

THE ACTS OF A PAGAN JEW

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An Autohistory

14 – 70 CE

Translated by Arouet Galen

Novelized by Nina Galen

Part I – CROCCHUS AGONISTES

Part II – THE STONES OF JERUSALEM

Part III – INSIDE THE COURT OF CALIGULA

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(Copyright page)

To sister Sue,
lost in the course of human events

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

In 1995, during an archeological dig near Jerusalem, a well-preserved manuscript was found. Penned in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic by a man named Mel and his son Mel Sarus, the historical events it describes, and carbon dating, place it in the first century of the Common Era.

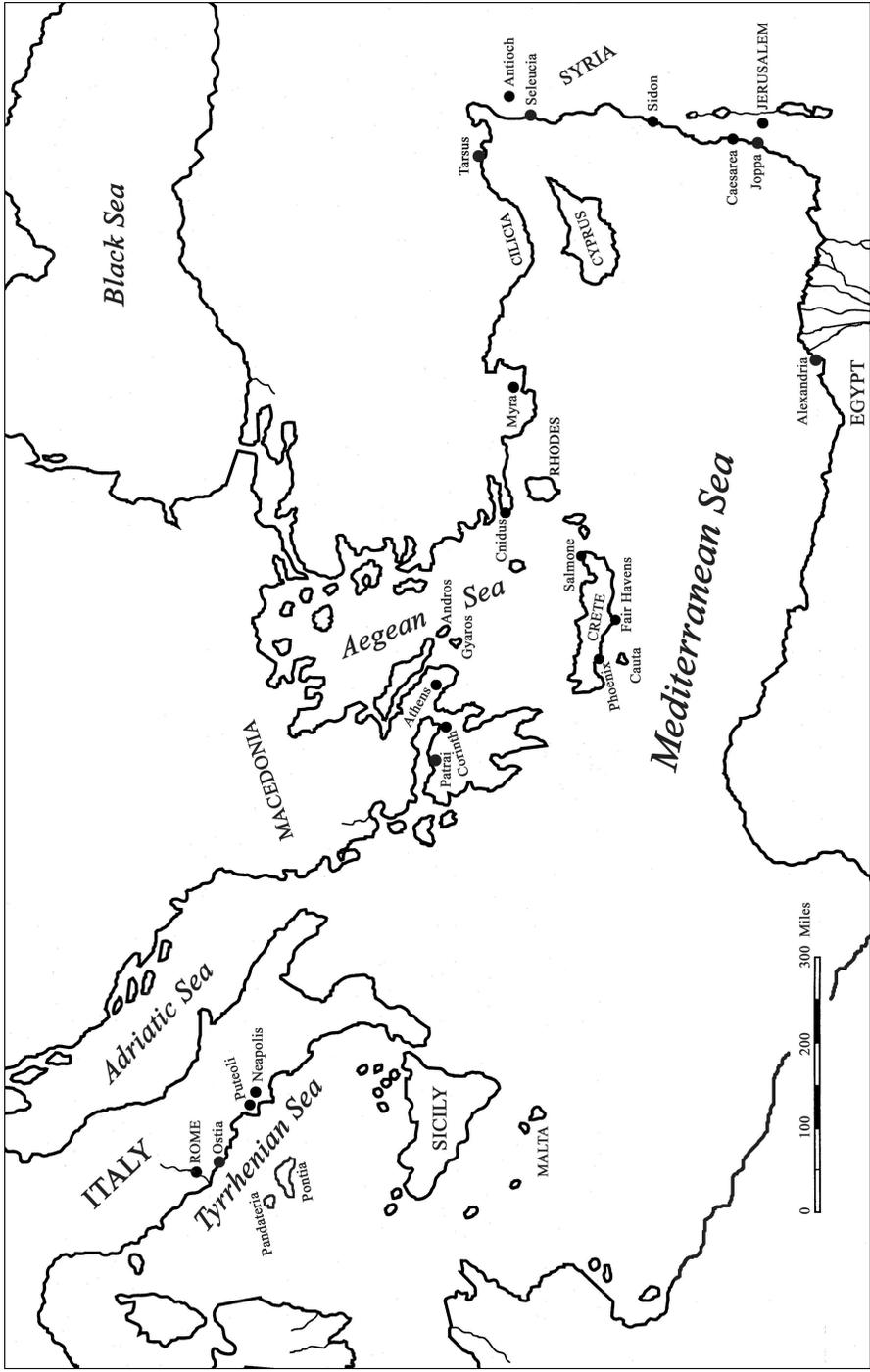
I took on the job of translating this unusual find. Why unusual? For one thing, these first-person accounts of two lives predate Augustine's *Confessions* – which scholars consider the first autobiography – by over 300 years. (So as not to alarm these scholars, and for reasons that become clear while reading it, the book may instead be called an autohistory.) Another anomaly is that the manuscript was written in the codex format like our books today – not on scrolls. The text shows that the decision to use codices was made in 45 CE, some fifty years before pages began to rival scrolls.

