance filled his mind. *Dreams I will never see fulfilled in this life*, he thought. *Yet, the reward in the life to come will fulfill these desires and*

feelings, Aleric thought confidently.

The gulls cried forth their song accompanied by the crashing waves, while the rising sun gave forth a rich glow bringing new life to everything. Aleric took a deep breath at this majestic scene and slowly stretched.

“A new day has begun, my Iverni friend,” Aleric said, reaching over and giving Coilus a shake. “What will it bring for us? Maybe it is the romance of the beauty of this fine morning, but I feel there is something awaiting us today. Something special! Yet look at us! Why, we’re a ragged looking pair and fit to be locked up if we meet any honest man. They will take us as a couple of cutthroats and robbers. We need to find some new clothes and a place to freshen up and shave. What say you?”

“Aye, that we need, for we will not last long on these shores looking as we do. Let us move off the shore up there and follow along to see if we come across any place.” Coilus had grown to respect his friend and his strange beliefs. He was a good man, honest and just. These Christians were past his comprehension, but he found himself respecting them. They were brave and fearless and that he could understand.

“Shall we rob some coastal home along the way?” Coilus asked.

Aleric stopped, looked at his companion in amazement, and then smiled.

“No, my friend. You have a lot to learn. Killing and stealing is not the way. You see, I have a God who loves me and will provide our needs. All we have to do is ask Him.”

Coilus looked at him. “Ask Him, and then what? Is He going to throw it out from the sky? Ha! You are indeed a dreamer, Aleric.”

“If so be, then let me live in my dream. Come, I will put it to the test.”

Coilus stared as he saw that Aleric meant what he said, and respectfully stood quietly as Aleric began to pray. “Lord, You heard my prayer in Rome and delivered me. Now I will keep my promise and declare You to the world. I need, though, to live in order to do this, Lord, and I ask that You provide us with food, shelter, and with the clean clothes and help we need. You promised if we ask of You, You would answer, so Lord we ask now that You help us, Your children.”

Coilus waited a moment then scoffed, “So where is this God of yours? Where is His provision?”

Aleric was unperturbed by this comment and smiled. “It will come. You will see. But now let us press on along the coast.”

They proceeded to climb up and move along a deserted coastal road. It was warm and breezy, they were both in high spirits and chatted together as they walked. They had traveled but two miles when some shouts and commotion were heard, seeming to come from round the bend ahead. It sounded like there was a conflict. They both darted to the side, moving along in the safety of the bushes so as not to be seen.

They reached a good vantage point where they could see the fight below. Some travelers were being attacked by a band of six robbers, and they were outnumbered and were losing.

Aleric glanced at Coilus. “We need to help them!” he whispered.

“Why? It is none of our affair. Leave them to it,” snarled Coilus

“Not so, for God has brought them along our path, therefore it is our conflict. We cannot pass by these needy people, my friend. Come let us go. Look over there.” Aleric pointed to two thick branches on the ground, which they picked them up and started down the hill. “Let’s teach these ruffians a lesson,

my friend!” Aleric said with a laugh.

It was quick and easy, for although the robbers had knives and one a sword, they were no match for the skilled and trained gladiators, and they were soon running into the hills bloody and beaten.

The two travelers looked at their strange rescuers. A sorry sight these rescuers were, looking more dangerous and fearsome than the robbers they had just beaten off. The two travelers thought they were now in worse trouble than before. But Aleric was quick to put them at ease and soon they were all chatting together.

The two travelers, who introduced themselves as Fortunatus and Lucius, were bound for Athens to visit with some friends there. They readily invited Aleric and Coilus to join them, and fitted them with some new clothes at the first town they stopped by, at the same time paying for a shave and haircut for both of the men.

As Coilus sat there, his beard gone and hair trimmed, wearing a fresh set of clothes, Aleric whispered to him, “What say you now, my friend, of God’s supply? Did He not answer our request? You actually look human in your new apparel!”

Coilus laughed. “You’re not so bad looking yourself. Maybe you’ll find some voluptuous maid to keep you warm at nights.”

Aleric laughed along with his friend. *It may not be a bad idea*, he thought. *I could use someone to share my faith and mission with as well as my bed.*

It was a different-looking pair who continued on the journey with the two travelers. God’s answers are not always in the way we expect, but nevertheless there they were, on their way to Athens—new creatures in the company of good people who would put them up in Athens. It seemed all was working out well.

Coilus could not quite figure out his new friend;

he seemed so full of contradictions. Sometimes he would speak against fighting and talk about love and forgiveness, how they should turn the other cheek. Then he would turn around and chase off robbers. *I need to talk to Aleric more about this seeming contradiction*, he mused as they continued along the road.



The journey for Lavinia and Arrius was quiet and uneventful, but both of them had noticed there was something different about the other, although neither could figure out what. Maybe it was to do with the death of Arrius’ brother and his mother’s illness. Arrius, on the other hand, was worried that something had happened in Rome to Lavinia and was feeling responsible for bringing her there, yet he could not bring up the subject. So they continued quietly along together and were thoughtfully reflecting on all the events of the past few days—each one respecting the silence of the other.

It was soon enough that they reached Athens and arrived at the home of Arrius. Almost at once his mother seemed to take a turn for the better, and this was a great encouragement to all. Lavinia only stayed a short time, paid her respects to all, and then moved to her family home nearby, where she hoped to relax and consider her new life, and what her plans for the future should be.

Soon she was sinking into a dream-filled sleep, only to encounter the horrors of the arena from a new perspective—that of being a participator rather than a spectator. She was running from the lions, and then there was the face of Nero looming before her, laughing, gloating over her fate. Nearby stood Tigellinus, his face as impassive as a stone, watching as the lion’s jaws closed upon her. She screamed.

Then she was awake, sitting in her bed soaked in sweat. It was all a dream, all just a dream. But was it

some warning of what was to come? If she persisted in following these Christians and their God, was this to be her fate? Were her old gods warning her to desist, to turn back to the old now?

No, she could not, for despite the fear of the moment she felt this was not so. Something drew her and compelled her to keep going and seek out the truth, the answer to her questions, and what these Christians were all about.

Today she would start her inquiry and find out more. She lay back down on her bed once more and soon was drifting off into a peaceful sleep.



After some time in idle talk with his family, Arrius felt tired. He excused himself as he had traveled long and needed a rest. He retired to his room, and within a few moments had drifted into a troubled sleep. He tossed and turned, mumbling and moaning on his bed.

In his dream he was being dragged and placed in chains, then beaten and whipped by soldiers. Suddenly it changed. It was not him. It was Ruth. She was the one being beaten and assaulted by that brute, the young and haughty Senator Epidius. He could see the man's eyes glowing brightly and his teeth gleaming in the broken light of the dungeon as he laughed in glee. He saw a sword rise and fall. A scream filled his ears!

Then he awoke with a start. He was shaking. What did it mean? Should he head back to Rome now? Was it a warning of trouble for Ruth? No! It seemed despite the vividness of the dream, another feeling was stirring within him to stay. There was something for him to do here. It had not been the chance of circumstances alone that brought him to Athens. A hand of fate, perhaps the hand of Ruth's God, had guided him here, and he felt he would soon learn why. In the meantime, he decided to send

Ruth a message, telling her of his dream, and to be careful.



Arrius had inquired around town asking discreetly about the Christians, finding out they were not as secretive here as they were in Rome, and had found out about a gathering. He now entered quietly into the meeting hall. He had dressed simply and made sure to keep to the outer edges of the crowd to avoid any detection, as he did not want to be recognized in case anyone he knew might be present.

It had been quite easy to find the meeting place and gain entrance by dropping a few names from Rome such as Jacob, Demetrius, and Martha—names he had learned through his conversations with Ruth—and using the sign of the fish. It did not make him feel much safer in their presence, and he realized that if he had been able to get into this meeting so easily, then it would not be too difficult for the agents of Rome should they ever come—or if they already had.

He looked across the room, eyeing the people, checking for any faces that might be familiar, when suddenly his eyes caught a figure shifting in the shadows of a corner. For a second a face was visible, and then it was gone again, but there was no mistaking her. It was Lavinia.

What was she doing here? Was she spying on him? No. She seemed to be intently listening to the words being spoken. Could it be she was a Christian? Or maybe she was a spy for her brother? No, that was not like her. Or could it be that she was just curious about them as he was, and that she had found out about this meeting just as he had? Since he wasn't sure, he decided for the moment not to reveal himself to her.

What a comedy, he thought, if she was also

being drawn to Christians. Both Tigellinus and Decius were some of the Christians' greatest and most dangerous enemies—and here they were, the sister of one and the cousin of the other, attending a Christian meeting. He wondered what this would all bring to pass.

Then his attention was drawn to another woman, near the front of the room. In an instant his eyes were drawn into her deep green ones, which twinkled like orbs of light, and seemed to reach into his soul, discovering its innermost secrets. He felt uncomfortable, shifted his gaze, and withdrew into the shadows of the room.



They had now been back together for a few days, and Valeria had at long last opened up and shared her heart with Claudius. Her father had been a Christian, she told him, and although he kept it secret, he had done a lot to consolidate the church before his death. She had kept it all a secret from Claudius for fear of losing him. Now she could see it had been a mistake.

Claudius listened with an open heart and he asked many questions. He was trying to understand what motivated these Christians. But try as hard as he could, he just could not fathom it all. He admired them, though, and could see no wrong in what they believed. He saw in how they lived that they were no threat to Rome. But to believe that the gods of Rome had had nothing to do with the victories and power of Rome, that they were not gods at all, and that there was only one true God, was difficult to accept.

And this Jesus was God's Son? Then why did He not destroy those men who tried to kill Him? Why die? And that this man had been crucified and had then risen from the dead ... it was just too much to believe. He also could not stand by and see his wife die. But what could he do? He put his arm around

Valeria and hugged her.

"My love, I find all this too hard to comprehend. I do not know that I can yet believe as you do. But this I do promise—I will stand by you and no man will lay a hand on you or my son as long as I live."



When Katriona arrived with Philip at the meeting, James was already speaking, for they had been delayed and arrived late.

Katriona listened intently to each word James spoke, as though they were precious jewels. They awoke within her a life and feeling she had never known existed—a freedom from the fears instilled in her by the Druids. Oh yes—the Druids had power, but it was a power of evil and fear, but those powers and fears were overshadowed by the love she felt in this room, and the knowledge of a God more powerful than any man or spirit.

Her eyes caught someone moving in a corner. She saw his eyes gleaming clear and bright, *but he's searching*, she thought. Then gradually she felt like she was being transported to another world.

There was a ship, and there were people on the deck looking out into the distance where the shape of land was appearing on the horizon. She saw the faces of the people on the deck. There were two women, one of fair complexion, the other dark, both with a radiant beauty, yet as different from each other as night and day. The lighter one had full, almond-shaped eyes, enticing and radiant. The darker one looked of eastern origin.

Then she saw Aleric the Celt standing next to them. His hair was short and neat like a Roman, and Coilus the great Iverni was beside him. They looked different—shining with a great light—and they were laughing together. There was another figure present, but she could not see whether it was male or female. Then the vision faded. The man vanished into the

shadows, and she returned her attention to the words being spoken.

She somehow knew these visions were pictures of things that God was going to bring to pass in His time, and she wondered what her part in all these things would be, if any at all.



It was almost midday. Claudius had been spending some time reading in his study when he spotted Valeria walking outside. He stood up and stretched, then carefully rolled up his scrolls and replaced them on the shelves he had taken them from. He strolled out into the peristyle to join Valeria.

He was thankful for the shade given from the roof around the sides as it gave relief from the heat of the day. They had only been talking together for a few moments when a knock at the gate interrupted them.

Claudius went over and opened the great iron gate. It was quite a surprise for Tribune Claudius to suddenly find Senator Gaius Falco and Helvia standing there at his door.

“Gaius! What on earth are you doing here?” Claudius exclaimed. “I never knew you were back in Rome.”

“Claudius, I planned it so and made sure it was not announced. For I have heard many rumors about things here in Rome. I therefore decided it was best to return early and without prior announcement and see how things were here. My wife Helvia had also written to me with some news of what has been happening, and about your wife, Valeria. I am glad that you have found her again.

“From other sources I heard news of what happened with Angus, and how he escaped death in the arena, and his life as a gladiator. I could not help but see in all this that your household is

facing the kind of danger that all the skills of the battlefield could do little to prevent. So I have come to be of assistance to you, for there is now much to talk about.”

Claudius led Gaius and Helvia into his garden, where they met Valeria, who then took Helvia into the house for refreshments as the men continued their conversation.

“I am beginning to have a feeling that Tigellinus is becoming a danger to Rome as we know it. Burrus I knew well and he was a good man, but not so this new prefect. I feel that the days of Rome’s glory are gone, and that with Nero on the throne we enter a new age of decadence. You must tell me, from your perspective as a Roman and a military man, what has been happening in Rome since I was last here. Leave out nothing, for sometimes the seemingly trivial is of utmost importance. Many a kingdom has fallen for lack of taking heed to the small insignificant and trivial things.”



His head was aching. He was feeling sick. He hadn’t been sleeping well these days. Titus had been having many problems at the quay. There had been thefts from the storehouse, and the investigation was not producing any results. Then some cargo ships he had been expecting were being reported missing at sea. This all added to his already troubled state of mind. Many merchants were starting to complain and seeking news on their investments.

Titus called in two of his trusted advisors and told them he would be going home for awhile, and that they were to take charge for the day. After arriving home he went upstairs and poured himself a drink while he rested on his balcony. He wanted to get away from it all. His mind was so confused, and still plagued with thoughts of how he had given in to the fear of Rome to secretly report on his good friend,

the Tribune Claudius—first to Tigellinus, and now that Tigellinus was busy with other matters, to Decius.

What had happened to him? Why had he become like this? He realized he was a cowardly man who held no grudge against the Christians or anyone else; but if it involved his own skin then he would willingly let them all die. He was seeing himself as he really was and he did not like what he saw. All of this worry and fear had seemingly added years to his age and he was no longer the carefree happy man he had once been.

As he sat there he tried to forget all his worries and just relax. He called in Octavia—a young slave girl he had recently acquired. She had been sold into slavery due to her family's debts and he had purchased her. She was young and pretty, not used to being a slave. She had been born in a family of a merchant and had been used to having things easy, but now she was learning the harshness of slavery.

Titus never had married. He lived in his villa by himself and his household of servants, and this girl was a good addition, he thought. He stood there admiring her beauty as she came before him. Just behind her, outside the window, he spotted to his astonishment Senator Gaius and his wife entering into Tribune Claudius' home.

Why, I thought that Gaius was in Gaul? he thought to himself. Then he remembered his orders from Tigellinus to report any activity at the tribune's home. Despite his uneasy feelings, Titus quickly wrote out a message to send to Decius, informing him that Senator Gaius was back in Rome, and had paid a visit to the Tribune Claudius. Then he turned his attention back to Octavia. Yes, maybe he should just relax and forget all his worries.

- 15 -

PLANS AND FORTITUDES

Martha had been having some quiet time alone in the garden of Senator Quinton's villa. The senator had been called to an important meeting at the senate and would be gone for most of the day. This gave her time to pray in peace.

She now found herself free for the day, as due to being his concubine her duties were to tend only to his personal needs, for there were enough servants to tend to the day-to-day duties of running the household. So she took her time to pray for the shepherds of the churches, and chiefly for Paul, who it was said might be coming to strengthen the church in Rome. Then there was Titus, who had left to go visit the brethren in Crete. Timothy had also left Rome again, accompanied by Sylvanus, heading for Thessalonica. Peter was returning from Babylon to join John in Ephesus.

Martha's quiet time was interrupted when Anthony came to let her know that someone was at the gate, urgently desiring to see her.

Martha rose up and moved to the gate to see who it was, and was surprised to recognize Ruth—the wanted daughter of Jacob the merchant.

Martha quickly brought Ruth over to the quiet garden spot where she had been praying and asked

Anthony to bring some water.

It was a shock to Ruth to find out that every one of her immediate family was dead, and she was alone! She wept bitterly at the news.

Martha tried to comfort her in her sorrow and encourage her that they had stayed true to the end, how their death had been a powerful witness, and how they were now in Heaven, beyond the pain and suffering and tears of this life.

“My dear Ruth, I understand the pain you feel and the sorrow that wells up inside like a fountain, for I lost all my family when I was captured and brought to Rome as a young girl. Yet for every sorrow you receive, for every pain you bear, for every trial life brings, there comes a strength and comfort from the Lord. Let others see your cheer, for are not your loved ones now enjoying the pleasures of Heaven? Turn to God for your strength. Do not look within, where dwells confusion and darkness. Men and women have done the best and the worst, the noblest and the basest things under the pressure of pain and sorrow. Look to our Lord, Who gives us strength, and not to your despair.

“Did not even our Lord learn from His sorrow and sufferings? Sorrow is but a part of love. Do not seek to cast it away. Let it bring you closer to Jesus, for He waits for you with open arms, like a lover desiring you to come to Him for comfort and strength.”

Ruth was too emotionally disturbed to receive this comfort, and her feelings of sorrow turned to anger and hatred and frustration. *Why God? Why did you let it happen?* her heart cried out within. *Why them? Why them?* She sobbed to herself as she felt the deep loss of her loved ones.

Her search having come to so abrupt an end, Ruth left to return to Arrius' villa, where she cried herself into a deep sleep.



Decius had listened to Tigellinus in amazement regarding the plans of burning Rome. It was to be a secret operation involving only select and trusted Praetorians and hirelings. Disguised in civilian clothes they were to start fires in several places at different times in several chosen sections of the city.

At first the prospect of burning the city to the ground shocked Decius. But the more he thought about it, and the more Tigellinus explained the reasoning and plan behind it, the more the idea began to appeal to Decius.

As he left his briefing with Tigellinus, he was handed a message by a waiting Praetorian. It was from Titus. He opened it and quickly scanned the contents, relating the return of Senator Gaius to Rome and his subsequent visit to the household of Tribune Claudius. However, in light of more pressing plans, the report did not seem particularly urgent, and as Tigellinus was on his way now to meet with Nero, Decius set the letter aside, intending to inform Tigellinus of its contents at a more convenient time.



After listening to the proposals of Gaius, Claudius saw the wisdom in them, and agreed readily to his suggestions. Valeria and Paulus would travel to Gaul with Gaius, where Gaius would hand over possession of some of his holdings and properties into her hands. The lands of Gaul were peaceful these days, and far from the control and power of Tigellinus and his Praetorian Guards.

There she would be able to set up a new life away from the dangerous politics of Rome, and if Claudius were indeed reassigned to serve in Britannia, he would not be so far from his family as before.

Gaius, on his part, resolved to return to Rome once that business had been taken care of, so that he could exert his influence in the senate and try

to curb some of these excesses of Nero and his henchmen. As a senator and a Christian, he felt the Lord was calling him to help his people, and he could do this better if his affairs in Gaul were overseen by someone trustworthy such as Valeria.

It had not been a surprise for Claudius to hear that Gaius was a Christian. After all he had learned in these last few days, he had almost expected it. It also gave him greater peace about trusting his family's security and welfare into Gaius' hands. He knew Gaius would look out well for Valeria and Paulus, and that they would be safer with him than if they stayed in Rome.



As he rose up to face a new day, Angus stretched and went outside. It was cool and a breeze was blowing from the south. Angus walked around, enjoying his time of relaxation and examining the small farm.

As he moved across the courtyard he came to a small shed, and heard Oberon talking inside. He decided to look in and see who he was speaking to, for it seemed he was telling an entrancing story. Moving around to an open doorway, Angus looked inside. There were about ten children sitting around on the floor listening intently to Oberon's tale. Angus moved in closer and listened as well.

"...The shepherd noticed that a storm was in the making and called out to the sheep. Within a few moments the sheep were following him back down the mountain towards the fold. By the time they reached the fold, the rains began pouring down. The shepherd counted the sheep as they passed through the gate into the fold: 50, 60, 70, 80 90, 96, 97, 98, 99. ... There was one missing!

"He checked once more, but still one was missing. He had to find it. He locked the 99 up safe in the fold and headed out into the storm. He searched

and searched for hours, then at last he heard the bleating of the lamb. He ran in the direction of the noise and soon found it. It had fallen off a ledge in the storm and was trapped in some brambles.

"The shepherd worked diligently until he had freed her, then carried her on his shoulders all the way home. After he had returned that lamb to the fold he went and gathered all his friends and rejoiced in that the lost sheep was found. That, my children, is how Jesus is. He is the Good Shepherd and He searches for all His lost sheep, for He is not happy until all are safe in His fold. So, my children, that is our job—to bring the lost to know our loving Savior."

Angus smiled as the story came to a close, and then turned towards the hills to see the gray sky turning slowly to a beautiful turquoise color as the day broke forth. He sighed to himself in appreciation and then returned to the house for his breakfast.

News had come that Angus could go that evening to Rome. Oberon would escort him to Rome, and to a secret place where he could meet Valeria, who had now returned to the house of her husband Claudius. Angus was glad at the news, and looked forward to the trip with Oberon, who Angus found to be a fascinating man.

That evening Angus said farewell to his new friends. His new shaved look and clean clothes of a nobleman was an excellent disguise, and his command of Latin beyond reproach, so that there was little chance of any man or soldier recognizing him as an escaped gladiator.

It was strange to be walking down the familiar streets of Rome again. The few times they came across some soldiers, Angus was nervous, yet not once was he stopped or questioned.

Oberon was talkative, and he and Angus spoke of many things, like the differences in the life of a

humble field worker compared to those who lived and traded in the city.

Oberon explained how he had become a Christian. “I used to work in Rome as a blacksmith at one of the armory camps. Then a soldier, a man called Brutus, arrived from Palestine. He used to tell all sorts of stories about the country. It is a land rife with prophets and all sorts of religion. I used to listen and partake of all his experience and learning.

“Brutus was a simple man but a good soldier. His officers respected him for his courage and his skill. It so happened that one day, as he talked to me about having seen a prophet called Jesus, that another soldier stopped to listen. The soldier told Brutus about a man called Paul who was under house arrest in the city for preaching about this Jesus.

“Brutus wanted to go hear more about him so he asked me to accompany him. And so off I went. It was a life-changing event for both of us, and we both received Jesus as our Savior. That was many years ago now. My time in the camp ended two years ago, and I moved back here to the place of my birth. I don’t know what happened to Brutus. Maybe he is still there in Rome or maybe he has been transferred by now.”

Too soon, it seemed to Angus, they arrived at a nice quiet house. This was the place, said Oberon, and then said goodbye at the gate for he had other errands to run before returning home.

A servant came and showed Angus in through the door, and then led him into a dimly lit room, where to his surprise sat not only Valeria but also Senator Gaius! Another stranger, a rather large and hefty-looking man, stood nearby.

Valeria rose and ran over to Angus, giving him an embrace and kiss. Gaius then gave him a hug and clasped his hand on his shoulder. Valeria

introduced the stranger as Urbanus, a Christian servant to the house of Senator Quinton. On the news of Rolf’s death, Gaius had persuaded Quinton to send Urbanus to help Valeria. Both Gaius and Valeria knew Urbanus well, as he had often attended Christian meetings with them.

“My, Angus,” Gaius said when all introductions had been made, “you look so different. Your new look is indeed becoming. Valeria has explained to me all about your saving her, and her son. Also how you received our Lord as your Savior. I am so happy to have you with us, dear brother. Now how can we help you? Do you need help in reaching some other land? Please tell us so we can see how best to help you!”

Angus explained about his desire to find out what had become of Aleric, and also of his quest to find Katriona; of how he had learned about her capture and arrival in Rome.

Gaius thought about it for a moment and said he would make some enquiries. He knew some of the scribes at the slave market, and he would see what he could find out from them. In the meantime he would arrange for Angus to be employed by a friend of his who ran a tavern.

Before Angus left they joined in prayer and committed the situation into the Lord’s hands. Then Gaius and Valeria both put their hands on Angus’ shoulders and asked the Lord to take direct control of his life and to use him to be a messenger of the Lord’s love and salvation to others.