But surely the book is most exceptional for its eyewitness accounts of life and events in the Roman Empire between 14 and 70 CE. Contemporary personages, including Paul of Tarsus (St. Paul), the Gospel writers Mark and Luke, Pontius Pilate, Caligula, the generals Vespasian and Titus, the Jewish historian/general Josephus – as well as the Alexandrian anti-Semites Apion, Isidorus, and Lampon – are all players.

My literal word-for-word translation completed, my sister Nina, citing its “possibilities,” set about making the text accessible to lay readers. She divided the book into five parts with numbered chapters and modernized most place names: Gallia/Gaul she called France, Lugdunum, Lyons, etc. Historical gaps were filled through careful research. Because ancient writings have no punctuation, Nina had her way with commas and capitalization.

And so, between the scratching of reed pens on papyrus, and the keyboard clicks of my sister's word processor, a fruitful collaboration took place. Acts and conversations jotted down two thousand years ago now blossomed into scenes; events both holy and historical, misconstrued for millennia, could be understood at last.

Some may wonder (as some have wondered about the Bible itself) what is true in these pages and what isn't. Admittedly, certain dead-on prophecies made at Delphi might raise modern eyebrows, but on whose watch did this occur? Apollo's? Mel's? Nina's? Happily, the answer to this and other such questions are revealed in the text itself. With that in mind, I suggest the reader suspend his or her disbelief, sit back, and enjoy this layered tale.



Part I

CROCCHUS AGONISTES

I [14 CE]

My name is Mel. My memories begin in about my fourth year – the year Rome lost her first emperor, the divine Augustus, and I lost my darling mother. But I think some of what happened then was described to me later, so I don't know exactly what I remember, was told, or possibly invented.

I clearly see young Mel walking up a very narrow, busy street in Rome holding his mother's hand. Suddenly she wasn't there. Amazed, he let himself be carried along by the crowd, or ran forward to find her, or back, confused and terrified. He was standing at the bottom of some stairs when a great figure came flying down and landed on him. It was a woman with white eyes, not old or young, clutching a walking stick in her hand. She apologized and raised her weight off him, at the same time shielding him from being trampled, but this didn't calm his fear. Quickly, gently, she ran her fingertips over his face and body. Her name was Nolia.

“What's your name, child?” she asked.

“M-Mel.”

“Do you see your mother, Mel?” Then someone lifted Nolia to her feet and together she and little Mel moved close to a wall, out of the way. “Is anyone looking for a child named Mel?” she called in her thin voice. “Is anyone looking for Mel?”

Mel strained to hear his mother's call, seeking her in the thousands of feet, legs, and yards of linen hurrying by. He looked up, expecting to see her familiar face and her arms frantically waving at him. Nolia called and listened for an answering voice, but all she heard were the cries of hawkers and peddlers. Straining to see Mel's mother's face, she saw only darkness. She gripped his hand, as if hoping by this tight connection to see the lost one through his bright young eyes.

At last Nolia said, “Come, Mel. We'll wait for your mother at home.”

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With the child's hand in hers, she tapped and felt her way back up the street until she came to a familiar door located between a locksmith shop and a tavern. Pushing it open, she led him down a corridor that opened onto a courtyard with shrines and a small fountain, then into a large room in back.