Aleric and Coilus had enjoyed their journey with their new companions, Fortunatus and Lucius. It had been an interesting trip and they had discussed many subjects. It was dark when they arrived at a small fishing village. The two travelers had stayed in this village before and knew of a cozy inn where they could spend the night.

They heard of some festivities being held so they went to the village square where a festival was being held in honor of Eros and Aphrodite—gods of love. The entire village was dancing and everyone was enjoying themselves.

Coilus was always a man for laughter and merriment and was soon joining in with all the dancing. His red hair and large size made him a subject of much conversation, as the young maidens all tried to find out about this strong stranger who entered into their festivities.

Aleric and Coilus introduced themselves to any inquirers as sailors who were traveling around the country before taking a ship back to their homeland.

As Coilus joined the festivities, Aleric kept to the sidelines, preferring to keep out of the watchful eyes of the villagers, as one never knew if any of them might be an informer for the authorities.

Coilus soon noticed a dark-eyed beauty who had been watching him with great interest. She was beauty itself, he thought, and her dark eyes glistened in the evening light around the fire. “Who is that maid?” he asked Aleric. “I’ve never seen such a lovely lass in all my travels!”

Aleric looked with admiration at this lovely vision before him. She had moved out into the crowd of dancers and broke into a dance such as never he had seen. Her movements were inciting and her eyes flashed like fire, inviting and radiant. Aleric felt like she had reached into his soul and was stirring up hidden fires of passion within.

She was of a dark complexion and had large dreamy eyes. Her form was slim and of average height, and her well-formed body was accentuated by the tightness of her dress. Her hair was long and silky, black in color, with two braids in the front. She was dressed in a long flowing gown of rich

bright colors that stuck to her form like a second skin until it reached her thighs where it flared out. When she twirled around as she danced it flew out, revealing two beautifully shaped legs that would fit the goddess Venus herself. She had strings of beads around her ankles and was barefooted.

Aleric gave a gasp of admiration before turning to one of his companions sitting next to him. “Who indeed is the maid dancing with such fire and abandon?” he asked.

“Ah, yes she is indeed a beauty, is she not?” Fortunatus smiled and nodded in appreciation. “I will ask about her for you.” He then went and asked some of the people about her and soon returned to Aleric to let him know.

“She is one of the traveling easterners who are camped not far from here. They came about two weeks ago and are, it is believed, on their way to the western country of Hispania. They are friendly people and have a great talent for working with their hands and selling wares of silk, carpets, and such. Their maidens also are unusually attractive. I believe they came from the land of Persia or somewhere beyond in the lands of the Indies that Alexander once conquered. At least this has been all that I could gather from my conversations.”

“I don’t know of this land of the Indies, but I’ve heard a lot of Hispania. It is said to be a beautiful land and has bred many great men. Senator Seneca was born there was he not?” inquired Aleric.

“True. He was. It is said to be a land of inspiration.”

Aleric then passed on his information to his friend who was easily seen to be attracted to the woman.

“Then let us see what the evening brings forth, my friend!” Coilus said with a gleam in his eyes.

“Be careful, Coilus. We know not how this girl’s

family will like strange foreigners making advances towards her. She is not one of us or even one of the Greeks,” warned Aleric.

“You worry too much. You act like an old maid sometimes. What you need to do is lighten up and enjoy life. Come on! Join in and have fun,” Coilus replied with a laugh.

Aleric watched with interest as the Ivernians started to move towards the girl and soon was engaged in such dancing that never before had the villagers seen.

Aleric was quite amazed as he saw the dexterity and agility of his large friend as he danced. *Yes, they'd make a good pair*, he thought.

As the night went on, he noticed that the two of them seemed to communicate fine using a mixture of signs and broken Greek. It seemed they were enjoying their evening. Aleric smiled and felt happy for his friend, and hoped that this would not cause any problems.

It was the girl's companions and family that Aleric was most concerned about. If they found any reason to be suspicious of the two strangers, and particularly the one who was paying so much attention to the girl, it could lead to conflict, or even prison. Yet, maybe he just worried too much like Coilus had said and needed to lighten up.

The festivities were now coming to a close and most of the crowds had left. Aleric watched as Coilus said his farewells to the maid and strode over to join him. He noticed from the corner of his eyes that two men joined the girl as she turned to leave. From their interaction, Aleric could see that she knew these men—most probably some relatives. One of them was talking excitedly. Maybe he was angry? Aleric watched them disappear into the darkness.

Aleric rose early in the morning, before the dawn broke. He was troubled and could not sleep. He

moved out into the cool air on the balcony of the inn. As he stood there enjoying the refreshing breeze, he noticed some movement around the bushes at the end of the street. Carefully he moved to the shadows and watched as he saw four men emerging quietly and moving towards the inn.

It came to him in a flash: These were family of the girl, probably upset at the events of last night and Coilus' familiarity with the girl. This could spell trouble.

Aleric moved quickly into the room and shook his friend. “Up, my friend! Danger lurks at the doorstep. Come on! Get up and speedily!”

Coilus woke with a start and shook his head as if to clear it. He was quick to react, as his years of fighting as a pirate raiding the coastal villages, not to mention his time as a gladiator, had trained him to always be on the alert. It was but a few moments later that they were poised ready for the battle that was to unfold.

Aleric was not feeling right about it, though. This was not the way it was to go. The Lord had other plans ... but what?

“Coilus,” he whispered, “try not to kill them. I wish to talk to them. It is not the way of the Lord to kill. We should not be men of force but men of love.”

Coilus grunted in reply. He was getting used to the strange ways of his friend and agreed to the plan.

It was a few moments later that the door slowly opened. Two men crept into the room, heading towards the bed. Aleric caught the flash of light reflecting upon the blade of a knife. They were armed. So their intentions were obviously less than friendly.

They waited, then Coilus pounced on one of them like a bolt from the heavens. One blow struck the stunned assailant to the ground, while a second

blow knocked another against the wall so hard that it knocked down a shelf that hung upon it.

Just then another assailant leapt through the window and lashed out at Coilus.

Unseen to the assailant, at the side of the window, Aleric stood, hidden by a cupboard. He now stepped out behind the assailant as he entered and hit him with a wine flask, knocking him to the ground senseless. He then heard the sound of the last man leaping off the balcony and disappearing down the street as fast as he could run.

Coilus and Aleric bound up the three unconscious men and sat them together on the floor while they waited for them to recover.

It was with surprise that the three men awoke to find Aleric and Coilus sitting in front of them with large, beaming smiles on their faces.

“My dear friends,” Aleric began, “you see that we mean no harm to you, and are sorry if we have in any way offended you or the honor of your family. We meant no disrespect to you. If we insulted you we would like to apologize and make amends. We are strangers and as such do not know all the customs and ways of your land. We did not mean any harm to the maiden last night, but though you obviously entered our room to do us great harm, my God has told me to release you unhurt, that you might return with our message of peace and friendship.”

Coilus then leaned forward, pulled out his large knife, and cut each man’s cords. Aleric handed back their knives.

One of the men, the eldest of the group, stood up and reached out his hand to Aleric. “You have proven yourself to be an honest and just man. You could have taken our lives easily and none would have faulted you. I believe that you meant no harm to my niece, so on behalf of my tribe, I offer the hand of peace. And I would like to hear more about this

God of yours who can speak to you so clearly.”

The man put his hand on his heart and glanced at his companions, who followed the gesture. Then he added, “My name is Raheem and I wish to extend to you the friendship and hospitality of my people. Please come, with your companions. Eat with us and meet with the rest of our family. You will find our hearts open and our home warm to your coming.”



Ruth awoke feeling much better for the time she had slept. Her spirit was quieter and not so bitter and rebellious. It was hard for her to accept all that had happened and that she was now alone, yet inside she knew that her Lord had not forsaken her, and that there was a greater reason and purpose behind all that had happened that she was not yet seeing.

She arose and moved over to the window, glancing out at the beauty of the garden and praising the Lord for His supply and care. She decided to go out into the garden and look around outside. She put on some clothes and walked out into the fresh morning air. It was cool and refreshing, sending tingles through her skin.

She sat down under some trees and as she meditated on the beauties around her, she felt a warmth come upon her and decided to pray. “Dear Jesus, all my life I have been brought up to love You and trust You. Never before have You let anything bad happen to me. But now my heart is sorely troubled by the death of my family. Why did it happen? Why did they have to die? Jesus, please give me the peace I used to have in my heart.” As she sat in the stillness of the garden she felt the warmth of the Lord’s Spirit descend upon her, and peace filled her whole being. Then a voice spoke to her heart.

Precious Ruth, My little flower. I do love you as a father loves his only child. As a lover desires his beloved, so do I desire you. I would that you not be

hurt and grieved so, for these trials are not designed to hurt you or cause you ill. These are designed to help you grow, to help you come to Me, to help you put your life in My hands and let Me take control.

It was time, My little one, for your mother and father to come to aid Me in My Kingdom, for they had run a good race, and their final hours were a greater witness to many more than their secret lives had touched. Yes, even as your father died, alone in the presence of those who tortured and questioned him, his simplicity and love touched the hearts of even the hardest soldier who watched, and will be used to bring them to Me, some along shorter paths, and others along longer ones.

And the power and conviction of your mother and those who died with her in the arena caused many in the grandstands that day to examine their own hearts and lives, and to come face to face with the emptiness of their own existence, so that they too shall come to hunger and thirst after My Spirit that they received the witness of that day.

As for your brother, it was his time and place to come, for in other circumstances he would have weakened. But while standing with his mother and friends at his side, he found the strength to boldly stand and bravely die for Me. It was his greatest hour.

So fear not, for all these things have come from My hand, and shall work together for good. Now I call you to follow My voice, to listen to My call and to be not afraid to proclaim My words both here and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. This is your calling and in it you will find great joy, fulfillment, and love.

- 16 -

THE BURNING

Nero had been busy all day with many important affairs of the empire. There were problems once again in Palestine, and Tribune Marcus had put down another group of rebels in Britannia. Now Nero had just finished meeting with his counselors and was relaxing with some friends.

Tigellinus was restless in spirit, as he was preparing the final touches to his plan for the great fire. It would occur during a great feast that Nero was planning, a special night of the arts at the palace. Tribune Claudius would be present, and would at the same time receive notice that he was being reposted in Britannia.

During the evening there would be renditions of some of the great Greek dramas and several of the more lewd ones. Maccinus would also present a new poem, specially written for the event. And at the same time, though few would know it, the greatest tragedy of all would be visited upon the streets of Rome herself.



Angus was resting in the Tavern of the Golden Shield where Senator Gaius had secured work for him. It was a nice place, and its keepers were Greeks—a woman called Dorcas and her brother,

Demetrius, who also worked as a goldsmith and merchant of gold in the market.

Angus had had an enjoyable time talking with Demetrius over the past few days, hearing all about Greece and some of the other countries Demetrius had traveled to. Angus had a great thirst for knowledge and was always glad to learn more. His island home had been secluded from all the knowledge and wisdom of the rest of the known world.

Later in the day a messenger arrived with a letter for Angus from Gaius. It seemed from the records of the scribes that a Philip of Greece, a well-known merchant, had purchased Katriona and taken her to Athens. If this was the same Philip that Senator Gaius knew then it was good fortune, for he knew the man to be a Christian and a great helper of the work, establishing the churches in many parts of the empire.

Gaius said that he would send off a message to Philip immediately and that he was sure they would get some news within a few weeks. Meanwhile Gaius advised that Angus remain hidden and out of sight of any strangers, for even with his new appearance he could still be identified, and there was a price on his head as a runaway. It would only be a matter of time before someone recognized him and betrayed him.

Angus agreed to all the counsel and was happy to stay in the home of Demetrius, where Demetrius and Dorcas took time to teach him of the Scriptures and speak to him of the words of Jesus. Dorcas also held meetings in the tavern sometimes, with some of the other women. Phoebe, Mary, Persis, and Martha would often be there.



Senator Gaius had not slept well. He was troubled. He felt an urgency to try to speed things

up regarding Valeria's departure, and determined to send her and Paulus ahead without him by a ship he knew would be leaving later that day.

Claudius felt the decision was a bit hasty, but Gaius remained determined that in this case haste was needed. Tigellinus had been up to something, and he felt that the sooner they could get Valeria out of Rome, the better it would be.



It was a grand affair at the palace—almost as big as the feast on Nero's birthday. Everyone was there, from senators to poets, from writers to military officials. Yes, Nero was playing out his fantasies once more. Actors dramatized the great dramas of Greece and some also of Rome while poets rendered their poems of love and tragedy.

Senators lay on couches indulging in all sorts of vice and immorality. Drunken men staggered through the halls, disappearing into the rooms beyond, and women screamed with pleasure as they cavorted drunkenly.

The smells of incense and perfumes, mixed with the odors of food, filled the room. There was gaiety and merriment everywhere. It was to this scene that Tribune Claudius arrived. He was disgusted at the great leaders of the empire indulging in their pleasures and immoralities. Not that he was so good a person, as even the gods indulged themselves in acts of drunkenness and sexual misconduct. Was it not, then, natural and normal? He had on occasions been to the Great Temple of Venus in Corinth and used the services of the priestesses¹ as did most men at one time or another.

In the past he might have sanctioned all this, but not now. Something was changing within him, and he instantly felt out of place.

¹*Priestesses and the Temple of Venus: The 1,000 priestesses who served in this temple offered sexual services to the worshippers who came.*

Senator Epidius was cavorting around naked with a young woman while others laughed at his antics. Some others, however, seemed to keep their distance from the more wanton acts of their fellows. Senator Cassius and Senator Quinton, for example, were seated together and speaking in quiet tones. Petronius and Seneca, along with Senator Otho and some others, were seated at the other end of the room, engaged in some discussion of philosophy, while others contented themselves with watching the great drama of this feast.

Claudius decided to meander over to join the discussion between Petronius and Seneca, which already had several other listeners, and appeared to be on a popular topic.

“It should be kept clearly in mind,” Seneca was saying, “that the human life is not intended for joy or soft living, for drifting with the current. We have been given the power and mind to strive upstream against all obstacles. No one has ever striven to do thoroughly even the most common of duties without adding to the force and strength of this world. No heroic deed ever perishes, for it kindles virtues in the hearts of others, inspiring them to heroic emulation.”

“I agree,” answered Petronius. “Man needs something to do, something to suffer, to sacrifice if he is to reach the highest plain of his own humanity. Mere happiness is in itself insufficient. You will find it is the idle who complain that there is no time to do anything, for in truth there is always time to do what a man makes time for. Behold how low these great men stoop in their drunken idleness to pursue the basest desires of the flesh. These are not the kind of men who created Rome. They only shape her, and into what? A nation inviting the anger of the gods who founded her, even as they struck in anger with the earthquake in Pompeii.”

Seneca nodded in agreement. “Indeed, a small judgment that could well portend a greater one, given perhaps as a warning. But men such as fill the halls of Rome will give such tokens little heed, whose minds are set on what they can get from life, and not what they can give to it. They forget that true virtue and worth rests within, and lose sight of the small greatnesses of life, which come piece by piece. We should view life as a mosaic, and each moment as a piece of glass that must be cut and set with skill to form the final picture.”

Claudius listened, only half interested, making up his mind to not stay long, but leave as soon as Nero had presented him with his new orders.

Just then Tigellinus approached him, his face shining with a cold friendliness. “The emperor has called for you, Tribune.”

Claudius followed, and again listened half-heartedly to the emperor’s speech and assignment he already knew was coming—about the power of the empire, the might of the Roman armies, of Claudius’ bravery and strength during his time of captivity in Britannia, and of the great honor that was now being bestowed upon him to return to Britannia to join in the successful campaigns of Marcus, but now as an equal with him.

It was but a few moments after Nero had dismissed Claudius from his presence, and Claudius was making his way through the room to leave, that excited cries drew his attention to one of the large balconies, where people were quickly gathering.

“Fire!” one of the senators called out. “All of Rome is in flames!”

Claudius rushed to the balcony to see that it was true. Sounds of screaming and confusion rose in the distance, and flames could be seen licking between the many buildings and streets that stretched out before them into the distance.

Valeria, I must go to her!



“Fire! Fire!” screamed voices from everywhere. “Run, run for your lives!”

It was pandemonium as the streets filled with crowds of screaming people pushing and shoving each other as they tried to find a way out of the inferno.

Angus darted out into the streets to see orange flames licking the evening skies. His first thoughts were of Valeria, and casting aside any concern for his own safety or the fact that he might be recognized, he began running towards her house to see if there was anything he could do there to help. He quickly encountered streams of frantic people rushing towards him, pushing and fighting to get away from the blazing inferno behind.

He changed direction several times, trying to avoid the flames and find the quickest way through the labyrinth of alleys and streets towards Valeria’s home.

He thought it strange that the fire seemed to be coming from random places and directions. Still, it was not important. He had to make sure his mistress and her family was safe.



At Decius’ request, Alexis had been keeping an eye on the household of Tribune Claudius, as well as Titus. One of his men now returned to inform him about how two loaded wagons had left the tribune’s estate, headed for the docks. They were being loaded on a ship that was headed for Gaul, and upon further inquiry the man had discovered that the ship would be taking on a woman passenger and her child.

Alexis realized at once that Valeria was planning to escape the fate that Tigellinus obviously had in store for her once Claudius left again. He at once saw this as his chance to redeem himself in the

eyes of Tigellinus by taking care of this matter in his own initiative, since there was no time to inform Tigellinus first.

So the two men set out at once for the tribune’s home, only to discover that their way was hampered by numerous fires that had started throughout the city. As Alexis approached the house, another of his men came running towards him. Valeria had left only moments before, on foot, together with four servants, and they were heading for the docks.

The three men now quickly made their way in pursuit of the group, and soon spotted them. They followed at a discreet distance when, a short while later, one of the largest of the four servants left the group. That would make the odds a little more even, Alexis noted, still wary from his encounter with the servant Rolf. Now to wait until they entered a slightly less-crowded street.



When Angus arrived at the house, he noticed the gate was open. He entered slowly and cautiously, only to see that the property was obviously deserted.

He was about to leave when a voice caught his attention.

“Angus, what are you doing here?”

Angus turned to see Urbanus.

“Where is Valeria, and Claudius?”

“Claudius was summoned to the palace. Valeria is on her way to the docks. I was sent back to watch for Claudius. You have not seen him, have you?”

Angus shook his head. “How can I find her?”

“She’s traveling along the merchant’s street. If you run, you should catch up with her. She’s traveling on foot, as with news of the fire, she did not want to wait for the return of the wagons.”

Angus thanked the man and moved on, running as he went. The merchant’s street was as yet not touched by the fire, and provided an almost direct

route to the docks. Valeria would be easy to find if this was the road she had taken.

Angus was nearly at the docks when a sudden cry alerted him to a scuffle in a small alley. He turned and saw a woman near the entrance of the road lying motionless on the ground, and heard another scream that sounded like it came from Valeria.

He ran deeper into the alley, and quickly surveyed the scene before him. Another servant was lying on the ground bleeding, and two men were struggling to hold Valeria still on the ground while another watched, holding little Paulus back with his hand over his mouth, so that it looked like the boy was about to suffocate.

Angus acted quickly without the slightest hesitation. The bandits had as yet not noticed his entry. Angus pulled out his sword and with one swift stroke knocked the first man over the head with the hilt of his sword, leaving him in an unconscious heap on the floor.

“Stay here, Paulus! Don’t move!” Angus instructed the boy, who looked at his rescuer with wide eyes, and nodded obediently.

The two other thugs had by this time noticed the intruder, and one of them let go of Valeria and tugged at his sword, while the third quickly took out some rope to bind Valeria.

Angus could see that these men were experienced fighters, and though he was larger than both of them, he had never done much fighting with a sword.

Within seconds the first man was upon him, and Angus dodged the man’s first thrust. He shot up a prayer, asking the Lord to somehow do a miracle and save him and Valeria and her servants from this situation.

He slashed out with his sword and felt the thud of his weapon connecting with his assailant. At the same time he felt a great pain flood his head, and

warm blood splatter across his face as a sword cut a gash across his shoulder.

Then suddenly the assailant was at his feet. Angus looked up in surprise to see that the first servant he had seen lying in the alley had come to, and knocked the man over the head with a large clay pitcher, the fragments of which now lay scattered around the man’s body.

It afforded Angus a moment to recover from the shock of his pain before the second man was on him.

The servant, meanwhile, had grabbed Paulus and now ran past the assailant—who kept his wary eyes on Angus—to join Valeria and move her away from the scene of danger.

Angus backed slowly up the alley towards the main street. In the meantime the man who had been hit with the pottery had stood up again. Now there were two angry men, hate blazing in their eyes, and their swords drawn, coming towards him. Angus knew that so long as he could keep these men after himself, Valeria would be able to escape.

The first man now called out to his companion. “Alexis, look at that scar on his face—I know who this man is. He’s that gladiator who escaped after his trial in the arena—the Celt, Angus!”

“Angus,” the man said, obviously pleased. “Finally we meet face to face.” Then, to his companion, he said, “This will be an even greater prize than the woman—if we can get him alive.”

Angus, suddenly realizing which of the two was the leader of this band of thugs, made a sudden dive for the man, swinging his sword wildly, so that Alexis leapt back in surprise.

But Alexis was not as agile as he had imagined, and the sword had already made a slice into the man’s side. He now tripped over some rubble and fell to the floor, feeling anew the pain of his wounds from

the fight with Rolf.

Before the man's companion could do anything, Angus was back on his feet and had delivered the fatal thrust, sending Alexis to meet his judgment, a look of absolute horror on his face.

Angus pulled back, leaving his sword where it was. He had never killed a man before, and the realization of what he had just done left him momentarily stunned and unable to move.

The other man, too, stood motionless at seeing Alexis dead, but he was quicker to recover his wits, and now advanced towards Angus even more warily.

Angus saw the man coming, and backed away, when suddenly he felt a blow to his head from behind, and everything went black.



Claudius arrived at the scene just as a man had stood up behind Angus and knocked him over the head with the largest fragment of pottery that lay near him.

Before the other man could thrust home the final blow, Claudius was on him. "Your turn to be outnumbered, you dogs!" he said as five Roman soldiers entered the scene behind him, armed and ready for battle, and positioned themselves around the two men.

The assailants' faces paled as they realized they were now outnumbered and surrounded. Their only chance was to try to break through the circle of guards. They lunged forward, swinging their swords wildly, only to instantly fall beneath the swords of Claudius and his men.

When it was over, Claudius knelt over the body of Angus. He was still alive, but sorely wounded. Claudius ordered the soldiers to prepare a stretcher to bring Angus along. Then his eye spotted something gleaming in a corner. He bent down and picked it up.

It was Angus' amulet, with the sign of the mistletoe, but it was now cracked and splattered with blood.

Claudius put the amulet into his pouch and continued to inspect the scene, and the five dead bodies that littered it. One of them was Clarinda, and Claudius quickly put the pieces together in his mind. Valeria had been attacked on her way to the docks, and Angus had come to her rescue. But where was she now?

He quickly moved on to the other bodies, suddenly recognizing one of them as Alexis—a well-known associate of Tigellinus.

So this was no random gang of thieves or looters taking advantage of the fire. This was a planned assault against Valeria. Gaius was right, things are becoming more dangerous.

Claudius ordered the soldiers to bring Angus to the villa of Senator Gaius, which was outside of the city and far from the damaging fires. Then he moved on down the alley in search of Valeria.

AFTERMATH

The fire lasted for six days before it was finally extinguished. Almost half of the city had been destroyed and now stood in charred and smoking ruins. Great temples, museums, and works of art had been destroyed, not to mention countless homes and lives.

Rumors had begun surfacing that the fire had been deliberately started by the emperor's men, for his dislike for the sprawling city was well known.

"Shall I detail men to put down this discontent amongst the rabble?" Tigellinus suggested.

Nero looked thoughtful for a moment, the light of power gleaming in his gimlet eyes, but then his expression changed. "No, no. I have another idea. Bring out my chariot and prepare a guard of horsemen. Bring me the chests of the treasury! I will show them the generosity of their emperor. I will show them how he grieves in spirit with them for the destruction of our great city." Lifting his hand to his eyes he wiped away a tear.