I still recall that populated tenement, a building seven stories high that overarched the narrow street to another tenement on the other side, for it was there I lived the next several years. What had happened to my mother? I never found out, but it wasn't uncommon in those narrow streets for something to fall or be thrown from a window and hit a person walking below. Of one thing I was certain: my mother would not have abandoned her Mel had she been alive.

The room we entered that day was a communal dwelling with straw mattresses on the floor and a grill where sausages were roasting. The five women who lived there – all freed household slaves like Nolia herself – were busy at different tasks, spinning and weaving flax, grinding grain, and sewing.

"Where's my mama?" I demanded, looking around frantically.

"Your mama will come tomorrow," Nolia promised, "and your dada too."

"My dada won't come," I told her. "He won't come." I remember looking hard at Nolia's face, hoping that when she opened her mouth she'd correct me, that she'd tell me my dada *would* come.

Her mouth opened. "Of course he'll come," she assured me. "He'll come tomorrow."

"He's dead," I said, watching her face. "He died when I was small." If only she'd contradict me one more time.

Again her mouth opened. Inhaling deeply, she let out a sigh. "Ah."

Ah? Ah? I felt my whole life hanging on that Ah. Maybe she was about to say, Ah, of course your father isn't dead; he'll be here tomorrow. I waited breathlessly to hear her say it, but she didn't.

It's strange how sometimes I'll remember a conversation that took place many years ago only because the other person said or did something that seemed inappropriate or incomprehensible at the time. My memory's a great storehouse of these non sequiturs that over time are one by one explained, but never forgotten. Much of what was said that day will remain with me for the rest of my life.

"Claudia," she called, "come help me with Mel."

A robust woman hurried over. "I'm here."

"Mel, this is Claudia. Claudia, this is Mel. Claudia, give Mel some sausage. Go, Mel, go with Claudia."

Claudia led me to the grill and offered me a sausage that had cooled. "Here, child."

I shook my head. "We don't eat sausage. We don't eat pork."

Then Claudia did a peculiar thing. She lifted my tunic in front, looked beneath it, and chuckled. Another non sequitur to await clarification.

“Mel, there’s no pork in that sausage,” Nolia said quickly. “No, none at all. That sausage is made from arena kill. It’s tiger meat, not pork.”

“Tiger meat?” I’d heard of scary, dangerous tigers and now looked at the sausage with interest.

“That’s right,” said Nolia. “Yesterday brave hunters killed three tigers in the amphitheater. They gave the meat to the poor. Have you ever seen a tiger, Mel?”

“No. Have you?”

“Of course,” she smiled. “Tigers are big and very fierce.” Then she said something that changed my life forever. “I saw your father fight in the amphitheater once. Your father was a great gladiator, Mel. A great gladiator.”

“He *was*?” No one had ever told me that before. “My father was a gladiator? You saw him fight in the arena? You *saw* him?”

“Yes, I did,” the good woman assured me. “All Rome saw him. We loved him. He died bravely, fighting a tiger.”

How thrilled I was to hear this, though I had no idea how a blind woman could possibly have seen my father fight. Perhaps the god of eyesight graciously restored this gift during arena games. Slowly, breathlessly, I repeated, “My father died fighting a tiger.”

“Yes,” smiled Nolia. “There never was a braver gladiator than your father. Claudia, give the son of that brave man some sausage made from tiger loins.”

I took the sausage and chewed on it, savoring the taste, telling myself that this sausage came from the very tiger that had killed my father. Eating its blood and flesh would make me strong like my father, strong as a tiger. I crammed the rest of the sausage into my mouth and threw my arms around Nolia.

“Nolia,” I cried, almost choking on my feast. “My father was a great gladiator! He died fighting a tiger!”

Nolia hugged me. “That’s right, Mel. That’s right. Claudia will take us to the baths now and later we’ll have supper and she’ll give you a bit of straw to sleep on. Your mama will come for you tomorrow.”

How happy her words made me. I was sure she spoke the truth.

II [24 CE]

But my mother never came to claim me. For the next several years my life moved along uneventfully. I lived with Nolia, Claudia, and the other freedwomen, learning to speak some words of Greek from the two who were of that country, and slowly took on the responsibilities of an adult

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family member in our communal home. It was my job to help fetch our rations of oil and grain from the public dole. Claudia would make it into bread, or a gruel with onions, garlic, and whatever other vegetables we could find. Sometimes we were given arena meat – tiger, antelope, or bear. We worshiped the gods, the household spirits and the deified Augustus, and life went on without incident in the principate of Tiberius Caesar.

As I got taller and bigger, Nolia got older and smaller. Her hair became almost as white as her eyes, but she no longer needed a stick to help her walk in the street. This was because I became her eyes; when she went out I always accompanied my dear friend, who walked with her hand on my arm.

Then one day the unthinkable happened. First we heard shouts and the clapping of horses' hooves. I looked back. Some hotshot chariot driver was clattering up the street, driving his horses at full speed and scattering all before him. I grabbed Nolia to pull her out of the way, but some idiot trying to flee charged into us, knocking her under the hooves and wheels.

The driver was drunk, the horses kept going, and Nolia was dragged a long way. I ran after the chariot, shouting for the man to stop, but not until her clothes ripped did she break free. I saw her roll over and over in the street, then stop rolling and lie still.

I wasn't the first to reach her. A man stepped out of the crowd, knelt down, examined her, shook his head, and declared her dead. Terrified and speechless, I was too stunned to know what to do. Looking around desperately, I hoped to recognize someone who knew both Nolia and me, someone who could tell the man who she was and that I was her friend.

When no one stepped forward to claim Nolia's body, the man signaled to his slave who gathered her in his arms and followed him up the street. I stood watching until they disappeared in the crowd. Perhaps he'd take her to the same place my mother had gone and I'd never see her again. Why hadn't I spoken up? But even if I had, what could I have said? Poor as we were, there was no way we could have given her a proper funeral.

At that point I lost my ability to think or reason and began running through the streets, tears coursing down my cheeks. How quickly and randomly a loved one could disappear. I vowed I'd never *ever* love another human being. Never!

But then I paused. To whom could I make my vow? To the very gods who'd caused her death? No. It would have to be a personal vow – to myself. And so, standing there in the street, I vowed to myself that I'd never again love a human being, not a woman, not a man. I'd love only the unreal, the surreal, and the fantastic – things that could never die because they'd never lived.

For hours I walked aimlessly, dreading to return home, to tell Claudia and the others what had happened. Arriving at our street I had a terrible shock. Our entire tenement, which bridged the street, had collapsed into a

huge pile of rubble. While it wasn't clear whether anyone had been killed, it wasn't known if anyone had survived. A workman told me they were going to use the bricks to build a temple to Jupiter.

"Another temple to Jupiter?" I cried. "*Another temple?* Damn the gods! They cause us nothing but grief!"

He stared at me, wide-eyed at such reckless blasphemy. I didn't care. All I wanted to do was get away. And so I ran and ran, weeping because now I had no Nolia, no home, no community of friends.

III

What saved me from complete despair were the baths. Much solace can be found in a place of water. Because of Caesar's great aqueducts, Rome is a city of fountains and baths, many of which are free to everyone. Each day I'd get into the warm water, close my eyes, and pretend I was back in my mother's arms.

The baths were wonderful in every respect except one – to fully enjoy them you had to be naked as a Greek. To avoid embarrassment I'd always wrap my lower body in a towel, removing it only as I slid down backwards into a pool.

Why this modesty? Well, I had a kind of scar on my private parts. Unable to question my parents about this, I decided that as a small child I must have cut myself on something sharp. We bathers mocked the Jews with their circumcisions, and when others saw my scar they'd laugh in the same way. So I kept myself covered, hoping no one would take me for a Jew. To make absolutely sure, I never set foot in that place across the Tiber where the Jewish people lived.

The baths were restful but not quiet. There was much splashing and grunting of men working out with weights. Some would bellow loudly, hoping everyone would look around and admire them. Others played ball, shouting to one another. But the most annoying noise of all came from the man who plucked beards and body hair from chests and underarms. To drown out the screams of his vain clients, and to advertise his services, he kept up a constant screeching while he worked.