"But then what shall be used to build the golden Rome of your great vision?" Tigellinus asked.

"Fear not, Tigellinus. Are there not many rich among these Christians? Send your men throughout the city to spread the word that it was the Christians

who started the fires. Once the people fear and hate them, we shall have all the reason we need to do away with them and confiscate their treasures and properties. This small sacrifice of our treasury will prove to the people that their emperor loves them, and the Christians hate them. I will have my golden Rome, and the people will love me!”

Within a short time Nero was riding out in the streets with his Praetorian escort crying out to the people. “My dear subjects, your emperor grieves with you. My heart bleeds for the sorrow you feel. I see your need and wish to help you.” Reaching into his treasure boxes he scattered gold and silver coins amongst the crowds. “See how generous your emperor is? Here! Take and rebuild.”

It was a mad scramble for the coins as crowds jostled and fought to get the gold. This scene was then repeated street after street as Nero rode around the city until his treasury boxes were empty.



It was now some weeks since the great fire, and Rome had become a dangerous place for Christians. The rumors that Christians had started the fire grew in popularity.

There were some who knew the Christians well enough to realize that there was no truth to this rumor, but such sentiments had become dangerous to speak of, for they could lead to sharing in the fate of the Christians.

The arena became a regular scene of mass executions, with Christians being killed in as many hideous and twisted ways that Nero and Tigellinus could devise for the pleasure and satisfaction of the people. Though Christians had met their deaths in the arena before, they had always been in few and scattered groups that Tigellinus had managed to gather and convict of some crime or other. But now Christian executions became almost daily fare, with

Nero often riding his chariot around the dead at the end of the day, gloating at his handiwork.



Although Christians were now being reported and rounded up in the hundreds, it seemed that the more were found and killed, the more there seemed to be.

Decius worked faithfully to uncover the nests these Christians were hatching from, but with the loss of Alexis, who died under mysterious circumstances during the fire, the investigations were largely fruitless.

Titus had also conveniently perished in the fire, trying to salvage his fortunes, which had now been confiscated by Nero. Decius, however, had managed to secure the man’s slave, Octavia, for himself—a small consolation after Ruth had slipped through his fingers.

With Titus dead, there was also no proof that Decius had ever known of Gaius’ unexpected return to Rome—a piece of news that greatly angered Tigellinus, who learned of it much later than he would have liked, for the man’s influence had already begun swaying the opinions of the senate against the drastic actions of the Praetorians toward the free people of Rome.



After learning that Valeria and Paulus had made it safely to the ship, and bidding them an emotional and tearful farewell, Claudius returned to the house where Angus was recovering.

Knowing that he would soon be sent to Britannia, he appointed Urbanus as steward of his properties in Rome.

Before leaving, he also presented Angus with a gift—a richly decorated sword engraved with the words:

To Angus for his loyalty and devotion. A remembrance of your service to my family. Claudius.

“You have saved my family twice now, Angus, and I can never repay you for this. This sword is only a token of my gratitude, and a remembrance for you of your great service to my family.”

Claudius offered to arrange for Angus to join Valeria in Gaul, where he would be safe from those who sought his life in Rome.

Angus declined the offer, however, saying he could not leave Rome until he had discovered the fate of Katriona, and found her, if that was possible. Once he did, and this would now become his focus, he would be most happy to join Valeria in Gaul, and from there perhaps someday make his way back to their homeland.

Claudius assented willingly, saying that the offer would remain open for as long as he and Valeria had a home. He then pulled out a small pouch, opened it, and handed something to Angus. It was the amulet Angus had lost in the fight with Alexis, and which had been broken. Claudius had paid a smith to fix it.

Angus thanked Claudius and took it, inspecting it in his hands. “It looks almost as new as the day it was first given to me by Nielbauld, a Druid priest from my homeland. It was supposed to keep me safe from harm and death wherever I went—a job it has obviously failed in. But I have now discovered a greater power, the one true God in Heaven Who looks after me, and whose words and promises are greater than this piece of metal. I appreciate the trouble you went through to return this to me, but I believe I am no longer meant to carry it.”

Angus then raised himself up on his elbow, and tossed the amulet into the fire, watching as the

flames licked it and burst into different colors.

He thought back to the Druid and felt a shiver go down his spine. For the first time he felt that there had been something truly evil about that man. He looked down at the snake bracelet that was still around his wrist. He hesitated for a second, then took it off and threw it also into the flames.

“This bracelet was a gift from my brother just before he was taken to Rome as a slave. I have worn it in remembrance of him, but now I must live before God, and these gods of my past can no longer walk with me. I have chosen to follow this God of love and peace, and yet I find myself beset with conflict, and have now even killed a man with my own hands. It was in defense of another, and yet I cannot help feeling that these events were brought on by these talismans. Perhaps they were not. Still, I feel better letting them go.”

Claudius admired Angus’ beliefs and determination, even if he could not fully comprehend them.

Soon after, the two men bid each other farewell, and Claudius departed to his new assignment in Britannia.



Ruth had been safe from the great fire out in Arrius’ villa. The servants had kept her informed of all the happenings after the fire—of the mood of the people, of Nero’s ride through the streets, of the Christians who had been accused of starting the fire, and were being rounded up and executed daily. It would be some time before life in Rome returned to normal, if it ever had been.

It was shortly after that a messenger arrived from Martha, asking Ruth if she could help to shelter a Christian fugitive. Ruth returned a message saying that she could take in and shelter several Christians if necessary, as the villa was remote and received no visitors.

Angus arrived in a covered wagon of supplies a few days later. Gaius had found himself under closer scrutiny from Tigellinus, and so had sought to find a new place of hiding for Angus while he was recovering.

Ruth found this handsome young man very intriguing and stayed up late in the evenings talking with him, tending to his wounds while they spoke of their lives, and the words and stories of Jesus that they had heard.

Angus found Ruth to be sweet and charming, gentle in her manner and always considerate of his well-being. When he looked into her eyes he felt a love fill his soul—a warm comforting love. He could feel she cared and was concerned for others, and so it was that a bond was gradually formed between the two of them, and Angus slowly recovered from the wounds to his body and his heart.



Aleric and Coilus, together with Fortunatus and Lucius, were treated as royal guests after Raheem had explained the true intentions and noble actions of the two strangers.

An older man, dark skinned, with a full beard the color of snow and with strong features, nodded in pleasure and invited them for a great feast where wine flowed and the young men and maidens danced wild and carefree.

The older man was the father figure and leader or chief of this group of travelers. His name was Omar. The tribe was indeed on its way to Hispania, and the wise old patriarch related the nomadic history of his people. Time and again their ancestors had moved from place to place, sometimes because their manners and way of life were not tolerated by those among whom they lived, and other times seeking better resources and lands. Yet in spite of the many hardships of their existence and their past, they

thrived and enjoyed life to the full, having learned to adapt themselves to the ways and cultures of the lands in which they lived.

The old man watched the two strangers thoughtfully as the night continued, and noted the obvious attraction between Coilus and his daughter.

“Yasmine is the daughter of my old age,” he confided in Aleric when Coilus and Yasmine were again engaged in a dance together. “She is a spirited young girl and has always been searching for adventure. I confess that she is not the most satisfied with our ways and traditions. All my other children are now married, and some have started tribes of their own. But Yasmine, she has always resisted my suggestions for a man. Now I am old, and my life may soon pass away.”

Aleric looked up at the sudden change in conversation, peering into the old man’s eyes, but it was as if they were focused on some distant and unseen point.

“I wish to see two things before I die,” Omar continued. “One is to see my people settled in a new land, and the other is to see my daughter happily married to a man who can care for her. And now she is attracted to your friend—an attraction I am pleased to see, for I have perceived that you both are good men. My eyes may be dim, but I can see things that others cannot perceive, and I sense in you and your companion an aura of goodness that I have not known or seen in any man in all the many lands and places our travels have brought us to.

“Soon we shall be leaving this place. It is not good for my people to remain in one place for too long. But I would like to see my daughter and your friend united before that happens, and I care not then if she remains with us or no. I only want for her to know and live in the light that shines from your souls.”

Aleric looked at this man in surprise, and suddenly knew that it was God who had brought them to this meeting of paths.

“Omar, It is a surprise to see how generous you are in offering the hand of your daughter. As for the light that you perceive, it is not from us, but from our God, the one true God who created the heavens, the earth, and every living thing that fills it. If you will hear of it, we shall be glad to share this Light with you, your daughter, and your tribe, for all may freely know and have it.”

And so the tribe was gathered together, and Coilus listened with as much interest and awe as any of the others, while Aleric stood before them in the power of the Spirit and related the story of Jesus’ birth, life, and death—and then of how He conquered death forever by rising from the grave, and giving power to all men who would confess His name and accept the price He had paid for the forgiveness of all sin to live forever in His eternal Kingdom.

Fortunatus and Lucius, in turn, were surprised to discover that their rescuers and companions were Christians like themselves—for this was one topic they had not spoken of on their journey.

When Aleric had made an end of speaking, and these words were sinking into the hearts of those who had heard them, Coilus came up to his friend.

“Aleric, I think I am beginning to see and understand what was hidden to me before. Do you think this Jesus can forgive me for the life of evil that I have led? I have been a man of crude manners, accustomed to dealing death wherever I went, for it has always been the way of my people to live by the laws of raid and plunder and death.”

“Yes, Coilus—a thousand times, yes!” Aleric answered, a light in his eyes. “Jesus can change your life. He can make of you a new creature if you will let Him, so that old things pass away, and all things

become new. That is His power. That is His promise. That is what He came and lived and died for.”

And so it was that, on that night and in the days to follow, Coilus and many others in the camp came to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And it was with equal joy that Coilus learned of Omar’s desire that he marry Yasmine—a suggestion that Yasmine herself was also obviously pleased with, and so a date for the marriage was set, and other plans were made for the tribe to continue their journeys towards the lands of Saragossa in Hispania.

With Omar’s blessing, for it had been Yasmine’s choice, Yasmine and Coilus would go on with Aleric, Fortunatus, and Lucius towards Athens.



Angus had now recovered and was well enough to move around. Having had experience in running a Roman household, he was soon helping to fix up the garden and rooms around the house that had seen little use or care in many years.

So it was that one day, several weeks after his recovery, a message arrived for Angus from Senator Gaius. Philip of Greece had indeed purchased Katriona, and she had become a Christian. If Angus wished to see her, Philip would gladly receive him in Athens.

There was also news of the gladiator Aleric. He had been sent to fight in the arena of Athens, but the ship had wrecked off the coast of Macedonia, with many hands reported lost or drowned at sea, including the gladiators.

Angus was saddened at this piece of news, but the news concerning Katriona was more than an antidote. Angus determined to make for Athens immediately, and when Ruth heard of his plans, she asked to accompany him. She had stayed in Rome only to discover what had become of her family, but now that she knew, there was little to keep her here.

If she went to Athens with Angus, she could meet Arrius, the cousin of Tigellinus who she explained had opened his heart to the Christian faith.

Gaius was happy to learn of their decision, knowing they would both be safer away from Rome. He arranged for an escort of his personal guards to take them, and dispatched messages to Arrius and Philip to be expecting them. And so Angus and Ruth left the decadent evil of Rome behind them, and made their way to the start of a new life.

- 18 -

COMING TOGETHER

Decius lay in the hot soapy water of his bath. He glanced over to the door where Octavia had just entered the room with some oils. He rose up out of the bath and she dried him down. He moved over to the table and lay down on the towel as she started to rub the scented oils into his skin.

It was relaxing and peaceful. Octavia's fingers were soft and nimble, not like the fingers of the men at the baths. He actually felt some tenderness creep into his heart for a moment. His thoughts then went to his sister Lavinia and her sudden and unannounced return to Athens. Even though he understood about Arrius leaving, it seemed strange that his sister would have left the pleasures and entertainment of Rome for the relative remoteness of the life they had left behind in coming here. It was quite unlike her, and Decius was curious as to what had prompted the sudden decision.

He had always been close to his sister, since they were children. She was a woman of pleasure and enjoyed her life to the full, drinking of every cup of opportunity that came her way. So he could not understand why she would go back to Athens when all of Rome and its delicacies awaited her. He should return to Athens himself to see her, and then maybe

he could talk some sense into her.



The next morning Decius went to Tigellinus to request leave to travel to Athens to see his sister. As things were for the moment under control in Rome, Tigellinus agreed, with the condition that Decius use the visit to investigate the spread of Christians in the city, and to report back with any news regarding the loyalties and sentiments of its citizens and rulers.

A week later the Praetorian departed, along with a squad of soldiers. It was an uneventful trip, first over land to Aternum on the eastern coast, and then by ship to Athens.

When Decius arrived he found that Lavinia had gone to visit some old friends in Corinth, and would be returning in a few days. He decided to await her return, and in the meantime look into the spread of the Christian sect in Athens. Decius, well known in Athens as the son of the magistrate, and an emissary of Tigellinus, arrived at the governor's house and was immediately granted an audience.

They spoke for some time about the matter of Christians in the city, during which Decius noted that the authorities here in Athens did not appear very concerned about Christians, or diligent in finding them. Some had been arrested and imprisoned, but none had been hunted or executed with the same urgency as Rome was commanding.

Decius left the governor's residence knowing that there would be little more to learn from this man. He had better success with his own father, and within a few days had learned of a large gathering of Christians that was to take place outside the city. He determined to find a way to infiltrate it, and to see personally who and how many of the noble citizens of Athens (with whom he was well acquainted) might be involved in this growing movement of treachery.

His inquiries had also led him to a man called

Publius, a convicted Christian who had renounced his faith and reaffirmed his loyalties to Rome when faced with torture. From this man Decius learned some valuable information as to signals and sayings used among Christians that would help him to gain entrance to their midst.



Lavinia had been back in Greece for a couple of months. During this time she had discovered and attended several different Christian meetings. It was at one of these, in Corinth, that she listened to the man called James tell a story she had never heard before.

"There was a man, a hard-working landowner who had two sons. The elder was a hard worker and faithful in his work. The younger on the other hand lived a selfish life, avoiding the work and constantly asking his father for his share of the inheritance now so he could enjoy life.

"One day the father relented and divided the inheritance, giving the younger son his money. The following day the young son departed, traveling into a new land and finding a city of his liking, where he lived a life of pleasure.

"He partied and reveled in drunkenness and gambling. He had plenty of women filling his every desire. His money, though, was being spent quickly as he lived his life in this world of self-gratification—forgetting the sufferings of the poor or the needs of others. Not once did he think of his family or of others until one day he realized he had spent all his money.

"There was then a great famine in the land and soon he was but a beggar on the street, no one wanting to help him. All his old friends no longer wanted to be near him, for they had only wanted the money and the pleasure, not him. Even the girls he had loved and spent nights of pleasure with,

spending his money on jewels and trinkets for them, ignored him as if he did not exist.

“Finally he found work in a farm feeding the pigs and sharing their food. As he groveled in the dirt he remembered his father and how even the slaves were better treated than he now was. Making up his mind he went home. While yet he was some distance off, his father spotted him and came running to him, throwing his arms around him.

“Oh Father, I am not worthy to be called your son. Please forgive me and take me in as a servant,” the young man said.

“No, no,” said the father. “Come!” he shouted to his servants. “Bring out a robe for my son, bring forth the fatted calf let us feast, for my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is now found.”

James was looking directly into Lavinia’s eyes as he spoke, and she felt he had been speaking about her. She was like that lost son, for she had lived a life of selfishness and pleasure, thinking only of her self.

She came over and bent down before James, crying and sobbing. “Oh please help me to be free, for I have lived a life of selfishness also and wish to come to God.”

James looked at her and put his arms around her, comforting her, and then prayed with her to receive Jesus as her Savior.

Shortly after this Lavinia had been introduced to a merchant of Athens called Philip, who took her under his wing and started to teach her of the life of Christ and what each one was commissioned to do. Due to her family being rich and important, with her father a magistrate, and her brother a prominent officer of the Praetorian Guard, Philip had advised Lavinia to be quiet in her witness and not to be seen speaking or working with obvious Christians lest word reach her family of her involvement with the

Christian faith.

She also became fast friends with another of Philip’s companions, a Celtae woman called Katriona. Katriona had been learning from her interpreter to speak Greek, and was making remarkable progress.

Lavinia had now been gone from Athens for several days, visiting friends in Corinth. She had promised to return home for the great celebration in honor of the god Dionysus—or Bacchus, as the Romans called him—that was to take place in Athens in a few days’ time.

She had also received a message that there was to be a large gathering of believers taking place at a remote villa on the outskirts of Athens just before the great feast, and that Stephanas, a personal acquaintance of Paul, would be speaking there. She decided to travel straight there without returning home first, as it would be difficult to come home and then leave again without arousing some suspicion.

She wondered about Arrius. The two of them had been lovers before going to Rome. But even in Rome they had started to spend less time together, and on their trip back to Athens she remembered he had been strangely quiet. Since then he had not spent any time with her or requested to see her. Her family wondered at this also, but suspected it was due to some passing argument between the two, so she had been left alone and not been asked too many questions by her family.

This trip to visit some of her old friends in Corinth had been encouraged by her mother, who felt that perhaps some time away from the city would help clear her mind. She had sent along two servants to chaperone her daughter.

Now Lavinia would have to find some excuse to send them back alone. So Lavinia dismissed her servants, saying that she would be meeting Arrius

and had no further need for their presence. This news, of course, pleased the servants, who returned readily to Athens with the good news.

Lavinia felt guilty about the deception, but soon thought no more of it as Didius, a Christian acquaintance of Philip, and often his messenger, arrived to escort Lavinia to the place of the gathering.

The journey was a slow one, and Lavinia found lots of time to think, especially about Arrius. His mother was well now, but still Arrius had kept busy tending to various duties of his family that had been neglected in his absence. She had, on occasion, caught sight of him on various errands, though she had not felt like approaching him. If he wanted to see her, she reminded herself, he would call on her, and then she could be assured of both his desire and his attention.

However, she had noticed that he looked different, changed, somehow more thoughtful or serious. He was no longer the wild, carefree Arrius she'd known—always alive, vibrant, looking for excitement, or trouble. Had the death of his brother sobered him? Or was his mind on another woman—perhaps a woman he had left behind in Rome? Was he tired of her and seeking new flesh to fill his desires?

Not that the thought bothered her. Since coming to know the Christians, she had already determined in her heart that Arrius was not the kind of man for her. Still, she felt a burden on her heart for Arrius, and silently prayed that God would work in his life.



The trip to Athens had been free of any unusual events. Fortunatus and Lucius traveled with Aleric, Coilus, and Yasmine along smaller and quieter roads that afforded them plenty of time and privacy to speak of their lives and how they had each come

to the Christian faith.

Arriving in Athens, Lucius and Fortunatus found a place among Christians where Aleric, Coilus, and Yasmine could stay while looking to make a way back to Gaul and eventually back to the home of the Celtae. Omar had left Coilus and Yasmine with a generous gift of a bag of gold that would see them wherever they would desire to go.

In the meantime, the three were invited to attend a large Christian gathering that was to be held the next day, and for which Lucius and Fortunatus had made the journey to Athens to begin with.



Katriona had been overjoyed to hear that Angus was alive and in Rome. The memory of the isle, when she had been bathing and then locked eyes with Angus as he watched her, was still fresh in her mind. It was as if in that moment an exchange of spirits had taken place, and they had somehow become part of each other. She could almost smell the heather and the burning peat. She did not understand how in that one moment she could have fallen in love with him, but now she knew that it had been so.

The thought of him coming to Athens thrilled her and made her as excited as a young girl at her first jig. She thought of her vision of being back in the isles with him. It had seemed so impossible at the time, but was it now beginning to come to pass?

Had she not just met Lavinia, whom she had also seen in a vision? It was as if all the pieces were slowly falling into place, and soon the picture would be complete.

It was sad that Angus would not be here in time for the meeting tonight. But at least Lavinia would be there, or so Philip had assured her. Katriona had grown fond of Lavinia. She was beautiful and very wise, full of knowledge, not like her. Katriona felt so innocent in the world, having lived in the shelter of

the isles. She smiled as she thought how different they were from each other, yet how close they had become in only a short while.

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THE MEETING

Philip and Katriona were soon approaching the villa. Philip was nervous, and had been unsure about whether to attend this meeting. Although he was an active Christian he was also very careful not to advertise it, and even in Athens many Christians were not aware that he was one of them. But Stephanas would be speaking, and reading a letter from Paul addressing some issues that had arisen with the church in Athens, and he did not want to hear a second-hand rendition of it.

Soon the villa was packed with nearly one hundred and fifty people. Philip and Katriona sat in a corner towards the end of the room, and spotted Lavinia and Didius as they arrived. They signaled to them and they joined the group in the shaded corner of the hall.

Aleric, Coilus, and Yasmine arrived along with Lucius and Fortunatus at almost the same time, for the moment escaping the notice of Philip's group, and settled in an opposite corner.

James soon rose and began to speak, opening the meeting with a prayer before introducing Stephanas as the main speaker.

Aleric provided a running translation for Coilus of everything being said. Yasmine seemed to

understand the speech without too much trouble, though Aleric noticed her listening closely to his translations as well. She had started picking up the particulars of their language quite quickly during the course of their travels and conversations together, and she could already speak almost as much of the Celtic tongue¹ as Coilus could speak Greek.

Aleric smiled to himself, observing that love needed no common language for these two, though Coilus had, Aleric noticed, started to learn Greek more quickly since he met Yasmine. *It must be exciting to be young lovers like them*, Aleric thought, then concentrated again as Stephanas stepped onto the stage.

Stephanas paused for a moment. He looked out into the crowded room and uttered a silent prayer for guidance. Then he began.

“My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I have heard and seen much since last coming here about differences that have sprung up between you, and it was with a heavy heart that I carried a report of these things to Paul, so that he sent me back with a letter for you, written by his own hand. But I will speak to you first from my own heart, for I too have somewhat to say unto you.

“There is so much to set right in this evil world, and there are so many to be helped and comforted. We must, therefore, keep asking our heavenly Guide to lead us so that we do not miss our turn to do unto one of the least of the brethren as we would do unto Christ.

“You must needs portray Christ’s sample of love in all you do. If you are a slave then serve as if unto Christ. If your master is cruel and hard, win him by your obedience and hold no resentment. Wives, be

humble and loving, as was Christ. If you are married to unbelievers then win them by your unselfishness and affection. Show your husband how much you admire him and care for his every need. Likewise, be in subjection to your husbands, that they also may without the word be won by your conversation.

“We have all been placed in different circumstances, but God expects each man to submit to His will. We have need of patience with ourselves and with others; with those below, and those above us—and with our equals; with those who love us and those who love us not; for the greatest things and the least; against sudden inroads of trouble and in our daily burdens; in the breaking of the heart by a loved one; in weariness of the body, or in weariness of the soul; in our own failures or in those of others toward us; in everyday events or in aching of sickness or decay of the flesh in old age; in bereavement, loss, injury, reproach; in heaviness of the heart, or in dislodged hopes.

“In all these things, from simple troubles of childhood to the suffering and death of a witness in the arena, patience is a grace of God, wherein we can endure any evil, small or great, and become more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For we may at any moment be called to a test of faith.

“There is no short road to being a Christian, to letting His love overwhelm you. Be content in the place He has put you, and do not let ill will and comparing get hold of your heart. Let us accept our place, and forgive even as we have hope of forgiveness in Christ. Let us love, even as Christ has loved us, for by this shall all men know that we are His disciples.”

Stephanas continued speaking, soon coming to and reading the letter from Paul. Just as Stephanas reached the end of the letter, Aleric noticed a woman entering the room and making her way discreetly

¹ **Celtic tongue:** *The Celtic language was spoken in various forms throughout western parts of the Roman empire*

to a group in the corner. She bent down to whisper something in a man's ear, who then rose together with another woman.