Senators came to the baths, fat senators, naked except for the rich jewels on their fingers. I recall a conversation between two who sat near me and spoke in low voices.

The first senator said, "I think the deed might best be done some evening when that rat leaves his house and walks to the Forum to meet his mistress."

I could hardly believe my ears when the second replied, "I hear he carries a dagger under his toga. We'll need at least three men."

Were they planning an assassination? Of whom were they speaking?

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Whoever it was, he had to be warned. I began to shiver as if cold water had suddenly flooded the pool. Then the first senator said, “Wait! I have a better idea. I’ll tell my wife to put a spell on him.”

“A spell?” cried the other. “Perfect! Our hands will be clean. What kind of spell?”

“She can make him think he’s a chicken.”

“A *chicken*? Can she really?”

“Yes. Last year she made one of our slaves believe he was a chicken. Old Hilarius ran about all day, clucking and pecking.”

“Poor fellow! Did she change him back?”

“Of course not,” said the first, nudging the other with his elbow. “*We needed the eggs!*”

Then he laughed loudly while his friend bent forward groaning a mighty groan and crying out as if in pain, “Ooh, that’s so *old!*”

I didn’t understand. It wasn’t their Latin I hadn’t understood. It was the sense of what had been said. I thought about that conversation many times over the next years. It bothered me, haunted me. Why had one laughed? Why had the other groaned? Where had the eggs come from?

But most of all I liked to hear people discussing the games, particularly the gladiatorial contests. I kept hoping someone would mention my famous father, for I was too shy to ask about him, and in fact had no idea of his name. It made everyone sore that grouchy old Tiberius refused to sponsor more than two contests a year, had cut back the state subsidy, and had reduced the number of gladiators taking part in any event. Sometimes a private citizen, out of vanity or ambition, would get permission to put on a gladiatorial contest or animal hunt, but this was very costly and therefore rare.

I recall hearing a conversation between two such citizens:

“I tell you,” said one, “that damn game nearly bankrupted me. My mistake was to rent my gladiators from a *lanista* who was recommended by a certain *munerarius* who I guess was in cahoots with him. So what happened? *Three of the fellows were killed!* Those men were supposed to be brave, well trained, and of top quality. One was slain outright, the other two begged for their lives and the crowd demanded that their throats be cut. I ask you: *Where were the gods?* So, instead of paying a rental fee of eighty *sesterces*, I had to reimburse that bastard at four thousand *sesterces* apiece. You’d think *I’d* killed them.”

“*Gladiators?*” the other cried. “The price of *ostriches* is through the roof! The smallest *monkey* costs a fortune. The good news is that I’ve a contact who says he can get me a tiger. Now a tiger’s worth any price. I’ll starve it for a week, then run it against ten unarmed POW’s. The glory will be all mine!”

“Sure,” said the first, “and if *I* did that, with *my* luck the damn tiger would bound into the arena, drop dead of starvation, and the prisoners

would devour *it*.”

My education in the baths wasn't entirely made up of listening to conversations. Two afternoons a week I was taught Latin and Greek by Dorcas, a friendly Greek slave who'd been obliged to study Latin by his wealthy master. Dorcas would bring a wax tablet and stylus for me to work with.

I loved to startle him with bits of my secret languages, like, “*Shalom, Dorcas.*”

He'd always jump. I remember one time he said, “I don't understand, Mel. Your Latin's excellent, your Greek's coming along great, but you're *fluent* in eastern tongues. When did you learn Hebrew and Aramaic?”

At this I laughed a loud laugh. “I never learned them, Dorcas. They were already in me when I was born, like my eyesight and hearing.”

He frowned. “Mel, are you sure you're a Roman?”

“Are you *serious*?” Turning my head I held my chin high to exhibit a profile that out-Caesared Caesar's. “Is this a Roman nose or *what*?”

That really silenced him.

IV [26 CE]

When not at the baths I did odd jobs for shopkeepers and builders to earn enough to pay for food and a place to sleep. Sometimes I was able to buy a book from one of the booksellers near the Forum, but more often I'd attend readings of poetry and philosophy. During festivals I watched plays, dancers, and mimes. Less often I went to see chariot races and boxing.