As the small group left the room, Aleric suddenly recognized Katriona—a fellow Celtæ captive from the ship that had brought them to Rome. He was going to call out to her but his attention was diverted by Coilus.

“What's the man saying now?”

Aleric turned back to his friend, and in doing so his eyes caught sight of another woman at another end of the room just standing up to leave. For some reason he could not keep his eyes from her, and he stared transfixed as she made her way to the door.

At the same time another set of eyes spotted this solitary woman leaving the gathering—yet they stared not in admiration but in shock.

It was Decius, and he had just recognized his own sister.

Lavinia here? But why? She must be one of these Christians! Anger rose in his breast, threatening to burst out in a display of force. He forced himself to remain calm, to wait a few minutes after she had left, and then rose to follow her.

Aleric, whose eyes had remained wistfully on the door that Lavinia had disappeared through, suddenly noticed another man exit by the same way. He was large and covered in a dark cloak, his face hidden. There was something about the way he left, however, that did not sit right with Aleric.

“Coilus,” he whispered, “I need to go. A girl just left the room, and a man followed her shortly after. I feel she may be in danger.”

So saying, Aleric rose and made his way to the door.

“If there's danger, he's not going without us,” Coilus said to Yasmine, almost yanking her off her feet as he rose and strode to the exit after Aleric.

Lavinia had walked but a short distance from the villa, and turned onto a street that led back to the city, when she heard a noise behind her and turned.

She screamed as a blow hit her across the cheek, knocking her to the ground. She looked up in fear to find herself staring back into the angry eyes of her brother.

Decius grabbed her and wrenched her to her feet, holding her wrists in his hands, shaking her like a doll. “How could you do this? You disgrace our family by consorting with these plebeians, these Christian traitors hoping to displace the glory of Rome with their beggars' religion. What do you think you are doing with these Christians?”

“I am one of them, Decius,” Lavinia answered. “I have chosen their God. They are my family and brothers and sisters now!”

Rage filled Decius and he lashed out, hitting Lavinia so hard that she fell again to the ground, blood flowing from her lips. Tears burst from her eyes, and then she screamed out in pain as Decius kicked her hard in the ribs, sending waves of pain flooding through her body.

“You want to be one of them? Do you? Are you ready to feel the mouths of lions clasped around your dainty arms? Are you ready to face the wrath and sting of the whip of Rome? Have you truly become so demented that you would choose the company of these beggars over the rich halls of Rome? No, indeed you are not my sister!” Decius snarled, picking her up again and striking her hard on the cheek, so that blood ran from a cut caused by his ring.

Lavinia's senses started to reel and she was filled with nausea. Decius was no longer himself. It was as though he had become possessed by an evil spirit.

“Stop, you coward!” a voice suddenly sounded in her ears.

Aleric had heard Lavinia's screams and turned the corner in time to see Decius level his last blow against his sister.

"You fight women well," Aleric challenged, "but how about a man?" He threw off his cloak and revealed a sword.

Decius turned and threw Lavinia to the ground. "You have no business interfering. This is a family matter. She is my sister and has disgraced our name," Decius replied.

"I care little for your family name, stranger, whatever it may be, or even whether this woman is your sister or not. It is you who lack honor in treating her as you do. Now leave her alone or defend yourself!"

Aleric unsheathed his sword and stood ready.

Decius threw off his cloak, revealing his huge muscular form. He pulled out his sword and smiled with a condescending smirk. "And I would say the same to you, stranger."

As Decius turned, Aleric suddenly recognized the man, and remembered having seen him before. He was one of Tigellinus' men. What had he gotten himself into?

Just then Coilus arrived at the alley, with Yasmine running slightly behind him. He motioned to her to wait and pulled out his sword also. He shook his head in disbelief. How could this friend of his be so changeable—one moment refusing to fight and the next rushing into one without a care. He was certainly one strange Christian.

Decius viewed the newcomer with interest. He was a large man—bigger than himself—and it was obvious from his scars and build that he had seen a good share of battles, and obviously lived through them.

Then in a flash it came to him: *The two Celtae gladiators!* Yes! It was them. They had been reported

lost at sea after a shipwreck, but there was no mistaking that these were the men. So he would be fighting gladiators, but it mattered not. To train for the arena was one thing. To learn the discipline of a seasoned and noble Roman soldier was another. He would handle these two as easily as a common Roman soldier before barbarian hordes.

The fight began and Decius moved skillfully, inflicting a wound on Aleric with his first thrust.

Coilus moved quickly to Aleric's rescue and fended the Roman off with heavy blows that sent the man staggering backwards. There was no denying the strength and force in this man's arms, and for a moment Decius pondered the wisdom of continuing the fight.

But then he saw an opening to dash to the side of the blindly charging Iverni, and dealt a cut across the large man's shoulder. He could see Aleric joining the charge again, and in a flash of lightning had pulled out a knife and launched it towards Aleric, who did not see it coming. The spinning knife hit and buried its tip deep into Aleric's thigh.

Coilus then thrust out his sword, parrying another blow from Decius. The fight continued for several long moments, Coilus doing his best to stay between Aleric and Decius, but without gaining any clear advantage. Decius was indeed a master with the sword, and both Aleric and Coilus realized that despite their skill and years of fighting they were no match for Decius, especially since they were now both wounded. But for a miracle, they would both be defeated sooner or later.

"You foolish gladiators! Did you actually think you could take on a trained warrior of the Roman army, and a Praetorian at that? Praetorians eat gladiator meat for breakfast!" Decius snickered, his gimlet eyes betraying the evil within his soul.

Unseen to Decius, Lavinia had now gotten back

on her feet. Her face stung, and her stomach was filled with the nausea of pain. Her ears were ringing. Her senses swooned. She staggered a little, then caught herself before she fell.

Taking a deep breath, she took in the situation and watched what was happening. Stooping down, she picked up a large stone and moved quietly behind her brother.

As Decius gloated in his pride, Lavinia raised the rock above his head. Hearing a noise, Decius swung around, but too late. Lavinia brought the rock down onto her brother's skull with all her might, and he slumped silently to the ground.

"My poor brother," she said. "You lift yourself in pride, only to fall by the hands of a woman."

Lavinia staggered a little and Aleric rushed to her side.

"Are you are alright?" Aleric asked, his eyes searching hers.

As their eyes made contact, she felt emotions beginning to stir within her, and for once could think of nothing to say.

"I saw you leave the meeting, and this man follow you," Aleric explained, a little embarrassed at his boldness. "For some reason, I sensed you were in danger, so I followed as well. I'm glad I did."

"My name is Lavinia," she said, realizing that if this man had been at the meeting, he must also be a Christian.

"I am Aleric," Aleric replied.

Coilus watched the two of them as they stood there gazing at each other, neither one saying anything for several moments. He grinned, always one for a bit of sport, and then broke the pregnant silence.

"Once you two love birds have finished staring at each other, I think we need to be moving on from this place. Your brother is still alive, and the headache

he'll wake up with won't stop him from alerting the Romans to our presence, which could put us all in great danger."

"But we cannot kill him," Lavinia said. "We are to love our enemies, and pray for those that spitefully use us and persecute us."

"Then I suggest that we love him somewhere else," Coilus said, "and pray for him from a safer distance."

After looking around, they soon found a deserted shed at the edge of a small forest far from the road. Coilus dragged the unconscious man across the field into the shed, where he was tied with several ropes they found inside.

"That should give us some time until he is discovered, and to decide what we are to do now."

"Philip would know," Lavinia said, "and he must be warned as well. If my brother was indeed at the meeting, there's no telling who he might have recognized. I don't know what he is doing here in Athens, but there is no doubt that it foreshadows great danger to our work here."



Decius raged and fumed when he recovered his senses. He pulled and twisted and struggled for about an hour before he realized he would not escape by himself.

He relaxed, exhausted, and his mind started to clear and his anger subside. He looked around at his surroundings. It was a small, deserted shed, that looked as if it had once held horses. There was a musty smell in the air of old manure and fermented fruit.

He was tied to a strong beam. His head ached from the blow inflicted by his sister, and his legs and arms ached from the tightly bound cords. In the rays of moonlight piercing through holes in the roof he could make out some rats scurrying along the floor.

All else around him was silent. There was nothing to do but wait until daybreak, and hope then that he could attract the attention of some passersby.

As he waited, unable to do anything else, his mind wandered back to the words he had heard spoken in this Christian meeting. He remembered feeling something he had never felt before. The words cut into him like a knife, and had shown him his life from a perspective he had never seen it from before. It felt empty, hollow, and wasted.

As he had studied the crowds around him, he saw faces and people that were kind and simple. There was nothing sinister about them. There were no hidden motives in their eyes, no disguised agendas in their words, no superficial smiles or carefully chosen words to gain some political advantage. They were like one big family, as close as he and Lavinia were ... as close as he and Lavinia *had* been.

Lavinia—he now remembered spotting her in the crowd, and in that moment a cloud had fallen over his mind and anger had taken hold of his heart—like some hand of evil that had become accustomed to ruling his life and actions, almost like he had no control over it.

Now, as he sat here tied up, he thought of his sister again and how they had played and laughed as youths. He remembered how she had covered for him many times and softened their father's anger towards him.

She had always been kind and gentle, and they had always looked out for each other. He could not believe what he had just done to her. Is this what Rome had turned him into—a brute beast fit only to destroy, and commanded by some will other than his own?

Decius retraced the steps of his life, from his early years of learning from his father and tutors, to his later years and desires to leave Athens and

the comfortable and complacent life of his father to make a name for himself as a Praetorian, and how this had set him at variance with his father and tutors, who never thought highly of Rome's aggressive military policies.

But for Decius, glory and honor had been in war and battle, in the strength of men, and not in the rich, comfortable, and complacent life he had always seen in his father.

So it was that Decius had started his military career, where he distinguished himself as a ruthless fighter, venting his anger and thirst for strength on all who crossed his path, consistently killing and maiming more than any of his fellows.

This trail of death and destruction and loyalty above all to the might and power of Rome had carried him into the very halls of the emperor as a member of the Praetorian Guard, but had now also nearly caused him to kill his own sister, whom he had loved and cared for more than any in the world.

Was it now too late to change? Had he passed the point of no return? Could any god forgive all the evil he had perpetrated, and make a new creature of him?

With these thoughts running through his mind, he fell back into a restless sleep.



Decius was woken by a loud crash at the door. A farmer entered, saw the tied soldier, and instantly left with a look of fear on his face. He returned an hour later with four soldiers, who released Decius and escorted him back to the governor's residence for a report.

The governor apologized profusely for what had happened, and promised Decius he would give his full cooperation to finding and rooting out these Christians, promising Decius whatever forces or authority he would need to carry out the will of

Rome.

Decius was hit with a variety of thoughts. His thoughts of regret and memories of the simple and innocent nature of the Christians he had seen were still fresh in his mind. At the same time, he again felt anger well up within him, and a desire for revenge against those who had led to his humiliating defeat. The inner conflict caused his body to begin shaking, and his scar to grow red, giving him a ferocious look that made the governor unconsciously take a step back from the man.

All his life Decius had followed these impulses, and where had it led him? He had always sought to be the most powerful, the strongest, never forgiving a wrong done to him, and living a life of ruthlessness and hate. Now another voice was speaking to his heart. His eyes had been opened to another truth, another reality, another world—and he knew this was the moment when he would have to choose which one he would accept, and which one he would reject. He could not live in both.

He hesitated a few moments, then stated his demands for the men he would need.

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THE NEXT STEPS

Angus and Ruth arrived in Athens late in the evening. The city was packed with crowds celebrating the festivities of Dionysus, the god of wine and drama. They followed the directions to an inn Gaius had told them about, and after being shown to their rooms, handed the innkeeper—a man by the name of Didius—a message to be delivered to the household of Philip the merchant.

Philip immediately called Katriona in and explained that Angus was in Athens.

Katriona was elated and wanted to see him right away, but Philip suggested waiting. It was only last night that they had discovered that Decius had been present at the meeting, and there was no telling what he knew, or who was by now being watched.

He had arranged passage for Aleric, Lavinia, Coilus, and Yasmine to Ephesus—a safe place for the moment, where they could be taught by some of the original apostles. The ship was not leaving for another day, so for the moment Coilus and Yasmine were being sheltered in the house of Fortunatus, and Aleric and Lavinia in the house of one Erastus, a weaver by trade.

Still he worried. Decius would waste no time and spare no expense to find his sister. The hunt for

Christians was coming to Athens, whether they were ready or not.



Decius had indeed wasted no time in picking up the search for his sister. He knew that she would try to leave Athens with her friends as soon as possible. He also knew that there was a much greater risk of them being recognized along the way if they traveled on foot or by road. Their safest way out was by ship, and there were several ports within a few days' journey from where they could make their way to almost any part of the world.

So he had assigned men to watch all ports and harbors, to gather lists of all ships leaving for more distant destinations, and to warn captains to report any strangers seeking sudden accommodations aboard their vessels.

He himself took two men on horseback and raced from one port to the other to check on the men's findings. At the same time, his mind was going through the introspective torment of hell. He felt like screaming, for the soul within him was being torn and rent. He felt as if he were in the agony of torture in the dungeons of Nero. His emotions of hate, his desire of revenge, his old brutal self which had ruled him since a youth, was being torn by a new emotion of love—of compassion, of forgiveness, of mercy.

Dark spirits, not willing to relinquish their hold on his life, were fighting for the possession of his soul. He felt as though he was going insane.

The two soldiers accompanying him could see the distortions in his face as he agonized, and they too wondered whether he was going insane—or if these Christians who had bound him had put some sort of spell on him. The governor had ordered them to obey his commands explicitly. But what if those commands started to go against the will of Rome?



Back in Rome, Garth had been unable to sleep. There were not too many fights these days in the arena, as it was almost continually being used for the execution of Christians, whether in large or small groups.

A seemingly endless stream of men, women, and children were being killed every day. It sickened even Garth—a man used to seeing savage war, rape, murder, and violence from his many battles. It was hard to believe that a nation could stoop to such levels of consistent carnage and horror.

At the same time he was gaining respect for these Christians who would bravely meet death with songs on their lips praising this God of theirs. He felt anger rise within his breast as he thought of the evil being perpetrated on these innocents by a so-called civilized empire. And they considered his people savage and barbarian.

Garth thought of the other Celtae he had known here who had died—some like Armirius dying as he had lived, in hate and bitterness; some like Clohn who had died just yesterday of sickness, screaming in pain and calling out to his gods to no avail.

He wondered if Clohn had brought the curse of the Christian God upon himself, as he remembered how after the great fight in the arena, Angus had spoken of the power of the carpenter-God Jesus, and Clohn and Neil had both vehemently argued with him that he was deserting his gods and people. "Rome is right to kill ones such as you!" Clohn had said, threatening to kill Angus himself had Aleric not restrained him. And the next day Clohn had taken sick, and refused and screamed at Aleric when he had tried to beseech the Christian God for healing—and now he was dead.

Had it been the hand of God? Angus had been fortunate enough to escape—both his immediate certain death in the arena, and his eventual certain

death as a gladiator. But Aleric had not been as fortunate—lost at sea. But perhaps that was a form of fortune as well, for else he would have died as a gladiator.

But now they were both gone, and there was no one Garth could turn to who could answer his questions of life and death. Tomorrow he would fight the Ethiopian who had slain Armirius. Would his life end the same? Was this to be his doom? Was he now to die like Armirius, groaning in the sand, having known only a life of death, murder, and destruction?

Just then a loud creaking of the door and a dazzle of torches interrupted Garth's thoughts as soldiers entered his cell and threw in a man who stumbled on the stone floor, unaccustomed to the darkness.

"Are you alright?" Garth called out when the door had closed and the soldiers left.

"Yes, I am fine!" replied the stranger.

Garth and the newcomer talked together for some time. He was certainly an unusual prisoner—a Roman citizen by birth who had been arrested several times, sometimes escaping, other times being released. He was a Christian, Garth discovered, and he spoke freely of Jesus, of the Kingdom of Heaven, and of how man could gain victory even over death through the name of this Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

He spoke with such fervor that it riveted Garth. The more the man spoke, the more the clouds of confusion seemed to vanish from Garth's mind and he could see things so clearly. All his questions were answered and by early morning there was no doubt left in his mind. It was with tears that he knelt down and bowed his head and confessed his Savior. Then he spoke again to the man.

"I have lived a life of violence. I have killed

and dealt death since my youth, for that was all I knew. I sought to free my people from the yoke of the Romans, but instead I brought only more destruction and death upon them. Now again I fight, but for the pleasure of these Romans and for their entertainment in the arena.

"What do I do now? You say we are to love our enemies, but I am still destined to kill and fight in the arena. How can I love a man who is to kill me for sport? If I refuse to fight I will die an even worse death. What should I do?"

"I cannot see inside your soul, Garth. This is something you must decide from your own conviction and according to your own faith. You must choose your own path as I have done. Our Lord gave His life for us, Garth. He shed His blood to save you. He could have called down legions of angels to free and rescue Him, but He chose not to. He said, 'if My kingdom were of this world then would My servants fight.' But this is not His kingdom. This kingdom is ruled by evil men. His Kingdom is a heavenly Kingdom, Garth.

"Even as Jesus was arrested, His disciple Peter took out a sword to defend Jesus from the soldiers who took Him. But Jesus cried out and said, 'No Peter. They that live by the sword will die by the sword.' But in all your thoughts, remember this: He loves you. You are now His child, and He will not leave you nor forsake you. He has forgiven you of your past life. He has made of you a new creature. But even now, if you make mistakes, if you choose wrongly, He understands our frailties and our fears, and is still ready to forgive. He does not expect more of us than we can offer, Garth."

"And what of you? Will you escape again?" Garth asked, thinking that perhaps there was a chance that, since they were now imprisoned together, they might escape together.

“I do not know. But I feel strongly that I have now run my race and finished my course, and God knows I am ready to leave this weary world, to accept His will for me, whether it be life or death. I can do no other than follow my Lord’s footsteps.”

Just then there was a noise at the door, and two soldiers entered to escort Garth to the grounds where he would be prepared for his fight.

“God be with you,” Paul of Tarsus said as his new friend and last convert was taken away.



The next morning Angus went to the home of Arrius and left a message from Ruth with the servants stating that she had arrived in Athens and where she could be found. He then returned to the inn, and together with Ruth explored parts of the city.

Later in the day Arrius returned home and it did not take him long, after he read the message, to rush down to the inn.

Angus smiled as he watched Ruth. Her face lit up when she saw Arrius and she ran to him, throwing her arms around him and giving him a long and passionate kiss, momentarily oblivious to the fact that Angus was watching.

Arrius, as soon as he had disentangled himself from Ruth’s embrace, thanked Angus for bringing her, and offered to help Angus in whatever way he could.

Angus was pleased to see how much they loved each other and was thankful for Arrius’ offer. He explained that he was waiting to meet up with a girl as well, and after that he intended to make his way to Gaul, to the house where the wife of Tribune Claudius was now staying, where he would be safe from the wrath of Tigellinus.

“I see your predicament,” Arrius answered. “I will be most happy if when you have met your companion

and rested you will be my guests. And I will see what I can do to help you in your venture.”

Ruth reached out her hand, taking Angus’ hand in hers. “You have been as a brother to me, Angus. I believe God sent you to me to help me. When I heard of the death of my family I was sorrowful and deeply distressed in my soul. But by teaching you the words of our Lord and spending those evenings together in prayer and reading I felt my own courage renewed. My soul was freed from the darkness that the Enemy had tried to place it in. I will miss you dearly and will pray always for you. Please do visit us when you have found Katriona.”

Shortly afterwards Ruth departed with Arrius, and as Angus watched them go, he silently prayed, *Thank You, my Jesus, for sending me to Ruth who nursed me back to health with her care and Your words. I feel I am but a babe and have so much more to learn. I have done much wrong, even since coming to the knowledge of Your saving grace. But they have been blunders of the flesh, and not intentional.*

But now my soul is troubled for the death of this man, Alexis. I feel ashamed for what I have done. Yes, I am glad that I was in time to save Valeria, but ashamed that I had to kill this man and send him to a fate he could in no way be prepared for. I wished I could have somehow saved him. Maybe I was the only chance for him to know You, and I killed him.

When Ruth spoke of Your words I could see all my mistakes before me. I could also see that You forgive and save us from them. I know You saved me for a purpose, and Katriona too. I pray I can find that purpose, and I pray it can be with Katriona, but I commit all into Your care, and ask that You make clear Your plan.”



Philip went alone to the quiet of his room to pray, being troubled in spirit over the recent turn of events

in Athens. So much was happening in such a short time. There was much to counsel about, and many decisions that needed to be made—some of which seemed obvious and beyond question. But yet he could not find peace in his heart about them.

“Dear Lord,” he prayed, “I feel in need of You. There is so much happening now. I need Your peace. I feel overwhelmed with confusion, worry, and fear. This Decius could destroy our work here. I have labored these many years to help and strengthen Your church here. But now there could be great danger to me and many others if we remain.

“You said once that if they persecute us in one city, to flee to another. And yet not all can flee, and must those who stay behind be left leaderless and comfortless? You have always guided my footsteps, dear Lord. So I ask again that You reveal Your will to me.”

The answer echoed in the expectant quietness his heart and mind.

Dear Philip, you are a truly loyal son, willing to follow My every word, My slightest bidding. You have been a strength to My church, bringing encouragement and help as you could give it to My children of many cities. Now I call you to go a step further in forsaking your life of this world to live completely for Me.

Yes, persecution will come, but not as you think. Yes, you must flee, but not in fear. I am putting it in the heart of James to stay, to be the strength of the church and to lead them in the trial of their affliction. But your danger is greater, and therefore I call you to step out and join your friends in their voyage to Ephesus. There you will receive instruction and go forth as My apostle of faith.

But first there is another you must help on his way, for Angus must go with Katriona to be a witness for Me in his own land. These two have a destiny to fulfill together, and you are the instrument to place

them on this path. Go meet him, with Katriona, and set them on the path that I shall show you. And when you have given them all you can give, leave the rest behind, in the hands of James, and follow Me to Ephesus.

IN THE FACE OF DEATH

The day for the contest had finally arrived. Garth stood at the gate, watching as the Ethiopian strode in and came and stood beside him.

Garth eyed the man with interest. He was tall and muscular. His face was impassive, like that of many who lived their lives with the thought of killing or being killed. But there was a further air of pride or dignity about him, as if he had once been the son, perhaps, of a great chief.

Their eyes locked, and both could sense uneasiness in the other. Suddenly Garth felt compassion for the man rather than fear. He did not know the man. He had never spoken to him. But underneath this gladiator's costume he could see another man, another soul, another prisoner of Rome who had been forced to kill simply to survive. Suddenly it didn't matter to Garth which of them would die. The victor would only have to face death again in another contest. The loser would finally be released from his pointless existence.

Garth thought back on the words of Jesus that Paul had told him: "If My Kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight."

Just at that moment, the sounds of clanking interrupted his thoughts as the gate before them

opened, and a group of soldiers escorted the two champions into the arena, and onto the sands of their fate. They marched around the arena until they came before the box where the emperor was seated, where they stopped and saluted, and then mindlessly worded off their customary pledge to Nero.

But this time, the words stuck in Garth's throat, and he found he could not repeat them. He felt his head spinning. He was sweating. He stopped and lowered his hand. He could not do this. How could he kill this man? He had nothing against him. This Ethiopian was but a prisoner of circumstances like himself, and if he killed him he would send his soul to hell! No, this was not right.

The Ethiopian, meanwhile, had also stopped and was looking at Garth curiously. The crowds, too, went silent. What was happening? What was going on?

Garth looked around and saw before him not just the bloodthirsty mob, but souls who were lost and seeking as he had been, and who now needed to be told of their Savior—the true God of love and peace instead of gods and emperors who only instilled hate and fear. He raised his eyes to heaven and saw a cloud of witnesses watching him. He was stunned. What was happening? Who were they? Then it came to him. They were the witnesses of faith that Paul had spoken of, and they had come to watch him deliver his soul before this crowd.

He threw his net and trident to the ground and shouted out to the crowds. "You came this day to see blood. You came to watch men die for your pleasure. All the while you cry blood, blood, blood! But your souls wander, lost in the sands of time. You throw this life away in pleasure and decadence, neglecting your souls which are being prepared to suffer the torments of hell!

"Don't you see how you have corrupted yourselves

and become but beasts like your emperor? Is this your god—this fat, perverted, man who lusts for the blood of innocent men, women, and children?" At this Garth turned and pointed at Nero, who was silently watching in shock, his fat jowls quivering with rage.

"This vile creature degrades Rome and is turning it into a hovel for beasts—and you who follow him are slaves to his whim and will. You call me a slave? Look at yourselves. You are the ones who are bound by his shackles. The Christians have found true freedom through the knowledge of Jesus Christ, the Son of the one true God who created and loves all men, and offers them true freedom—freedom of soul, of spirit, of life. Nero fears this God and this freedom, and thus he kills them, and causes you to hate them. Can you not see how you have sold your minds into the slavery of his will?"

At this Nero rose to his feet. His face was purple with rage, and his lips quivered in anger. "Stop him!" he shouted. "You there, Ethiopian, slay him at once! Your emperor commands it!"

The Ethiopian raised his sword to strike, but then his eyes made contact with the eyes of Garth, and he hesitated.

Garth lowered his voice, and looked kindly at the man. "Do what you must do. I will not hold it against you. You will only release me from this world of pain and death into a world of peace and everlasting life. Do it!"

The Ethiopian stood frozen, hesitating, and marveling at the peace with which Garth awaited the blow that would send him to his death.

"Are you mad also?" screamed Nero. "Slay him now!"

The Ethiopian lowered his sword and let it slide out of his fingers.

He turned to Nero, and raised his voice so that

all could hear. “I will not kill this man. I have killed too many men in my life out of fear for men such as you. This man has risen above your fear, above the fear of Rome, and thus proven himself greater than Rome, and certainly greater than you.”

“Guards! Guards! Kill them now!” Nero shouted.

The Ethiopian turned to Garth. “Share with me your God, that I may know Him before I die.”

“Do you believe that the Son of God can cleanse you from your sin, through the blood that He shed?”

“I believe,” the Ethiopian answered.

At that moment, they were both pierced through by a volley of javelins that had been let loose at Nero’s command.



As Tribune Claudius stood at the dockside waiting to board his ship to Britannia he thought back on many things. These Christians still troubled his thoughts. He thought of Cornelius and his discussion in Britannia, of Senator Gaius, of his wife Valeria and all she had shared with him, of Angus, and of the Christians that he had seen in the arena, singing praises to their God in the face of their death.

His heart was heavy. Many soldiers fought in the names of Jupiter or Mars, but to many these were little more than just names, symbols or trinkets like those Angus had thrown into the fire. The gods of Rome had never inspired such loyalty in men as the God of these Christians did.

He had all his life offered prayers and incense to Athena and Mars, but it was just a routine, a tradition. It meant nothing to him. The gods of Rome were not concerned with petty men—only with their own wars and squabbles.

His heart now cried out in the silence and void that filled his consciousness.

“I am but a lost soul on the highway of life. I am confused. I seek the truth, yet I am blind and cannot see it. Help me! If there is a God of all men, of the heavens and the earth, who can change a man and make of him a new creature, a new spirit, a new soul, please show me, that I may also know You and the peace and joy You have given to my beloved.”

A tear started to form in his eye and roll down his cheek. Just then a hand reached out and touched his shoulder, startling Claudius. He turned around and found himself staring into the beautiful eyes of a woman. They were filled with love, and she seemed to be glowing with an aura of inner light.

“I am sorry,” she said in a quiet and meek voice. “I did not mean to startle you. Please forgive me. I am called Martha, a slave to the household of Senator Quinton. We have not met, neither does he know that I am here. It may sound strange to you, Tribune, but God told me to find you here and talk to you.”

Claudius was shocked, and his face paled as his mouth fell open.

“Yes, Tribune, I have come to answer your questions and to proclaim His love for you. He wishes that you enter into His Kingdom and become a tribune in His army—not an army of flesh but a mightier one of the spirit.”

Claudius was dumfounded at this immediate answer to his prayer.

“Martha is your name, you said? I had only just this second asked the one true God to prove Himself to me, and here you are—His very messenger. Tell me all you know, for now more than ever I am ready to meet your God.”

Martha took his hand in hers and beamed forth such love that he forgot all else around him—intent only on partaking of each of her words like choice jewels.

“I am but an instrument of His power and love, Tribune, but I will be most happy to share with you the joy of my salvation and point you to the gates of Heaven, and the arms of a God who is waiting to embrace you into His Kingdom.”



A knock at his door startled Angus out of his musings. He opened it to see a kind man somewhat older than himself standing at the door.

“Angus?” the man asked.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Philip,” the man answered. “You sent me a message. I believe you are interested in meeting Katriona.”

“Yes, yes!” Angus answered, showing the man into his room. “Where is she?”

“You will meet her soon, and in good time. For now it was necessary for me to be cautious, as Athens is fast becoming as dangerous for Christians as Rome. Many of us are already under suspicion. You shall have to be careful as you leave it.”

“Leave it?”

“Yes. You stated in your message that you intend to travel to Gaul.”

“I did ... but I was hoping it wouldn’t have to be so soon.”

Philip went on to explain the events of the past days, and how Decius and his men now had many ports and roads watched.

“Here, take this document. It states that Katriona is your servant, in your care, to deliver to the household of Senator Gaius in Gaul. With it you should have little trouble getting out of the city, or finding a ship to take you without arousing any suspicions. God has told me that you both have a mission to fulfill, and that I was to help you on your way. Now I have done what I could, and I must soon leave this city myself.”

Philip then gave further explanations and directions. Katriona was staying in the house of Linus, a Christian who lived outside the city. Angus would find her there, and from there they were to make their way to Corinth, from where many ships departed for Gaul. Philip left Angus with a hefty pouch of coins for the voyage, and after giving his blessing on the young man and his mission-to-come, he left to make his own preparations for leaving.



Angus wasted no time in making his way to the house of Linus, and being expected, was shown into the atrium to wait.

Angus sat down and watched nervously, anticipating the arrival of Katriona. It was a seeming eternity of time and the moments became hours in his mind. In reality it was only a quarter of an hour before Katriona stepped into the atrium.

She was radiant. *My, how she has blossomed into a woman*, Angus thought. Indeed, she was no longer the sprightly lass he had seen at the burn but a fully developed woman. Her shapely form was accentuated by the thin Greek dress draped over her body and fastened at the shoulders. It flowed down to her ankles with a slit at the sides up to her waist, where it was held in place by a thin belt. Her hair was pinned at the back, showing the lovely curve of her neck, but a lock of hair had slipped down and hung by the side of her cheek.

She smiled as she noticed his admiring gaze and couldn’t help but tease him. “So, Angus,” she quipped in his native tongue that he had not heard in some time, “I see you still like to eye the women.”

Angus blushed, a little embarrassed at her remark, and muttered, “I guess I am not used to seeing such beautiful women, so I cannot help but admire you.”

“You are the one for compliments, are you not?”

she answered. “I am glad to see you, though, Angus, despite my seemingly teasing attitude. It’s been such a long time. I have so much to tell you but I do not know where to begin. In all the time we lived together in the village I never took much notice of you. But that day when our eyes met at the burn, I felt as if a part of you mingled with me, as if we were meant to remain together in this way when circumstances would drive us apart.”

“I, too, felt something that day when I saw you, Katriona,” Angus answered. “I saw you in a different light—for there was many a time that I saw you and your brothers or your father at the village meetings. But when I made contact with you that day I felt a fire in your eyes. I had only stopped to admire your beauty, but instead I caught something else—a spirit within you shone out.

“I had always seen you as unattainable, something only to dream of—or to sing liltis about if I had been a bard. But in that one moment I felt as though we had become one in spirit. I, too, felt as if we shared an exchange of something. Aye, there was the fire of Lochiel there, but there was also another fire burning deep inside you—a fire that could not be tamed by any man. The thought of finding that fire again has kept me going through all these years, Katriona.”

She moved over, sinking down at his feet and taking his hand. Her eyes looked up into his, and her other hand reached up and traced the lines of the scar over his eye. “Angus,” she said, “when I saw you that time my heart went out to you. And since then I have had visions of you that kept me thinking of you, and in time I knew that it was because I had fallen in love with you. I know it sounds crazy—to say that one can fall in love in a second like that, but it is true. I don’t know you, yet I love you. I have since then come to know Jesus, and His love compasses

my soul and motivates my life, but yet there burns within me this love I feel for you, Angus. It grows but stronger each day.”

“Katriona, I never felt worthy of you. You are the daughter of a great chief, and I am but a simple man. But now that I have learned of the words of Jesus, I know that rank or class matters not, that God does not look on these things as man does, and I too, believe, that we were meant to be together, and that together we are meant to do the work of God, and to someday bring the words of Jesus back to our people who know so little of love, and who are filled with the superstition and darkness of the Druids.”

Katriona gave a little laugh. “Well, simple man, I see there is a fire within you as well, and I understand your feelings, and share them. Our people need to be told of the gospel of Christ. Our people must find the freedom we have found, even in our bonds.”

As they looked into each others’ eyes, Angus could feel his head begin to spin. Without thinking he reached out his arms and pulled Katriona into a tight embrace. At the same moment their lips, as if of one accord, met in a moment of long-awaited passion.



Decius had received word from one of his messengers that strangers had been requesting passage to Ephesus from several ships at the docks of Cencrea, just outside of Athens. Decius recognized Ephesus as a city that had been mentioned in early reports back in Rome as a possible center for Christians. These were the people he was after. He just knew it. And to pick the closest port ... he would have expected something slyer from these Christians.

Decius learned the time of departure for the ship in question and positioned himself and his two men behind some cargo, while he sent the messenger to

call for reinforcements. It was chilly and the men were tired after their fast and long ride, but Decius ignored their complaints, his thought fully bent on confronting his sister and having his revenge on whoever she happened to be traveling with.

Soon he saw a group of people approaching. He strained his eyes in the darkening evening dusk. There were five of them and not four as he had anticipated. “Maybe some guide is with them ... yes, it’s them,” he whispered, as even from a distance he made out Lavinia from her movements. “She always had a distinct way to her walk,” he whispered.

As the group came closer, Decius also recognized Philip from the Christian meeting.

Before they could go any further, Decius sprung from his position.

“Stop!” he commanded, moving out to reveal himself. The two soldiers quickly followed.

Coilus reached for his sword, but Philip stopped him.

“No, brother—not with violence. It was God who instructed us to take this path, and it will be God who shall protect us or deliver us according to His will.”

Coilus glanced over at Aleric, as if seeking a confirmation of these words.

Aleric nodded. “There has been too much killing already, Coilus. Let us give God the chance to provide a way of escape.”

Coilus released his grip on his sword.

Lavinia stepped forward to confront her brother. “So, brother, have you come now to gloat over your victory, to have your revenge?” Her tone was angry and cutting. “Are you happy now that you will see your sister torn to pieces by wild beasts? Does that satisfy the lust for blood that Rome has put within you?”

The words stung Decius in his already tortured

soul. He signaled for his men to wait as he moved closer to his sister. As he did, he was shocked at the sight of Lavinia’s face—all swollen and bruised from his blows.

Lavinia noticed the change that came over her brother’s face, and knew the Lord was working in his heart. She suddenly repented of her angry tone, and calmed herself.

“Decius, you know how I have always cared for you, and how whenever you were in trouble I was there for you? But now I am the one in need, Decius. I was lost in a world of selfishness. I had no purpose in life. I had drunk from the cup of the pleasures of Rome to the full, but found no solace.

“I came to Rome with Arrius seeking answers—hoping there to find some meaning to my empty existence—only to find more corruption and selfishness and evil. Yes, I was introduced to new pleasures. I found new delights that satisfied my eyes and ears and mind for a moment, but in the end they only left me as empty as they had found me, with no further purpose in life than endlessly looking for further ways to please myself.

“Yes, I had riches and dresses. I had perfumes and wines. But I had no peace of mind for my tortured soul. Then I saw these despised ones—the sect of the Christians. I listened to their words, words that spoke to me, not just to my mind, but to my heart and my soul. For the first time in my life I felt I had found peace. I had found the meaning of life. I had found a purpose for living.

“I have heard the words of the great philosophers, Decius. I have read the writings of the learned, and yet they never reached my soul. They can speak of ideals, but where in all of Rome do you see those ideals being lived? Certainly not amongst those who most like to speak of them. But these Christians live the words of their Teacher—words that speak to the

heart and not just the mind.”

As Lavinia spoke, Decius remembered the words at the meeting and how they had reached into his heart also. He knew his sister was telling the truth. His heart was agreeing, yet his mind was fighting it.

“Decius, Jesus knows we are creatures of fault and imperfection. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. That is why Jesus came, why He took on the form of flesh to be as we are, to understand our infirmities, and to open to us the way to salvation, the door to true freedom. He gave His life for us, suffering a cruel death on the cross to pay for our sins, Decius. He gave His blood to cleanse us from our sins, and rose from the dead to prove that He had conquered both sin and death, and that those who believed on Him would not perish, but have everlasting life.

“I forgive you, Decius, for what you have done to me, as Jesus will forgive you for *all* your sins if you will only accept and believe!”

Tears formed in Decius’ eyes, and began to roll down his cheeks.

“Oh, Decius, Jesus knows your aching heart and the torments of your soul. He knows how you suffer the agony of despair and guilt you feel deep within for all you have done. He can help you to find peace from these things ... yes, peace, Decius—a new life of peace. He can wipe away all the past and is offering you a new start. Don’t let it pass you by, Decius. Accept His ransom now. Accept His love.”

Decius shuddered as the tears flowed freely down his cheeks. Could it really be true? Could there be forgiveness and freedom for him from all he had done, from the cruel, merciless, sadistic, and vengeful life he had led? Could it be that there was a way out? Was there a God who could and would forgive all he had done, and accept him still?

Philip, seeing Decius nearing a point of decision, prayed fervently for him. *Please Lord! Do it! Reach into his soul. Help him to receive You. Rebuke the hold of the Evil One! Set this captive free. Bind any evil spirits that are tormenting him and free him from their power so that he may hear Your words with a clear mind. You changed the heart of Saul and made him a great apostle for You. You can change the heart of this man also, Lord.*

Decius looked again into his sister’s swollen eyes. After all that he had done to her, she was standing there forgiving him, telling him there was a God who loved him and would forgive his evil.

“Tell me, Lavinia, what I must do,” he finally said.

She ran over and took him in her arms. “Oh Decius, oh Decius. Just pray with me! Receive God’s forgiveness through His Son Jesus. Come, pray with me!”

“Stop! What is going on here?” one of the soldiers cried out, confused by what he was seeing. “You’re putting a Christian spell on him, you witch!” the soldier shouted, stepping menacingly towards Lavinia.

“No, wait ... I am well,” Decius replied. “Leave us to talk.”

“You are not well, Commander! These Christians have put a spell on your mind! We have seen it taking hold of you. Stand back, and let us slay these traitors of Rome.”

Decius turned around and faced the men. “I am your commander, vested with authority from the governor. You will obey my orders and stand back immediately!” he demanded.

“You are without reason, sir. These Christians have clouded your wits and judgment. Our loyalty is to the orders of Rome, which you have clearly forgotten. It is our duty to protect the people of Rome

from these Christians, and if that means protecting our own commander from himself, then so be it!”

At that the two soldiers drew their swords and advanced toward the group.

Decius, seeing these men would not be reasoned with, turned to his sister.

“Flee! I will hold them. Do not take the ship. Go by land, and go now, before my reinforcements arrive!”

With that, Decius pulled out his sword and rushed towards the two soldiers.

Before either of them realized what had happened, the first soldier sank to the ground, dying, and Decius turned on the next one.

Realizing that he would not stand a chance in hand to hand combat against Decius, the second soldier rushed for the place where they had been hiding, and quickly retrieved two javelins that had been hidden there.

Decius, meanwhile, quickly looked to make sure the Christians were safe, and was relieved to see that the soldier had not gone after them instead.

Then a searing pain suddenly shot through his leg, and he looked down to see that a javelin had ripped through his flesh. He looked up just in time to avoid the second javelin, and then rushed for the soldier like a mad bull, lunging at him and sending them both rolling onto the ground.

The soldier’s sword had fallen and was now lying harmlessly out of his reach, and Decius drew his own sword to finish the man off.

But at the same time, and unseen to Decius, the soldier pulled out a dagger with his left hand, and as Decius’ sword sank into the man’s chest, a dagger pierced his own.

Lavinia and the others, who had been watching, ran over to him and bent down over him. They could see at a glance that treating him would be of no use.

He had already lost a lot of blood from his leg, and was dying.

“Decius! Oh, Decius!” Lavinia said holding his head in her lap, “You gave your life for us. Now give it also to Jesus before it is too late.”

Decius tried to smile but grimaced in pain instead. “I ... I have done so much evil. Now it is my turn to feel the pain I have afflicted on others. Let me face the death and judgment I deserve.”

“No, Decius. Jesus loves you, no matter what you have done. And now you have given your life for Him, even if you did not know Him. Let Him take that burden of sin from your heart, so that you do not have to die with it.”

“Is that even possible?” Decius asked, his voice starting to fade.

“Yes, Decius. It is. Believe it. Simply believe it because I’m telling you. It’s a gift—the last and greatest gift I could possibly give you. Please accept it, Decius!”

Lavinia gripped Decius’ hand.

“I ... I can see Him,” Decius suddenly said. “Jesus ... He’s reaching His hand towards me.” Decius lifted his hand as if to grasp something, and then let out a final gasp. “My Lord.” Then his hand dropped, and his spirit was gone.

Lavinia burst into tears, and threw herself onto her brother’s lifeless body.

After some moments Philip touched her shoulder. “Lavinia, there is nothing more we can do for him now. Our ship is casting off. With these men dead, the governor’s soldiers will hopefully assume that we got aboard, and will not think of looking for us on the roads. But we must be on our way now. We are not safe yet, and there is a long road ahead of us.”

THE PATHS OF LOVE

A cock crowed and Angus awoke, trying to remember where he was, and how he had gotten here. He yawned and stretched himself as he sat up in his bed. Looking over, he saw the beautiful form of Katriona stretched out beside him. Ah, yes ... he had gone to the house of Linus to meet her, and must have spent the night ... so it had not been a dream after all!

Katriona looked peaceful and content, lying on the soft sheets, her form and loose locks of hair highlighted by the rays of sunlight peeking through the shutters.

Angus rose up and moved over to the window, opening the wooden shutters a little to let the morning light shine in, yet not too much, so as not to disturb Katriona's sleep.

Ah, it was a beautiful morning. The birds were singing and the fresh smell of the dew on the grass and the fragrance of the flowers lingered in the air. How beautiful. It brought back memories of his youth and life on the isle. He had always liked the early morning and its beauties.

Angus looked out into the sky, watching the changing hues in the sunrise. He could smell some food being cooked down the street and the smell of

freshly baked bread was giving him an appetite. He could hear the sound of people, slaves hurrying off on some errand for their masters, and merchants hustling through the streets towards some market or another.

Then some movement on the bed brought his thoughts back to Katriona. She started to stir, moving and stretching on the bed. The light was caressing her body in waves as it shimmered through the half-opened shutters onto the bed.

Katriona slowly opened her eyes, rubbing them and blinking against the light. Then she looked around the room. Her eyes stopped when she came to Angus, his silhouetted form against the window. She smiled as she became aware of his eyes studying her, then coyly she motioned to the bed, patting it with her hand.

Angus needed no further hints.



The governor was shocked at the report of Decius' death. His body, along with that of two of his men, had been found at the docks. From all appearances, the men had slain each other.

"Unbelievable!" the governor exclaimed. "Why on earth would Decius have slain his own escort?" He knew he could not submit such a report or conclusion to Rome. That could only bring the suspicion of Tigellinus on himself. "No, you fools, it was those Christians of his that he was pursuing. They committed the murders, and in all their craftiness made it look like the men had slain each other. Scribe, take down a message for me to the Praetorian Prefect. Inform him that Decius Lucian Metellus, who was conducting an investigation against Christians here in Athens, was ambushed and slain along with two soldiers of Rome. The perpetrators of the crime are being pursued and will be brought to justice with all possible haste. And

then put all the usual formalities in the message and send it off to Rome at once."



Arrius rose early, contemplating the news he had heard the evening before about Lavinia. He had not seen her since the Christian gathering, and just yesterday had been contacted by her father Laevinus about her whereabouts. The last they had heard from Lavinia was that she was to meet with Arrius, and since then she had not been seen.

Arrius wondered if indeed she had become a Christian, and if that perhaps had something to do with her sudden and mysterious disappearance. He hoped nothing bad had befallen her. *I must try to contact the Christians again. Perhaps they will know what has become of her*, he mentally noted.

He also wondered if her disappearance had had anything to do with the mysterious death of Decius that he had been informed of late the previous night.

A servant entered, breaking Arrius' train of thought and informing him that a message had arrived from the governor, inviting him to a feast that was to be held at the governor's residence. The invitation was a surprise but not totally unexpected. Since his arrival in Athens Arrius had been meeting many important men of the city in the course of his business, and all were thirsty for knowledge of what was happening in Rome.

Arrius dismissed the servant and returned to his room. He entered it to see the shapely form of Ruth sitting up in bed. She looked enchanting in the early morning light, and he stood for a moment transfixed by the sight of her fresh natural beauty.

"Good morning," he said with a smile. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you, Arrius. And thank you also for the beautiful dress you left on the bed for me."

“It is nothing, Ruth. It is not the clothes that make the person, for whether you wore rags like a beggar or rich gowns like an empress, you would be stunning. Your spirit radiates an inner beauty that puts all else in darkness.”

Ruth lowered her eyes, a little embarrassed at his compliments.

Such innocence and humility, thought Arrius. She is like a breath of fresh air in my stale life. God did indeed take an angel from His heavens when He created her. There was such concern and love within those dark eyes. It was like Arrius partook of some of the Lord’s Spirit whenever he looked at her.

“Ruth,” he said, “I have just received a letter of invitation to the governor’s feast tonight. There will be many important people there. I would like for you to be at my side and accompany me.”

“Oh, Arrius, I couldn’t. I would be so out of place.”

“Ruth, you needn’t worry. Your beauty would silence any that would question your place. You will be with me, that will be place enough for most of these men.”

“But what of our safety? I am still wanted in Rome. I might be recognized.”

“I have not heard of any arrivals from Rome save Decius, who I heard was murdered under mysterious circumstances last night. I believe he was the only one still intent on seeking you. And I cannot hide you forever. The arrival of Decius turned the tide, for awhile, against the Christians. Perhaps now that he is dead, we can slowly turn the tide again. They need but see your beauty—both that of your flesh which will open their eyes to you, and that of your spirit, which will open their hearts to you. I am sure they will be impressed in time, as I was, to learn that your beauty comes from being a Christian, and perhaps this is why God has brought us to this city

at such a time as this.”



Angus and Katriona enjoyed the brisk walk to Arrius’ home. The air was cool and fresh. The street was busy with all the morning traffic of merchants and servants rushing back and forth on errands to and from the market. A few stray dogs were having a fight as a couple of young boys laughed and goaded them. A troop of soldiers marched past on their way to some distant post.

As they walked, Angus and Katriona spoke of many things, and Angus learned that Aleric was alive and well. It was good news, and to hear that they were on their way to Ephesus, where they would hopefully find a new life, was the best of all. They spoke of the many things God had done in their lives since being taken from the isle, and how amazing it was that they had found each other after all this time—and found that they loved each other.

Arrius was happy to see them and showed them to the garden where, after a few exchanges of greetings and pleasantries, they spoke of further arrangements regarding their travels to Gaul. Their first move would be towards Corinth, and Arrius immediately suggested that they stay in the house of an old friend of his family, Horace Decimus.

Horace had been very active and ambitious in politics in his youth, but soon became disillusioned with the corruption he saw and the plight of the poor. He did not last long as a politician, and contented himself with various studies, and even undertook to become a writer of histories. He now lived alone with some servants in a large villa outside Corinth that had belonged to his father. He was a quiet man, used to solitude and not one for company.

But Arrius was sure Horace would not object to having guests for a few weeks, and it would provide a secluded and remote place for Angus and Katriona

to stay while they sought for a ship that could take them to Gaul. It was a beautiful property and had large gardens and many secluded spots within the compound where, as a child, Arrius had often played hide and seek with his brothers, and as a man, had come to with more intimate companions, he added with a knowing wink at the couple—that brought a smile to Katriona's face, and redness to Angus' ears.

After the two left, Ruth and Arrius discussed their plan for the governor's party, and Arrius coached Ruth as to what to say, and what topics to avoid speaking about.



All had gone well at the feast. Ruth had not been as nervous as she had suspected and very few questions were asked as most of the people took her to be just another concubine and left her alone. There were many concubines and mistresses of the important officials there, as well as wives and slaves and servants, so she had not aroused too much curiosity. She had been able to witness discreetly to several of the slaves and concubines there but not to any officials.

After the main meal and entertainment Arrius had left for a few moments, as he had been called to see the governor and Ruth had walked out onto the veranda to get fresh air. It was quiet and no one was there, so she wandered further into the large adjoining garden. It was nice in the moonlight. The whole garden was tinged with a silver glow. Ruth walked along the path of beautiful pebbles over to the pool and played with her fingers in the water, watching the ripples and reminiscing of her childhood.

Then after a few moments she arose and walked over to the rosebushes. She enjoyed the smell of fresh roses. They were like a perfume created in

Heaven. There was a cool breeze that blew her hair and lightened her spirits.

Along the path she came to a marble bench near the bushes with a view of the pool lit by the gleaming moonlight. It was refreshing to forget all her worries and relax. So caught up in her thoughts was she that she did not hear the sound of footsteps behind her until she was roughly grabbed by the arm and swung round.

She recognized the man, though it took her a few moments to realize from where. And then she gasped in shock. He was Senator Epidius from Rome, who had often done business with her father.

Meanwhile his eyes had been devouring Ruth with lust, and he cackled, "How did you get in here, my pretty one?"

His fingers brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "I recognize you. You are the daughter of Jacob the merchant, whose family was arrested for being Christian conspirators—but you escaped, didn't you?" His hand twisted Ruth's arm, causing immense pain.

Slowly his other hand moved to her neck and his finger started to trace its way down her neck. She shivered with fear.

"How did you get out of Rome?" he questioned. "Ha! Don't worry, my little flower. I won't betray you! You have nothing to fear from me, for I am sure we can come to some little agreement."

Epidius leaned forward, nibbling her ear as he whispered crude remarks in her ear. As his hand began to caress her thigh, she shivered again, more from disgust than fear. His breathing was quickening, his wandering eyes and hands betraying his lusts. She felt like screaming, but realized that he was a senator, and that being as she was and who she was, none of the others would think much of the senator's actions towards her.

“There is a nice quiet spot over by the vines, my little one,” he suggested as he tugged at her dress.

She prayed silently in desperation. *Dear Jesus, help me! If I must suffer so, give me the grace, but if possible, Lord, please deliver me from this beast.*

“I would advise you, Senator, to release the girl if you value your life,” a voice suddenly called from behind them.

Epidius spun around, releasing Ruth, and found himself staring into the stern gaze of Arrius, whom he did not recognize.

“What did you say?” Epidius retorted. “Do you know who I am? How dare you speak to me like that?”

“This girl belongs to me, Senator. You may not know me, but I know you quite well—and although you may be a man of influence, you will find that I am also. You are probably better acquainted with my cousin than myself.”

Something in the tone of the man’s voice brought fear to Epidius. “Who is your cousin?” Epidius asked, becoming more uncertain under his challenger’s stare.

“His name is Ofonius Tigellinus. I believe you must know of him. He is the prefect of the Praetorian Guard!”

Epidius swallowed and quivered a little. His face grew pale as death itself, for to make an enemy of Tigellinus was to sign one’s own death warrant.

“I am most sorry. It was but a mistake,” Epidius stammered. “I took the girl for someone else. I apologize. There was no harm done. It was all a mistake.”

Arrius looked on the man with a mixture of anger, disgust, and pity, then snarled, “Go then, Senator, and see it does not happen again, for I do not forget easily.”

The senator beat a hasty retreat to the safety of

the festivities and Arrius breathed a sigh of relief.

As Epidius left, Ruth ran over to Arrius, throwing herself into his arms, and finding comfort in the safety of his caresses. “Oh Arrius, I was so frightened,” she said, her body trembling in his arms.

“Do not worry, my little one. You are safe now. I see, though, that even here in Athens the danger of Rome still lurks. If one has recognized you, then others may also in the future. Epidius I was able to frighten, as he is a cowardly creature, and I do not believe we shall hear more of the matter from him. But the next time I may not be able to bluff my way through successfully. I feel it would be wise for us to also make plans to go elsewhere—perhaps even Thessalonica, until we can make further plans of what we want to do.”

“Of what God wants us to do,” Ruth said, embracing Arrius more closely.

PREPARATIONS

Back in Rome, Nero had been having troubled sleep. For two weeks he had had the same dream on and off. He had dreamt of his mother and his first wife. They had been breaking into his room, knives in their hands, screaming, "Revenge! We have come for revenge." He had run out into the garden screaming for Tigellinus and the guards but they were not there. Instead hordes of Christians came running towards him. "Your time has come, Nero!" they cried out. "Your blood is required." Then he would look up to see the Christians he was burning as living torches in his garden, and they laughed as he stared at them. Then they started to climb down, advancing to him. "You did not kill us, Nero. You only delivered us. But now your time approaches and is at hand." Then Nero would wake in a cold sweat and shake on his bed in fear.

What did it mean? Why was he troubled with the same dream over and over again?

Nero called his guards and asked for them to send for Tigellinus, who came to the room as soon as he was summoned.

"What news of these Christians, Tigellinus?" he shouted, his voice quaking with fear.

"They are still crawling out of the woodwork like

cockroaches. The more we kill, the more we find. They have infiltrated our courts so it is possible they have informers within our ranks.”

“When is this Tribune Marcus coming? Surely Claudius has arrived by now to take his place? He will root them out like he did the rebels in Britannia.”

“Our last message indicated that Claudius had indeed arrived, and that Marcus was in the process of arranging his journey to Rome.”

“I must see him at once, Tigellinus. As soon as he arrives have him brought to me. The loss of Alexis was a sad one, but Marcus has shown the same talents, and proven his loyalty to Rome. We can no longer trust those we trusted in before. We must bring those who have heard little of these Christians, and who will not be afraid to do all in their power to destroy them, as you do, Tigellinus. If only Rome had more men like you.”

Tigellinus was surprised at the fear he saw in Nero’s eyes when he spoke of the Christians. *This tribune had better live up to his reputation, or he will not survive Nero’s disappointment*, Tigellinus thought.



Angus enjoyed the change of being able to relax and forget all that had happened. The villa in Corinth was even more beautiful than Arrius had described to them.

Horace Decimus was as Arrius had described him—and totally absorbed in his own world. He asked few questions and left them to do as they wished. He was for the most part of each day busy compiling history books and books on geography. From the few times they did get to talk Angus found him a knowledgeable man with a keen sense of humor.

In the evenings Horace would retire early, and

then rise before dawn to walk in his garden before he would begin his work. So it went on for their entire stay.

Angus and Katriona ventured out into Corinth a couple of times to visit, and to meet with Christians that Philip had told him about, including a couple by the name of Aquilla and Priscilla. They also took some time to look around and see the many temples and buildings that were there. Angus was interested in architecture and the art of building, for it was something lacking in his homeland. He hoped to learn more about building so that he could one day possibly build a tower like the Brochs in the Orkney’s to protect his people in the isles.

They passed by the Temple of Aphrodite. It was beautiful and filled with priestesses who beckoned Angus to sample the pleasures of the goddess. Then he came to the Temple of Apollo. It was busy with crowds of people coming and going. It reminded Angus of the Temple of the Vestal Virgins in Rome. The Temples were packed with people and beautiful to behold. Angus marveled at the beauty and riches that he saw, yet at the same time how dead and empty spiritually it all was. It was amazing how much money and work they put into buildings for their gods of stone; it would be so much more useful to invest in building for the poor of the land rather than spend it all on dead statues of stone and gold.

Besides these few visits to the city they stayed at Horace’s villa and walked in the gardens. There were a few servants who tended the garden but mainly the part near the house, and the rest was left in a wild state. It was there that they had many moments of fun and excitement together like a couple of children hiding and playing in the garden’s hidden recesses.

Today Angus had risen earlier than usual and gone for some time alone in the garden. He had felt burdened about their situation and asked the Lord to

show him if they were going the right direction. After his time in prayer he wandered around admiring the beauties of the garden and stopped as he came to a beautiful stream that ran through the property.

He watched the ripples of the stream. How peaceful and serene it was. He remembered as a youth how he used to see how many times he could get stones to skip across the water. He smiled as a frog hopped out and took refuge in the bushes.

Feeling tempted by the refreshing water he stripped off his clothes and went in for a dip. It was fresh and cool. His skin tingled and he felt exhilarated. It was hard to imagine that not so long ago he had been fighting for his life. Now here he was, seemingly without a care in the world.

After swimming for some time he started to climb out when he noticed his clothes were not where he thought he had left them. He started to look around in case he had put them elsewhere but he could see no sign of them. Then he noticed, over to the left amongst a clump of trees, Katriona sitting on a rock near some rose bushes with a smile on her lips and a sparkle in her eyes.

She looked like one of the statues of the Greek goddesses, with her black hair blowing in the wind and her deep green eyes sparkling in the light. She was dressed in a short Grecian dress, fastened at the shoulders. She was playing with a rose between her fingers and laughed as she saw his look of surprise.

“Come now, Angus. You spied on me while I bathed, so now it’s my turn.” She had an impish grin on her face and he looked over and guessed she had hidden his clothes.

“What have you done with my clothes?” he asked.

Katriona didn’t answer.

Angus started toward her.

“You think I’m just going to tell you?” she

taunted him.

Angus smiled. So she was in the mood for some play. After chasing her around for awhile, dodging in and out of the bushes, he lunged at her and brought her to the ground on a clump of soft grass, where they rolled over and wrestled in play. He finally managed to get on top of her, holding her hands tight in his as she screamed out between her laughing.

“I surrender! I surrender! They’re hidden behind the stone fountain.”

But Angus didn’t move. He sat on top of her, looking into her soft and inviting eyes. Her hair was disheveled and some grass was mixed in with it. She had a smile on her lips and a twinkle in her eye. Soon the two of them were lost in their passion.

So lost were they, and so engaged in their lovemaking, that they did not hear the approach of Horace. He stumbled onto them as he wandered through the garden on his morning stroll, much to their surprise.

“Oh ... I didn’t know you were ... I’m sorry ... I mean ... hmm,” he stammered in his embarrassment.

Katriona reached over and pulled her gown over to her, covering herself a little while Angus looked totally embarrassed and dumbfounded. His face and ears reddened and he was lost for words.

“I’ll ... hmm ... well ... I’ll see you at the house for breakfast!” Horace muttered, and turned away to head back.

Katriona smiled at Angus’ discomfort. She was not one to get embarrassed, he remembered. Yes, she was quite a character, and he loved her.

“So you think it’s funny?” Angus said. “Well, we’ll see how you like it!” He laughed and grabbed her clothes out of her hands, then jumped up and snatched his own from behind the fountain as he dashed back to the house, leaving her standing naked in the garden.

When she arrived at breakfast later she was not perturbed in the least and Angus saw that his trick had not worked as he'd imagined. She was not nearly so concerned about things like that. Still, they had learned one lesson and were more careful when they were alone in the garden from that day on, avoiding places where Horace might walk.

Horace made no mention of the incident, remembering the days of his own youth, but a twinkle shone in his eyes that they had not seen before.

As Angus and Katriona talked together later that night, Angus told her of the prayer in the garden and she mentioned about a dream she had had in which she saw her father Lochiel. He was sad and crying out for help for his people. As she had sat there under the shade of the old tree she had been moved to tears as she thought of him and her family.

"I believe, Angus, that we are being called back to our isle to minister, but we are not ready yet. Maybe in Gaul we will have the time to grow together in His love so that we can be a strong team for Him."

"Aye, that could well be, lass, for I too feel strongly we should make our way to the isle, yet I feel it is not yet the time. I hope you don't mind my trick on you this morning?" he asked hesitantly.

"Mind? No Angus. I played the trick first, remember? I love you, Angus, and I don't think you would do anything to be spiteful to me. I knew it was all in fun, like my trick on you." She moved closer and kissed him. "Now then, Angus, how about some dinner?"



It was a few weeks later that Angus and Katriona had found a ship that would be leaving to Gaul, and Arrius and Ruth came to bid them farewell.

As they dined that last evening, Arrius brought up the mention of Jesus to see Horace's reaction.

He was vaguely interested and did not seem to know very much about the Christian phenomenon, and brought up the teachings of many of the famous philosophers and teachers. Arrius used the opportunity to talk about Jesus and the Christian belief.

Although Horace never declared a decision, he did agree with a lot of what Arrius spoke of, and Arrius decided to spend some time there whenever possible to speak to Horace more about the words and teachings of Jesus as he learned of them himself, and to perhaps try to bring this man also to the Christian faith.

The next morning Arrius and Ruth saw Angus and Katriona to their ship, and after bidding them farewell, returned to Athens to make plans for their own travels.

CODEX IV

ANNO DOMINI 68

DESTINIES

The year was now 68 A.D. The place was Gaul. It was a cold wintry day and snow lay thick on the ground. There was a strong wind blowing outside, chilling to the bone. The smell of fresh pine and fir filled the air.

Inside the house, logs were blazing and crackling in the fireplace, and the smell of freshly roasted meat filled the air. There was noise of the clattering of pots and pans in the kitchen and laughter echoed all around the house. It was a pleasant villa with large grounds and a small stream trickling down the hillside just outside the gate. A couple of hunting dogs were munching on some bones on the porch, oblivious to the noise within.

The inside of the villa was sparsely decorated with little furniture or trappings—not what one would expect of the house of a Roman noble. Valeria and her son Paulus were sitting at the table eating some fruit and talking with Angus, Katriona, and their two-year-old son Philip. It had been nearly three years since Angus and his family arrived there. Since their arrival it had been an eventful time in all of their lives.

They had just received news from Rome via a courier that made them thankful for how the Lord

had helped them to escape. There had been a great purging in Rome, not only of the Christians but of any who stood in opposition to Nero. Many had died, yet still they could not help but see God's mighty hand in it, for from all reports the church was growing stronger than ever.

Nero was still ruling with an iron hand, and his right hand—his hand of death—the Praetorian Prefect Ofonius Tigellinus, was persecuting the church with a vengeance. Ever since a plot to overthrow Nero by the military had been discovered, Tigellinus had ruled with even more power than before.

From the accounts they heard it seemed that Senator Seneca had committed suicide. It was believed to have been at the behest of Nero, who suspected his involvement in the conspiracy.

Petronius the Consul had also met his fate—purportedly at the instigation of Tigellinus, who was jealous of him.

Centurion Cornelius and Centurion Bruno—who had been good friends of Claudius—had been suspected to be involved in the army conspiracy to kill Nero, and both of them had been executed. It was indeed sad news when good men like them perished like flies in Nero's web of informers and deceivers.

Yes, life in Rome was getting harder. The news was that Paul had now been executed, and Peter—who had come all the way from Babylon to help encourage and strengthen the brethren during this time of trouble—had also met the same fate, was most disheartening.

Senator Quinton had been converted by Martha, his concubine, and was a strong force in Rome working to help ease the situation—especially since Senator Gaius and his wife Helvia had been killed for being Christians and their properties confiscated by Nero.

Thankfully Gaius had foreseen the trouble and had arranged for his properties in Gaul to be officially deeded to Tribune Claudius, and therefore they had managed to keep the farms and business Gaius had given to Valeria to look after.

Tribune Marcus¹ had arrived in Rome some months after Claudius had left, and was later converted by Martha and Camilla—only to have to flee from Rome to escape with his life from the wrath of Tigellinus and Nero. Martha was still going strong in Rome, and the church there grew—albeit secretly—day by day.

Then at last they heard some news also of Aleric, Philip, and Lavinia. It seemed they had gone to Babylon to continue the work already started there by Peter.

Coilus and Yasmine had followed them, and then continued east to Persia and other lands known to Yasmine with one of the original apostles, Thomas by name.

Arrius and Ruth were now helping to lead the churches in Thessalonica and the surrounding area along with Stephanas and Fortunatus.

Demetrius and Dorcas were busy helping James with the church in Athens after they had to flee Rome due to the persecution.

It was good to hear all that the Lord was doing and how His Word continued to spread abroad.

Meanwhile, back in Gaul, Angus and Katriona had also been busy. They had established several small churches in the surrounding countryside, gaining valuable experience in sharing the words and teachings of Christ to prepare them for their eventual return to their own lands.

Tribune Claudius, still stationed in Britannia, had come to visit his wife and friends in Gaul twice.

¹ *Tribune Marcus: For the story of Marcus' adventures in Rome see "The Tribune's Assignment" in the Heaven's Library book Overcomers*

His position and duties had not allowed him much opportunity to openly speak of Christ or form any cohesive group of followers, but he had discovered and done what he could to help and protect a newly forming church in Camulodinium.

Now Valeria had received word that Claudius was again coming for a visit, and the household looked forward to it with great anticipation.

But even before the message had arrived, Katriona had seen another vision of her and Angus returning to Britannia with Claudius, and when Valeria informed Angus and Katriona that Claudius was coming for another visit, they both felt that the time had come for them to leave Gaul. What would await them in Britannia and their own isle they could only guess. They knew it would not be easy to turn people away from their superstitions and the influence of the Druids. Even the Romans had tried to eradicate the Druid worship, but still it continued, though it was not as powerful as it once had been.

But in spite of the seemingly impossible task ahead of them, Angus and Katriona knew that it was the mission God had called them to and been preparing them for all this time. That, along with the visions Katriona had received those many years ago, kept them hopeful that this was God's doing, and that He would work on their behalf to accomplish His purpose through them, weak and incapable though they still felt.

They would, of course, miss Valeria greatly, as they had all grown close to each other over the years. Young Philip looked on Paulus as his older brother, and the two had become inseparable friends. Though they all knew it would be difficult to say farewell, they also knew that the time had come, that God was calling, and they needed to follow.



Time passed quickly. The tribune arrived and

spent an enjoyable month in Gaul with his and Angus' families. Too soon the time had come for Claudius to return, and for Angus and his family to go with him.

After a tearful farewell they headed off to the port. It was a long journey, but the travelers remained in high spirits, and little Philip kept them all amused with his constant chatter and endless questions about everything they saw and rode past.

After arriving in the small and recently established Roman port town of Gesoriacum¹, they stayed for a few days at a local inn, awaiting the departure of their ship.

It was evening and Angus and Katriona had gone out to enjoy a quiet stroll along the beach before dark. Claudius had gone to inquire after news of the ship, and Philip was staying at the inn with one of Valeria's servants who had joined them for the journey but would return home with the cart after the others had departed.

Angus and Katriona began making their way back home from their walk when they passed some drunken soldiers. They moved to the side as the revelers passed them by, then continued on their way until a shout stopped them.

"Hey wait! I know you! You are that gladiator from Rome. I saw you in the arena, when you killed those great beasts!"

"Isn't there a price on his head?" another suggested.

"Then let's remove it for him!" said a third with a loud laugh.

"I get the girl when we're done!" the last man added.

Angus grew tense. Even though the four soldiers were clearly drunk, it would not be an easy fight.

¹ *Gesoriacum*: Modern Boulogne-sur-mer on the upper west coast of France

The drunk soldiers pulled out their swords and moved towards Angus, laughing.

Angus stepped between Katriona and the men, and pulled out the as-yet unused sword that Claudius had given him.

The attackers were instantly upon him. It had been a long time since Angus had used a sword but thankfully—due largely to the drunken state of the men—he was able to hold his own. One of the swords broke through, slightly cutting Angus on his arm. In return, his sword struck flesh in the man's thigh, sending him falling to the ground and clutching himself.

The others backed away for a moment. Angus was giving them more of a fight than they had expected.

The noise of approaching footsteps drew the attention of the men behind them, where Angus noticed Claudius running towards the group.

Seeing he was a tribune, the first of the soldiers called out to him. "Tribune, this man is wanted in Rome. There is a fine price to be had for his capture. Help us take him!"

"I am afraid, my friends, that you have recognized wrongly. This man is my friend."

"But I was in the arena itself when he was led in. I know this is the man," the first said again.

"In that case," Claudius answered, "I am afraid I cannot let you or your friends live to tell of it." And with that, Claudius drew his sword.

The men paled, realizing what was happening, and that they were now caught between two obviously experienced fighters.

They gripped their swords tighter, and fought as well as they could, but in the end, the four of them lay dead, and Claudius and Angus stood next to each other, looking down at the bodies.

Angus put his hand on Claudius' shoulder and

thanked him. "I hope that this is not a sign of what is waiting for me, Claudius. I had thought to have put life by the sword behind me."

"I am sorry, Angus. But there was little else we could have done. Men as these will stop at nothing to seize a possible reward, and letting them live could have only meant danger for both of us. It may seem cruel, but it was better that they die than we."

Seeing a cloud of doubt and hesitation come over Angus, Claudius continued, "You will be sailing into certain uncertainty by returning to your island, my friend. Even Rome has never extended its rule as far as your isles. We have about as much trouble as we can handle in the regions we already hold without seeking to expand further at this point.

"Once you are on your own, Angus, your God will be your only protection. I wish that I could send a legion of men to go with you, to help you, but alas I cannot. Or I would go with you, but again, I cannot. But I can guarantee that your new ideas and religion will not be met with a lot of favor. They will more likely see you as a Roman spy, and your teachings as the influence of Rome, their enemy. You will likely need to be prepared to kill or be killed, and if you are not, then perhaps it is best to reconsider your plan."

Angus hung his head, realizing the truth in what Claudius said. Then he looked back up, and spoke. "Claudius, I owe you much. Your family has helped and sustained me these past years away from my home. I am most grateful, and although I know not what awaits us in my lands, I realize that we will be in the hands of God alone. But this one thing I can say with confidence: God had called us to those lands, and thus He has a plan for keeping us within them. I cannot believe that He would send us there only to embrace a quick death. He has a plan, and we need but follow it. And if His plan called for Roman legions to accompany us, He would have provided them. But

seeing as He has not, we must go simply as we have been called, trusting God to care for us.”

Claudius clasped his hands on the man’s shoulder. “Angus, you have nothing to thank me for. It is you who twice saved my family, and I know God is with you. Perhaps I forgot in my haste to come to your rescue. But I know He is with you, and I pity those who dare oppose you. Now come, let us return home and eat and rest, for tomorrow we sail to Abonae¹.”



Angus lay on his bed but could not sleep. He was troubled over the events of the day and felt unprepared for the future. Katriona awoke in the early morning to find him still sitting up near the window, watching the early morning rays.

She rose up and moved over to his side. As she approached he turned and remembered when he had peeked at her while she bathed in the burn. She was more beautiful now than ever, he thought. Motherhood had brought out a special glow in her. He watched as her green eyes sparkled in the light. Aye, she was a bonny lass and he was indeed blessed.

Angus reached out and drew her near to him. Then he turned and looked out the window again, pointing into the colorful sky.

“See the sky, my love? I have always loved the sunrise. It is like a glimpse into God’s great realm. The colors are always so different each morning, just like a new picture painted as a sign of God’s love for us. Just as when I look at you I think of how much God must love me, to give me such a one as you.”

“Angus, you flatter me, for I am nothing. But I am thankful to be with you, here and now—and as for the future, whatever it holds, we will face it together.”

“Let the cares of tomorrow be for tomorrow,” Angus said with a sigh.

He glanced over at little Philip, who was lying peacefully asleep in the corner of the room. A smile came to the child’s lips as if he was beholding the angels of Heaven.



The winds were howling and the waves crashed as the small coble* was lowered down over the side into the waters of the Little Minch that separated Angus’ isle from the Highlands in the east. The captain had taken considerable risk taking his ship this far north from Abonae, but a generous gift from Claudius had helped him to agree. Now he had taken his ship as far as he dared in this weather. He did not want to risk bringing it any closer to land, and so Angus had insisted on taking the coble rather than turn back now.

The captain had argued at first, but with a little more gold to cover the loss of the small vessel he agreed. And so now the coble, carrying Angus, Katriona, little Philip, and all their supplies, was being lowered into the water.

Angus rowed with all his might. It had been a long time since he had handled an oar, and even though he had been in worse storms than this in the past he had not had a woman and child with him. But little Philip was not frightened and looked at his father with a trusting look of faith. Katriona also showed no fear, but uttered a silent prayer for Angus’ strength.

The waves lashed the coble, sending it reeling as a spray of salt water drenched them. Angus heaved with all his strength and skill, fighting against the growing storm. By and by, land came into sight, and Angus managed to steer the vessel into the safety of a sheltered cove. There they clambered ashore, slipping on the wet seaweed that tangled around the

¹ *Abonae: Modern Sea Hills in Bristol, England*

rocks beneath their feet, and managed to find some shelter under a rocky edge along the sand.

It took another hour after they had landed for the storm to die down, and once the weather had calmed they ventured out and surveyed the land. With deep stirrings of distant memories, Angus recognized the place and guessed that they were only about a day's journey from Lochiel's camp. Both Angus and Katriona felt excited and nervous, but kept calm so as not to worry little Philip. After all, the Lord was with them and had proven His great power.

After retrieving their supplies, Angus pulled the coble into the shelter of the rocks, where he covered it with broken shrubs and seaweed. Then, after making bundles of their supplies, they started up the brae and off along the machair towards where the camp would be.

It was a rough journey and the ground was soft and boggy. It was still chilly and damp and Angus hoped they would not catch cold, for all their clothes and belongings had become damp from their boat trip. But God's hand was on them, and His continued protection and leading became evident, as the first person they met on their journey after just a few hours was Lachie.

It was a complete shock for the whistling Lachie to suddenly round the bend and find himself staring straight into the eyes of Angus.

It had been six long years, but Angus had not changed much. His hair and moustache had grown back. The only difference was his clothes and an older look on his face. Katriona he recognized immediately.

"By all the gods, am I being haunted?" he exclaimed, dropping his packages. "Are ye a ghaist come to haunt these shores?"

Seeing his friends' amused grins, a smile came to his face. "No. By the gods, you're no ghaist! It's

really you! Real flesh and blood! By the gods, it is you, Angus! Alive and home again! Nielbauld always swore his amulet would bring you home, and now it has. There will be great celebration at the camp tonight."

Then, spying the wee bairn in Katriona's arms, and looking back to Angus, Lachie exclaimed, "By the heavens! You have married the lass and have a wee bairn! What will Lochiel say?"

"Dinna ye worry, old friend. I'll speak to him!" Angus replied with a calm confidence that surprised Lachie.

Lachie looked intensely at Angus, noticing the visible scars and a look in his eyes that showed neither fear nor recklessness.

"Aye, lad, I do believe ye will. Ye have changed, man. It's no the laddie I kenned that stands before me now. Aye, lad, and I suspect your return bodes other changes as well, and this I promise, Angus, by all the gods, I am with ye."

BACK HOME

The arrival of Angus and Katriona was met with such a commotion as the clann had never before seen. The guards blew their horns, and people poured out from all corners of the village to see them. Soon it was such a noisy gathering that finally Lochiel pulled out his large sword and whacked it loudly several times against a nearby shield—bringing an instant quiet to the assembly.

He looked sternly at Katriona, then Angus, and finally to the child. His hard eyes softened and grew misty, and then he spoke. “You’ll come to my home and we will speak together.” Then, looking to all the others huddled around them, he shouted gruffly, “You will leave back to your work. Tonight we’ll hear the news at the fire as we eat. Now off with you all!”

As Angus and Katriona sat together with Lochiel in his hut, Angus learnt that the rest of his immediate family was now dead. His mother Anu had been the last to pass away just three months ago from a sickness that had swept the village. Angus was heartbroken, but resigned himself to the fact that there was nothing he could do about it.

Lochiel watched everything and his mind was passing judgment on all he saw. “Now it is time for you to speak,” he said, “for I can see that there is

much that has happened in the years that you both have been gone. Now you, Angus—you speak first.”

So Angus began his tale and after two hours came to an end. Lochiel said nothing but rubbed his large beard with his fingers, then looked to Katriona and nodded. It was her turn, and she began to explain all she had gone through. Angus watched Lochiel and could see that his emotions were being wrenched as he heard of this new God they brought with them.

Lochiel had changed a lot over the years. He was much older, but it was more than that. Time had played hard on him. His face showed that he had suffered much not only in physical hardships but emotional hardships as well—the anguish and pain of those who must care for others; the burdens of leadership, of the truly great who give their all for others.

When Katriona finished, Lochiel sat silent for some time, then spoke. “Angus, I can see you have become a man. I had thought no man here worthy of my daughter at one time. My heart was broken when the Romans took her, but there was nothing I could do. My wife died of a broken heart, and my only son Connan swore vengeance on them. Aye, he died in a battle against Roman raiders some years ago. I felt as though my whole life had fallen apart and I was left alone.”

Lochiel paused, seemingly emotionally distressed, then pulled himself together and continued.

“I have listened to you both and I see in you a man who is strong and kind, a man with wisdom and worthy of my daughter. You speak of this God ... you speak of this Jesus. I can feel from your talking that this has been what made you what you are. I see also you no longer wear the Mistletoe?” Lochiel’s fingers rubbed an amulet of his own engraved with the sign of the Mistletoe. “Aye, I received this when

I was young too, Angus, as a gift from a Druid. He promised me it would bring me protection and long life. Well, I have had both, but I have never believed it was because of this piece of metal.

“I know these Druids. They are men like you and I, and they try to control the people through their use of fear. Yes, they have learnt some strange arts that endow them with some powers, but they know not the burdens of caring for a clann, of caring for people. They seek only power, control, and order—their order. Your words, Angus, are good. They speak of love, of care. And yet they are going to be a danger, and perceived as a threat by the Druids, were they to hear of them.

“Nielbauld is not at the moment in our region, but no man knows when he may come or go. He has long said you would return, but I know now that when he sees you, he will not be pleased, and this I fear, for his wrath shall be against all of us because of you. As pleased as I am to see you, and grateful as I am for the safe return of my daughter, the matter of your presence here becomes a weighty one, and one that must be presented before the counsel and the clann.

“I can guarantee your safety for the moment, but word will reach the Druid and when he returns, there is no telling what might follow. But one thing I can promise you—I will stand by you.”



When mealtime came, Angus and Katriona were the center of attraction. First Calum the bard sang some ballant* of ancient glory, of the great warriors and their fights with giants and monsters. Then, as he came to an end, it was time for Angus and Katriona to stand up and relate their tale. It was to a mixed reception that they spoke. At first there was great joy and merriment, then as their story unfolded and Angus spoke of becoming a Christian,

some of the men started to murmur.

One of them, Diarmid, exclaimed angrily, "If Nielbauld were here he'd flay you! You have become as one of those Romans or Iverni seeking after other gods. The gods of our fathers are good enough for us! Enough of this Jesus! Angus has been fyled* by these foreign devils!"

Some other rumblings from the crowd echoed similar feelings as they began to think Angus had turned from his people. Diarmid was a rudas* fellow, and large as an ox. He was known to be thrawn* and was now roting* like a madman causing dirdum* among the crowd.

"Enough!" shouted Lochiel, his strong voice breaking through the angry shouts. "There will be none of this!" He pulled out his glaive* and moved over, positioning himself beside Angus. Lachie did likewise, and then Eochaid the Great followed—a warrior who had gained a reputation by defeating the Iverni raiders three times—as did his brother Balor. Then Ossian the Red, Domnal, and Culann who was Lochiel's cousin, moved out and joined them also. All of them stood stone faced with glaive and gullie drawn before the crowd.

There was a shauchling* of feet from the remaining men as they eased away from Lochiel and the other warriors.

Culann now spoke out. "You speak loud, Diarmid, and stir the hearts of the men, but I say listen! Let Angus finish his tale. You canna judge a man unless ye let him say his piece. There will be no one laying hands on him till he's done or they'll answer to me!"

Culann was feared by all. He was a man of a short temper and second to none with glaive or gullie. He had won much renown as a fighter in dozens of battles. His cousin Lochiel was also a strong and fearless warrior, despite his age. He could still make

one powerful stramash* if it came to blows.

The murmuring subsided and the crowds went quiet as Angus and Katriona explained what had happened. Then Angus stood up again as the power of the Spirit came upon him and spoke to the hearts of his people.

"You have known me and my family. You know Katriona, who has always had the gift of the second sight. What has happened was foretold and came to pass, for the true God of Heaven willed it. You are all held captive in the chains of fear by the will of the Druid. But there is a more powerful God—an invisible God, but One who is alive and speaks and guides, if we will only listen. It is He we proclaim to you.

"God did not create you to be bound and live in fear. He is a God of love who loved us enough to send His own Son to earth. Jesus told the story once of a great rich chief who had to go and travel in a far country. While he was away, he gave his lands to a steward to farm and work the land till he returned. The servant was to give of the increase of the land and send it to this lord by his servants.

"Now when the workers found the land fruitful they wanted it for themselves and refused to send the chief his due. The chief was a patient man, and sent servant after servant to them, inquiring about his due. Some servants they beat. Some they slew. Finally the lord sent his only son, saying, 'This is my son. They will respect him.'

"But no. When they saw the son, they plotted and killed him, saying, 'Now is the inheritance surely ours.' But the chief came with his armies and slew these wicked men."

The crowd was silent as Angus spoke. They loved a good tale. Some nodded in approval and others hunkered down to relax. Calum was already secretly plucking some notes to find a tune for the tale.

Angus continued. "This Chief was God. He left us these lands to work for Him, and we turned to other gods. Now He has sent His Son, Jesus, who was killed by our sins, yet through His death He saved us from these sins, for He came to give His life that we might know His Father and the gift of everlasting life and salvation through His Name.

"You can come to know Jesus just as we have, and through Him be set free from the shackles of bondage. You have heard how He has done mighty miracles for us, how He delivered me from the jaws of the arena to bring me by a long path to my home. He is a living God who cares for His children and gives them His power, and He wants all men to come to Him. Do not be as the fools who tried to take His Kingdom for themselves, but be wise and give our Lord His due, and so shall we rule with Him, and in the power of His Spirit!"

"Enough of this foolishness!" cried out Gilespie, glowering at Angus. "He speaks against the gods of our fathers! Dinna listen to him! We have seen the power of Nielbauld, but where is the power of this invisible God? Are you ready to face the wrath of Nielbauld? For it will be a mighty fearful thing to behold!

"You beware, Lochiel, for when you stand for this blasphemy you pit yourself against Nielbauld, and even you are no match for him. Your daughter has been bewitched, just as Angus has. Do not fall under their spell also. You may be chief, Lochiel, but if you stand with him you put us against you, for our stronger allegiance is to the Druid."

"Aye it's true!" echoed a host of voices in agreement.

Gilespie continued. "You bring us to variance with our gods, Lochiel. Let not your daughter enchant you with this witchcraft!"

"Enchantment or not, I will slay the first man

who dares to lay hands on either my daughter or Angus!" answered Lochiel, his eyes blazing like a fire as he lifted his glaive.

Lachie did likewise, followed by Eochaid, Balor, Ossian the Red, Domnal and Culann. Gilespie and Diarmid took a step back, knowing they were no match for these seasoned warriors. Instead they called to the others.

"Let it be so. If you will follow our gods, then let us go now to the Druid. All those who stay choose to face the wrath of Nielbauld."

There was a rumbling amongst the people as they each made their choice and separated from each other. Lochiel watched as more than half of the people left with Gilespie and Diarmid.

"Father, I am sorry," said Katriona. "I did not come here to cause you trouble. I thought only to share with you this joy and happiness that I had found. Now I bring destruction and war to our own clann."

"No lass, you're no to wyte*. It's but the will of God." Lochiel's eyes softened and Angus thought for a moment that he had seen a tear there. "My sweet little one, when you were born I knew you were special. As you grew it was known the gods had touched you, for the gift of spae was clearly given to you. I see now that there is an even greater mission given unto you, and that is to proclaim this one true God's truth to our people. You have shown to me there is a power greater than the Druid. Your God who guided and protected you both is indeed the only one. I see in you something I have never had. You have a spirit that bears witness to your words. I look at my grandchild and see the future. Katriona, I will gladly face the hordes of hell. I would walk into the pits of the damned to save you and him.

"Now, enough of all this blethering. We must prepare. Nielbauld will come in force when he hears

of tonight's doings and we must be ready. In the morning we will take the women and children to the cove. For we will make our stand by the high watch where we can command the countryside and they cannot come unseen."

After they made plans they retired for the night and posted guards around the camp. Lochiel was worried that Diarmid might try to murder Angus, for he was a fashious* man and would not stop at a bit of skullduggery. It would be no less than like him to do such a thing. He was a ruthless character and would not think twice about such an act.

Angus and Katriona were shown to Lochiel's hut while he stayed with his cousin nearby. Branween, Lochiel's sister, had made the room nice and sprinkled it with sweet smelling herbs and flowers. There was a large bed covered with beautiful skins and furs, and a lamp burning beside it. There was a fire burning in the center and the smoke whirled up like a funnel and out of a gap in the roof.

Angus stripped off his damp raiment and hung it near the fire, then lay down on the soft skin, letting out a sigh of relief as his aching body sunk into the soft furs. It had been a long hard day and he was glad to be able to rest in the dry comfort of the hut.

Katriona laid Philip down in the corner and soon he was asleep. It had been an exhausting day for him as much as for his parents.

After Philip was asleep Katriona stood up and took off her dress, placing it beside Angus' clothes. She climbed into the bed and cuddled up to Angus under the skin blanket, laying her head on his chest as he played with her long black hair. Sensing his restlessness she whispered, "Dinna worry, Angus. I feel all will work out for good. God did not bring us here to die." They lay silently in each other's arms for a time, listening to the risping* of the shutters as they rubbed together in the wind.

Finally Angus spoke. "I know, Katriona. But still I fear the fight. War is a terrible thing, and I wanted to bring peace to this land—not death."

Katriona nodded and ran her fingers through his hair. As she was playing with his hair Angus put his arm around her and pulled her head up and kissed her. "You're always a comfort and strength to me, like an angel from Heaven."

Katriona looked into his blue eyes, sparkling in the flickering light of the lamp, and seeing in them once more the reason she loved him so much—his love and concern, his gentleness in spirit. Yet what would tomorrow bring, she wondered? It was time to put the future into God's hands and trust Him. After a quick glance at Philip, who was sleeping peacefully and carefree on a bed of windlestrae*, Katriona smiled and gently blew out the lamp.

MISTLETOE OR CROSS

It was another cold wet day and Angus stretched his legs with a climb up the hill overlooking the burn. Aye, it brought back memories. A rich green light was covering everything and the steep heather-covered hills cut into the turquoise sky like purple violets. From his vantage point, he could see in the distance as the machair stretched like molten gold into the sunrise. Then he turned back and joined the others as they started to prepare for their evacuation to the high point.

They trudged along through the soft ground, carrying food and water and other needed items in case of a longer stay.

Lochiel was quiet, and Angus could sense that he was troubled about the situation. His face was hard like granite and his eyes deeply thoughtful. It was quite a burden to bear. As chief he was responsible for the clann, and knew that his decision could bring about the death of all.

Too soon they reached the hill and Domnal took the women and children down to the cove while the men prepared some fortifications on the hilltop.

From the high hill Lachie hunkered down among the rocks on the brae. From there he could see down the boss* where the army was seen coming in the

distance. At first they looked like little ants, but the closer they came the more the immense numbers came into view.

The Druid had gone to the clann of the Heron, for Lachie could make out the painted faces and rough clothes particular to that clann. Yes, of course he would make sure his victory by bringing in those who were perhaps the fiercest adherents to the Druid religion. They were a wild lot, those Herons, and known for their brutality. Lochiel had fought wars with them for ten years before peace was finally obtained.

Lochiel came to the lookout as soon as he heard the news. The men all watched as the army drew closer. They could hear the wild yelling and singing and watched the spears waving in the air.

It would be a fierce battle, and it would be only a miracle of God if any of them would be left alive by noon. Yet no fear showed on their faces. They were used to death and lived with it. They would fight to the last man and neither give or expect quarter.

Angus looked at the approaching army and turned to Lochiel. "Do not strike first, Lochiel. Maybe they can be persuaded to talk. The Druid may yet be won and then we could avoid all this bloodshed."

It took some time for Nielbauld and his men to arrive. Lochiel had chosen his position well. His men held the high ground and had the protection of the rocks on the left side. Behind them was the cliff, and below the mighty ocean waves crashed relentlessly on the rocks. Over to their right was a boggy terrain that was treacherous to cross unless you knew the safe spots. And in front of them was a steep hill.

The advantage was clearly theirs, but the sheer numbers of Nielbauld's army would eventually break through, regardless of how well they fought. It was a hopeless situation, but it was all in the hands of God.

Diarmid and most of the clann of the Heron moved to the front. It seemed he would take the charge up hill.

Gilespie took about twenty men and moved to the right where the bog lay. Angus knew well that Gilespie could find his way through, but it would be at a slow pace, and the bowmen could stop their approach.

Nielbauld the Druid now approached, flanked by six of his fellow Druids. He looked fierce and wild, his snow-white hair flying around him and his long beard reaching to his stomach. He carried a great staff of oak in his hand with sprigs of mistletoe attached. It was an ancient staff, fabled to have been around since creation, though others said it had come from some raiding Iverni.

His hawk-like eyes blazed like a furnace as they scanned the hilltop until they saw Angus. The Druid stared at him for what seemed like an eternity, though what he could see from that great distance would've been minimal.

Finally the Druid raised his voice and bellowed, "Angus! I knew you would come! Ask your friends. I predicted your return. But why must you bring this death with you? I remember well how during the great storm I fell from the high cliff on my way back from the Stone Cross. There was none there and I would have died had you not come and saved me. Do you remember it, Angus?"

"The gods were with you and Danu had brought you to me, for you were called Angus. It was then I gave you the Mistletoe! I promised you it would keep you safe and protect you, and it did! Have you now been blinded by these foreign gods that you deny this power and claim it comes from this Jesus instead?"

Angus stepped forward and shouted back over the great distance. "Nielbauld, I remember well the time you gave me the mistletoe. But it was not your

amulet that brought me home. I destroyed it many years ago, along with all the illusions of this past. It was indeed Jesus who brought me home, for He is the one true living God who answers the cries of those who pray to Him—not like your dead lifeless gods who demand death and sacrifices as worship. Now I have come home to bear witness to this truth, Nielbauld. It is your ways, though they be of old, that are false.”

“Then your witness shall be little more than your death, Angus. See yonder smoke rising from the horizon? That is the sacrifice that brings us victory! We have taken a sacrifice from each of the clanns to the Great goddess Danu, and she will surely guide our hands today in battle like she did in the day that we defeated the Firbolgs and Fomoirans. I have read the signs of our victory in the remains of our sacrifice, and they predict only loss for you. The gods have promised me victory for we are *Tuatha De Dananu!*”

“No, Nielbauld! You speak lies. Your god has blinded your eyes to the truth. You have the power over us not by your gods or sacrifices, but by your sheer numbers. But it is we who shall be the victors, for my Lord has shown me that this very day your soul will be called to judgment. He calls on you now to repent and come to Him, for He is a forgiving God who wishes all to come to Him. Do not persist in your evil, Nielbauld, for you stand at a crossroad now with the chance to turn away from this evil. Listen to me! Give me the chance to share with you what I have learned about the love of Jesus, who died for you, and for the evil and sins of all mankind.”

“Enough of this foolishness. You have chosen, Angus, and your blood will be on your own hand, for we are determined to give no quarter until this isle has been saved from the infection you promise

to bring to it. Once you had promise to be something great, but now your memory will be erased from all history—and your God with it! I will sacrifice you to Samhain in the center of the circle of Great Stones, for the gods cry out for your blood.”

The Druid raised his hands. His eyes radiated evil. “I will show you the power of the gods, Angus. I will rain down such a vengeance as was never seen in all history.” Then as he lifted his eyes to the heavens the clouds darkened, rumblings were heard in the distance, and a flash of lightning bolted across the sky. A muckle gurley was coming.

“See how the gods do answer my call? The heavens themselves prepare to war against you.” Nielbauld cackled with glee. His features distorted, giving him a demonic look. His eyes became hollow and dark as the pits of hell. He threw some powder into the sky, and a flash of lightning ignited it so that it appeared to explode and shower the sky with glowing flashes and sparkles that brought fear upon all who followed him.

At this signal Diarmid lifted his horn and blew a mighty note. The cry of the Herons was unearthly as they threw off their clothes and charged naked up the hill. The warriors had painted their faces and bodies in black and blue, and with their wild screams and clatter of weapons, and amid the rumblings of the brewing storm, they looked like warriors straight from the unseen realms of hell.

Eochaid, the great warrior, then threw off his garment and stood up in front. Holding his sword high he yelled out a cry of defiance, sending fresh courage into the veins of Lochiel’s followers. Then the bowmen under Eochaid’s command let fly a volleys of missiles towards the advancing horde.

It was a horror to see the death that followed and the screams of men injured and dying. Meanwhile Angus had been watching Giles pie making his way

¹ “*Tuatha De Dananu*”: people of the goddess

across the bogs with his men. The storm had come in quickly and the darkness and thick rain was obscuring their approach, but Angus had keen eyes and could see as they neared. Taking his bow he started to pick them off one at a time until they were driven by fear to retreat.

The Druid stood on top of a nearby rock shouting out a mixture of curses and mystical chants. His followers fully believed that he had brought down the storm to show his power over Angus, for Nielbauld himself was protected from it by an invisible force field, and no rains touched him.

But Angus, his spiritual eyes opened for an instant, saw evil beings like goblins or ghouls gathered around the Druid. He was being assisted by the very demons of hell.

Some of the men with Lochiel had been shaken by the seeming power of the Druid, and now feared that they had made the wrong choice. But the bravery and courage of Eochaid and Angus turned the tide as the Druid forces began to retreat under the hail of arrows. Still the battle continued despite the storm and there were casualties on both sides.

After five long hours of battle Eochaid the great was suddenly felled beneath a hail of arrows from the Herons. Angus made his way to the warrior's side and held his head in his arms as he died.

"Angus, my wife died in childbirth and my mother who raised my only child died of the sickness when it hit the camp. I have a daughter who will now have no one to look after her. Will you take care of her?" Just then Eochaid gave a gasp and died, leaving Angus thoughtful for a moment. Ossian was also deeply wounded, and Lochiel himself had also received wounds, though none very deep.

The Herons had by far suffered the worst, especially those who had tried to scale the hill.

Nielbauld the Druid stood strong, his hair and

beard blowing in the wind like a standard. His face glowed with an unearthly light and Angus could sense he was empowered by the Evil One.

Yes, this Druid had powers indeed, but they were powers of Satan, and Angus knew that God's power was greater, and that it would now have to be shown in some miraculous way for them to win.

Angus stood and closed his eyes in prayer. "Jesus, You promised us power over the works of Satan. In our flesh we cannot stand against this army and the dark forces that are empowering it, but You are able to defeat them, for You are greater than he that is in this world. We ask for your help, Lord. Give us strength in our arms and steel in our bones that we may have the might to win this victory!"

Then the Lord spoke to his heart in clear words. *Your ways are not Mine, Angus. It will not be your might that wins the battle.*

The battle raged on, and Lochiel at last came to Angus and took him by the shoulder. He was shaking his head in despair.

"We canna last the hour, Angus. We are almost to a man wounded or dead, and they have still more fresh men arriving from over yonder hill. You could save yourself and your family if you go leave by the cove where the women are. Take the old fishing boat and make it to Uist. From there you can manage to get to the mainland and further."

"No Lochiel. I brought this battle on you and I will not depart and leave you all to die. I have committed this battle to my Lord. He is the one who brought us here, so He will have to do something now to save us, for He has promised me victory this day."

"Now by Danu we have them!" Diarmid's shout rang in their ears as his men neared the hilltop. They let out a cry of victory. The Druid's chants became even more fervent, echoing over the entire

battlefield—when suddenly the chants ceased, interrupted by the sound of a loud horn that blew not once but five times. All the attacking Herons came to a standstill. It was a signal of danger from their lookouts on the other side of the valley.

All eyes turned to the sea. There, coming out of the mist and approaching the isle, were three Roman galleys. They anchored not far from the Heron shores. A raid!

For the first time since the battle had begun Lochiel let out a yell of joy. “I never thought I would rejoice at the sight of a Roman ship,” he said with a laugh. “But this time it just happens to be our salvation.”

The Herons turned and fled, running as fast as they could to bring warning to their families who were unprotected. Gillespie and Diarmid followed also, for they had brought their families to the Heron territories also.

Now fearing for their lives, Nielbauld’s Druid companions also left, leaving Nielbauld standing alone before the still alert clann of warriors protecting their families in the cove below. Seeing his plans fall apart, Nielbauld shouted out a last curse on them before turning to leave.

“This is only the beginning, Angus! This battle is not finished. I will return, and with such a vengeance that there will not be one man or woman or child that you have infected with your heresy left alive. Your name will become a curse and they will spit on the ground at the mention of it. I swear, by the gods, you will feel their revenge!” He then turned and strode down the hill after his retreating men.

Lochiel stood watching and shook his head as if struggling with himself over something. “It can’t end like this. It has to be settled now, once and for all,” Lochiel whispered to himself as he stood at the top of the windswept hill.

Lochiel suddenly came to life and took to his heels, jumping down the hill. He dreapt off some rocks and was soon skipping over the thistles, bogbeans* and heather. As old as he was, he was running down towards the Druid at a great pace.

Lochiel was about three yards off when the Druid turned, sensing the sudden danger, and saw the wild, disheveled Lochiel charging at him, his eyes burning with a hatred and determination that startled the Druid. Lochiel’s glaive was swinging in the air, singing like an Aeolian harp¹.

The Druid tried to move aside, lifting his great staff to protect him, but Lochiel swung his glaive with such power that it cut through the venerable stick as if it was a twig.

The Druid quickly responded by putting his hand in his pouch and throwing some powder into Lochiel’s face.

Lochiel’s eyes began to sting, and in a moment he was blinded.

At that, the Druid pulled out his dirk* and thrust Lochiel through.

But Lochiel was not dead yet. As though receiving a sudden supernatural burst of power, Lochiel lifted his glaive high above his head. “Go meet the fires of damnation to which you belong, together with your accursed bogles* and ghouls*,” he yelled as he swung his sword down over Nielbauld with all his might, killing him in one fell stroke.

Meanwhile Angus, Domnal, and Lachie were rushing down the hill after him and arrived just as Lochiel collapsed on the ground next to Nielbauld.

One look at both of them was enough to see that they were finished.

Lochiel looked up at them and whispered, “Dinna

¹ **Aeolian harp:** a wind harp, or melodic instrument placed in and meant to be played by the wind, named for the instrument said to have been used by Aeolus, the Greek god of wind

worry, lad. It is the will of God. I am an old man and it would be hard for me to change. The least I could do was to slay this man for you, for there could never be peace in these lands if he had lived. The other Druids are nothing without him and will retreat to other territories, taking their dark arts with them. Gilespie and Diarmid have not the courage or power to fight you on their own, Angus, though in time they may seek out and gather other armies and Druids to come against you.

“But the death of Nielbauld should set them back for years to come. Now you and Katriona will have time to plant your seeds of love and the words of your Jesus. It was best that I was the one to slay Nielbauld. Now you can be the balm to heal the wounds. It is up to you now, Angus—and perhaps even to my grandson—to bring your religion of peace to these isles. I ask of you only one favor—bury me in the old cove where I will be close to the sea.” Lochiel then shuddered and went still.

Angus bowed his head and prayed. “Dear Lord, have mercy on this man. I know he has died without You, but yet he died in Your name. He is a good man, Lord, and gave his life that we may preach Your words. Lord, have mercy on him and receive him into Your Kingdom.”



When the Roman ships departed, the Heron settlements were left in burning disarray, with many of their fighting men slain or captured.

Lochiel was buried as he requested in the cove near the sea. Angus took the sword that Claudius had given him and thrust it into the grave, making a cross.

“Claudius, I know you gave this sword to me as a token of my service to you. Now I leave it here as a token of Lochiel’s service to me, and to God, and in the hope that I shall never again have to use it.

Lochiel gave his life that we might have peace and that the word of the Gospel might be brought to this land. Rest in peace, my beloved friend and father to my wife.”

Katriona likewise stood over the grave as she thought of her father and of her childhood. Tears started to form in her eyes. “Dear father,” she prayed, “may your soul find peace, and may your sacrifice not have been in vain.”

She felt a hand touch her shoulder. It was Angus. He looked at her and gently said, “He was a brave man who had a vision for his people. We canna let it die, Katriona. We need to bring peace to these lands by spreading the words and love of Christ, and now that way is clearer than when we first landed here, thanks to the courage and sacrifice of your father. We have before us a great task, Katriona, and I am glad to have you by my side for it.”

Katriona nodded and looked out at the hills. They seemed to be glowing as if the Lord was pleased with them. “Yes, you are right, Angus. We have much before us now, but by His grace we will do it.”



For three years Angus and Katriona labored in preaching the Word. They began by bringing food, clothing, and care to the weak and wounded survivors in the raided Heron settlements who had been left behind, and helped them to rebuild their homes and lives.

In time many of the Heron clann came to know and accept Jesus in spite of attempts by the remaining Druids to turn the Heron against Angus and Katriona’s clann. Their sample of love and caring had won the hearts and goodwill of the Heron people, and a lasting peace was forged between the two clanns.

Diarmid and Gilespie were both slain in battles against Iverni raiders.

After Nielbauld's death, just as Lochiel had said, the remaining Druids were unable to reassert their authority in the region, allowing Angus and Katriona to slowly spread the teachings and love of Jesus ever further and wider on the isle, establishing their people in the faith of Christ.

The Lord blessed them with the birth of a beautiful daughter, who they named Etain Anu.

It was in the year 70 A.D. that a Roman galley was spotted off the shores of the isle near Angus' home. With the ship came a large contingent of soldiers. But this time they had not come to raid. They were on a mission, sent by Tribune Claudius, to find out if Angus lived and where and how he was. From them Angus heard news of his old friends, and from Rome.

Claudius had received new orders and was now stationed in Gaul where he would at last be able to spend more time with his family.

Nero was dead, killed by his own hand as the soldiers rebelled against him.

The Praetorian Prefect, Ofonius Tigellinus, had also died by his own hand.

A series of generals had ascended the emperor's throne in succession—Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and now it was Vespasian—a soldier Claudius had known quite well and who had led a campaign in Britannia many years earlier, and then helped to put down unrest in Judea.

Titus Flavius Vespasianus, as he was called, was a good man—not like Nero. Still, only time would tell how he would treat the Christians. But for now there was respite in the persecution and the church throughout Asia Minor continued to grow and prosper.

The message from Claudius, should Angus be found, was to ask him to return to Gaul with the ships. There was news which could not be delivered

into the hands of any others, especially since Claudius did not know if Angus would even be alive, or if he could be found if he was.

So it was that, in 70 A.D., Angus and his family departed on a Roman ship. It had been unusual for the people of Lochiel's clann to entertain the Romans instead of fighting them, but they had become more and more a people of peace rather than of war, and so the change was a welcome one.



Angus and Katriona watched the horizon as land appeared before them. It had been several days since the ship had left the isle and they were now approaching the coast of Gaul. It would not be long before they would step ashore and be reunited with Claudius.

Philip was excited and chattered incessantly, as he often did. Katriona smiled and ran her fingers through her son's long blond hair, her eyes remaining steadfast on the docks once they came into sight.

Beside them sat Graime—Eochaid's daughter, who they had adopted into their family. She sat with Etain in her arms and a look of excitement in her eyes at arriving in a new land.

Katriona spoke quietly to Angus. "This morning I had two visions. In the first one we were in Rome, and Arrius and Aleric and Ruth were there also. There was trouble in the air and excitement but everyone was full of faith and the Lord was doing great things.

"The second one was different. It was evil! There was a dark cloud of mist and it was evening with a great fire burning. There was a woman who was beautiful—as a goddess. I never saw a woman with such beauty. At first I thought it was an angel or heavenly spirit, yet when I looked into her soul it was evil. She was laughing and shouting. 'At last now it is mine! Now I will have my revenge!'

“I felt fear at first, but then I felt the Lord beside me, and a great peace and calm filled my soul. I don’t know what it means, but I feel we are again embarking on a new journey, my love. The Lord has yet another plan in store for us, and I feel that, whatever it is, we will soon find out.”

Angus was silent for a wee while as though meditating, then spoke gravely. “Aye, I feel also a strange sensation in my bones. I feel we will not return to this isle again. There is something new awaiting us here, for which cause the Lord led Claudius to seek us out, and led his ships and men to find us as quickly as they did.” Angus turned to Katriona, and she reached out and took his hand in hers, squeezing it.

Angus pulled her close to him and embraced her as their lips met in a long and passionate kiss.

EPILOGUE

1969

It was a cold, dark morning as Angus awoke in the damp cove on the Isle of Lewis. The fire had gone out and the air was cold and misty. He shivered a bit and pulled his clothes tightly around him. *It had all been a dream!*

Angus was thoughtful as he looked around in the broken light that was starting to seep into the cove. He saw Calum fast asleep beside him. Then he stopped for a moment to reflect on his dream.

Had it really been just a dream? Or had he actually seen into the past through some porthole in time?

He looked over to the spot where they had found the sword and started to dig.

It was a few minutes later that Calum awoke to see his companion digging in the corner of the cove.

“Are ye all right, lad?” he inquired. “What is it with you? Why are ye digging so frantically?”

“Help me here and I’ll explain!”

Calum hesitated just a moment and then rose and joined his friend. Soon they were digging like mad as Angus explained that he had just woken from a dream of things that had taken place in this very cove, at the spot where they had found the sword.

After about twenty-five minutes of fruitless digging, Angus stopped for a moment to relax, and Calum looked over at him, stopping also.

“Och, it’s nothing, Angus. It was just a dream,” Calum said with a sigh. “An exciting dream—but just a dream nonetheless, as so many others.”

Angus ignored him and started to dig again.

Calum shook his head and continued talking. “It’s getting on, Angus. We should be heading home. By now our family will be getting up and they will start to worry if we don’t come soon.”

Just then Angus stopped. His face paled. His hand hit something hard. He dug more, and uncovered a dust-caked piece of leather with part of an old inscription still visible on it. “Great heavens!” he exclaimed. “It’s Lochiel’s shield! He *is* buried here! It’s no dream Calum! It’s no dream!”

Calum stopped, his mouth hanging open in total shock. “You mean to say all that stuff actually happened?”

“Aye, I’m sure it did! Come now! Help me finish digging!”

It took several hours more, during which Angus told Calum as much of the dream as he could properly remember. When they finished they had uncovered a nearly intact shield, several bits of bone, and an old chain that easily looked like it could have been from the Celtic era—with an amulet on it that clearly showed an engraving of mistletoe.

“So it’s true ... it’s all true!” Angus whispered reverently.

“I wonder what happened after they went to Gaul and met Claudius? Do you think there’s any way of finding out?”

“Who knows? If God wills for us to know, then maybe one day we will find out!” replied Angus.

Angus wished he could have slept longer. Perhaps the dream would have gone on. Still, he felt

that a dream and tale of such vividness would not be left hanging, and that somehow, someday, the tale would finish.

“Come on, Calum,” he said, “we had better be going now.”

The two of them set off on the long hike back home, amazed at all they had seen and discovered. They had decided to leave the shield, unliftable as it had been, and to cover it up again, along with the sword and chain. No one else would believe the tale. Only they knew the story *behind* these artifacts, and so, they figured, only they should know *about* the artifacts. Aye, this would be a secret between the two of them.

Angus stopped for a moment from the top of the cliff—the same cliff where Angus and Lochiel had made their stand against the Druid—and looked down over the cove. He would almost swear but that he saw a beautiful girl standing in the water, with long black hair and deep green eyes that shone like an emerald. She smiled at him, and then vanished like the morning mist.

THE END

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Note: *This list contains information that gives away parts of the story. Read with care. Characters also mentioned or appearing in “The Tribune’s Assignment” from the Heaven’s Library book Overcomers are marked with an asterisk.*

Aelius Junius: Master of the gladiators and friend of Tigellinus.

Aleric: Celt captured by the Romans on the same ship that captures Katriona and Coilus. Converted to Christianity while a slave in Gaul by Christian converts of Aquilla.

Alexis: Informer and henchman for Tigellinus, of Greek origin.

Angus Ogg (18, modern times): Friend of Calum Moore, living in Scotland, 1969.

Angus: Scotsman captured by Roman raiders and main character of this book.

Anthony*: Housemaster of Centurion Claudius’ household. Sold to Quinton on the report of Claudius’ death. Christian friend to Martha and Lucius.

Anna: Maid to Camilla.

Anu: Angus’ mother.

Aquilla: Biblical friend of the Apostle Paul from Corinth, and husband to Priscilla (see Acts 18:1–2).

Arrius Albinus: Cousin of Tigellinus.

Armirus: Captive Celt who comes to Rome with Aleric and Katriona.

Balor: Celtic warrior of Lochiel’s clann who sides with Angus. Brother to Eochaid.

Boadicea, Queen (also spelled Boudicca): Ancient British queen who in 60 A.D. led a revolt against Roman rule. See footnote (viii) “Queen Boudicca” in the Heaven’s Library book Overcomers.

Branween: Sister of Lochiel.

Bruno: Second centurion, serving under Centurion Claudius on the raid that captures Angus.

Brutus: Roman soldier, converted by Paul along with Oberon.

Burrus*: Prefect of the Praetorian and advisor to Nero. Killed before The Tribune’s Assignment after which Tigellinus takes his place. See footnote (vii) “Sextus Afrianus Burrus” in the Heaven’s Library book Overcomers.

Calum: Bard of Lochiel’s tribe.

Calum Moore (19, modern times): Friend of Angus MacDonald, living in Scotland, 1969.

Camilla*: Girlfriend to Marcus and daughter of Procurator Tiberius Paulus.

Carinus: Steward of a Roman farm and secret Christian who gives shelter to Angus.

Cassius: Senator and friend to the households of Laevinus and Arrius.

Clarinda: Servant to the household of Claudius and Valeria.

Claudius Melitus: Roman centurion and commander of the ship that raids Lochiel's coast. Served under Marcus in his victory against the Icenii. Husband to Valeria. Becomes Angus' first master in Rome.

Clohn: Celt of Lochiel's clann, captured together with Katriona.

Coilus: Iverni chief of the ship that captures Katriona, and in turn captured by the Romans.

Connan: First and only son of Lochiel.

Cornelius: Centurion under Marcus in Britannia.

Culann: Celtic warrior of Lochiel's clann who sides with Angus. Cousin to Lochiel.

Danu: Druid goddess.

Decius Lucian Metellus: Son of Senator Laevinus Metellus, and member of the Praetorian Guard under Tigellinus.

Demetrius*: A Christian goldsmith who Marcus uses to infiltrate the Christian community in "The Tribune's Assignment." Brother to Dorcas.

Diarmid: Celt of Lochiel's clann who leads the opposition against Angus on his return.

Didius: Christian innkeeper in Athens, and frequent messenger for Philip.

Dinah: Wife of Jacob and mother to Ruth and John

Domnal: Celtic warrior of Lochiel's clann who sides with Angus.

Dorcas*: Christian and sister to Demetrius.

Eochaid the Great: Celtic warrior of Lochiel's clann who sides with Angus. Brother to Balor, and father to Graime.

Epidius: Young and haughty Roman senator.

Erastus: Christian friend and associate of Philip in Athens.

Etain Anu: Daughter of Angus and Katriona.

Fortunatus: Greek Christian and disciple (see I Corinthians 16:17) who, along with Lucius, helps Aleric and Coilus, and brings them in contact with the Christians in Athens.

Gaius Falco: Roman senator and old friend of Lucidus, with properties in Rome and Gaul. Husband of Valeria, and Angus' second master in Rome.

Galba: Roman emperor after Nero, ruled 68–69 A.D.

Garth: Leader of a minor Britannic uprising quelled by Tribune Marcus, and imprisoned in a Roman raid.

Gillespie: Celt of Lochiel's clann.

Graime: Daughter of Eochaid, and later helper to Angus and Katriona.

Helena: Maid in charge of Philip's household.

Helvia: Wife of Senator Gaius.

Horace Decimus: Roman and friend of Arrius' family living in Corinth.

Jacob: Merchant of gold and silver from Palestine.

James: Christian leader in Corinth and husband to Julia.

John: Son of Jacob, brother to Ruth.

Julia: Wife to James.

Junius: Member of the Praetorian Guard under Decius.

Justin: Christian and convert of Gaius.

Katriona: Celtic daughter of Lochiel who is captured and taken to Rome.

Lachie: Celt and older friend of Angus.

Laevinus Metellus: Roman magistrate and former governor living in Greece, and father of Lavinia and Decius.

Lavinia Metellus: Daughter of Laevinus Metellus, and girlfriend to Arrius Albinus. Sister of Decius Lucian Metellus.

Licinius*: Marcus' manservant mentioned in "The Tribune's Assignment."

Linus: Christian living outside Athens and friend to Philip.

Lochiel: Chief of the Celtic clann to which Angus belongs.

Lucidus Valerius: Roman senator and father of Valeria. Murdered in Rome.

Lucilius: Servant to the household of Arrius given to Ruth.

Lucius*: Christian in fellowship with Martha and Anthony in Rome, and Philip and Fortunatus in Athens.

Luke*: Christian deacon of the church in western Rome together with Martha.

Maccinus: Alcoholic Roman poet favored by Nero.

Marcus*: Roman tribune called to infiltrate the Christian community in "The Tribune's Assignment."

Marius: Servant to Tigellinus' household.

Martha*: Originally from Palestine. Concubine to Senator Quinton, and deacon of the church in Rome together with Luke.

Mary: A Christian woman and friend of Martha and Dorcas

Neil: Celt of Lochiel's clann, captured together with Katriona.

Nero*: Emperor of Rome. See footnote (v) "Nero Claudius Caesar" in the Heaven's Library book Overcomers.

Nielbauld: Chief Druid of Callanish.

Oberon: Christian blacksmith and servant on the farm where Carinus works, and who puts Angus back in contact with Valeria.

Octavia: Slave girl originally purchased by Titus.

Omar: Chief of the nomadic tribe, and father to Yasmine.

Ossian the Red: Celtic warrior of Lochiel's clann who sides with Angus.

Otho: Roman emperor after Galba, ruled 69 A.D.

Paul: The apostle.

Paulus: Son of Claudius and Valeria.

Persis: A Christian woman and friend of Martha and Dorcas

Petronius*: Roman governor and philosopher who befriends Marcus in "The Tribune's Assignment." See footnote (ix) "Titus Petronius Niger" in the Heaven's Library book Overcomers.

Philip: Greek merchant and secret believer, converted by Stephanas.

Philip: Son of Angus and Katriona.

Phoebe: A Christian woman and friend of Martha and Dorcas

Poppaea*: Nero's wife at the time of "The Tribune's Assignment" and this story.

Priscilla*: Camilla's maidservant.

Priscilla: Biblical friend of the Apostle Paul from Corinth, and wife to Aquilla

(see Acts 18:1–2).

Publius: Christian apostate in Athens who helps Decius infiltrate the sect of Christians.

Quinton: Roman senator and friend of the late Senator Lucidus. Also acquainted with Gaius and Seneca. Is converted by Martha in “The Tribune’s Assignment.”

Raheem: Nomad who befriends Aleric and Coilus in Greece, and brother to Omar.

Rolf: Trusted servant to the household of Claudius and Valeria.

Rufius: Young and haughty Roman senator.

Ruth: Daughter of Jacob.

Sabina: Servant to the household of Arrius given to Ruth.

Samhain: Druid god of death.

Secondus: Member of the Praetorian Guard under Decius.

Seneca: Friend of Burrus and tutor to Nero in his younger years. See footnote (x) “Lucius Anneaus Seneca” in the Heaven’s Library book Overcomers.

Stephanas: One of Paul’s first converts in Greece (see I Corinthians 16:15) who converted Phillip the merchant.

Tiberius Paulus: Roman procurator and father of Camilla. Marcus served under him in Britannia, where Tiberius died.

Tigellinus: Advisor and Prefect of the Praetorian under Nero. See footnote (vi) “Ofonius Tigellinus” in the Heaven’s Library book Overcomers.

Timothy: Convert and personal friend of Paul to whom the Biblical books of First and Second Timothy are written.

Titus: Neighbor to Claudius and Valeria, and master of the docks at Rome.

Thomas: The apostle.

Trebonius: Servant of Quinton mentioned in “The Tribune’s Assignment.”

Urbanus: Christian servant to the household of Quinton who helps Valeria after the death of Rolf.

Valeria: Wife of Centurion Claudius, and daughter of the late Lucidus Valerius. Mother of Paulus.

Vespasian (Titus Flavius Vespasianus): Roman emperor after Vitellius, ruled 69–79 A.D.

Vestus: Servant to Camilla’s household.

Vitellius: Roman emperor after Otho, ruled 69 A.D.

Yasmine: Daughter of Omar.

GLOSSARY OF FOREIGN AND UNFAMILIAR TERMS

balaclaver: woolen hat that covers ears and comes under chin

ballant: ballad

bannocks: loaf made out of oatmeal

banshee: female spirit whose loud screams usually signify death

baud: bold

blate: bashful

blethering: chatting

bogbean: a plant that grows in spongy bogs, marshes, and shallow water, common in Scotland

bogle: evil spirit, as in a ghost or some kind of goblin wandering the land

boss: hollow

bracken: large ferns

brae: slope or hill

breef: irresistible spell

burn: stream

cairn: a pile of stones

canny: shrewd

chittering: trembling, shivering

clann: Scottish Gaelic for “clan”

clavers: idle chatter

coble: boat

cove: cave (a small inlet or bay in English, but in the old Scots a cave)

croft: a small farm or plot of land that the owner or occupier farms, especially in Scotland

dander: stroll

dirdum: uproar

dirk: short dagger

dour: sullen

dreep: drop, jump, leap

droukit: soaked

fashious: troublesome

firbolgs and fomoirans: supernatural beings who warred with the Goddess Danu

fyled: defiled

ghaist: ghost

ghoul: evil spirit

glaive: type of sword

glinting: peering, looking

gullie: long-bladed knife

gurley: storm

haar: sea fog

OVERCOMERS II

howe: hollow

hunkered: crouched

kebbuck: cheese

kelpies: mischievous spirits who come out during storms near the coast

ken: know

lilt: song or ballad

machair: flat low plain lying beside the shore

muckle: great, big

neuk: nook

peckish: hungry

pitmirk: black as the pit

risping: grating

roting: roaring and ranting

rudas: rough mannered

runt: small

shauchling: shuffling

shieling: shepherd's cottage

skirling: screeching

spae: to have the gift of prophecy, to divine the future

stramash: uproar

thrawn: stubborn

waefu: sorrowful wailing

wean: child

windlestrae: dry grass

wraiths: spirits in form of humans that foretell death

wyte: blame