Of course, whenever there was a gladiatorial event I went to the amphitheater. Tickets, being free, were hard to get, but I became adept at this. To me there was no thrill greater than watching a slow, heavily-armored Thracian fight an agile, almost naked but well-shielded *hoplomachus*, both trained to fight and face death bravely. The crowds came to see shows of bravery – a brave fight ending in a brave death or a well-deserved reprieve. We didn't like to see a coward begging for his life.

Nothing would make us angrier than that. “*Verbera!*” Kill the coward! “*Iugula!*” Cut his throat! This we'd shout, not knowing or caring how many thousands of *sesterces* some *lanista* might extort in the flash of the blade.

Since Tiberius never attended amphitheater games, it was up to the *munerarius* to signal whether a contender was to leave the arena through the *Porta Sanivivaria*, the Gate of Life, or be slain and dragged out through the *Porta Libitinaria*, the Gate of Death.

I recall two brothers who were pitted against each other. Finally one dropped his shield and raised his finger to signify defeat. Grabbing the

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victor's arm, the *lanista* restrained him from dispatching the other, awaiting a signal from the crowd. The defeated man dropped to one knee. Was he begging his brother to spare his life? Was the *lanista* telling him to be brave? It was obvious the man was a coward and had to die, so we all began yelling, "*Verbera! Verbera!*"

The will of the crowd prevailed; Marcus Publius, the *munerarius*, pointed his thumb downward. As the victor raised his sword I wondered if he was repeating to himself the gladiators' mantra: *Ut quis quem vicerit occidat* – Kill the loser, whoever he may be. For he knew – as all gladiators and we spectators also knew – that the next time, should the positions be reversed, the one he spared today would not hesitate to slay *him*.

The *lanista* stood aside, the gladiator paused a moment, sword raised, then brought it down like a flash of lightning, striking off his brother's head. Such a great fountain of blood shot from his neck that it dyed crimson the *lanista's* white tunic.

Marcus Publius motioned that a palm branch be given the victor. How we cheered as he ran around the arena with his branch held high. Why, I wondered, didn't Tiberius Caesar enjoy sharing these moments with his people? Little did anyone know that only days later our emperor would exile himself to the island of Capri and never return to Rome in his lifetime.

Then one day my big break came. I was outside the amphitheater looking at posters advertising an upcoming gladiatorial contest and animal hunt, when someone came out of a door and hailed me. I looked up to see a man I recognized. It was Marcus Publius, the *munerarius*.

"Hey, kid," he called. "Wanna job?"

I was thrilled! Here was my chance! "A job as gladiator?" I cried. "Can I be a gladiator? My father was a brave gladiator. He died fighting a tiger. My name's . . . uh . . . Melius. You can call me Mel."

"Tell you what, Mel," he said, "You work hard and when you're old enough I'll see that you're trained in the very best gladiator school. How old are you now?"

I told him I was sixteen. He considered this a moment, then said, "How does in ten years sound?"

"Great! It's a deal."

He said he'd write out a contract and told me I should see a certain man about a hook. I did as he said and when I saw the *munerarius* again he was talking to some guy. They were chuckling together. Seeing me, my boss pointed me out to his friend.

"Hey, Mel," the friend called, "if you see a lion with a thorn in its paw, *don't try to pull it out!*"

Another non sequitur. What man could be so stupid – or so *brave* – that he'd attempt to pull a thorn from a lion's paw?

It wasn't until years later, in Apollo's temple at Delphi, that I learned what his words had signified.

V

And so I began my first real job, as an arena cleaner. Mostly our work was to hook a dead animal or human corpse and drag it out of the arena. Heavy animals we'd attach to mules. After the dead were removed we'd work fast to smooth over the bloody spots with fresh sand.

The best part of the job was getting to see gladiators, hunters, and wild animals up close. Of course, by the time I got close many were dead, but their blood was fresh and hot and the scent of victory still hung in the air. Because these contests were few and far between, I also helped keep the amphitheater in good repair and attended to the storage of the wild animals.

At night I dreamed of being a great gladiator like my father, of dying a brave death in the arena. It was a happy time. Next to being a gladiator myself, I felt life couldn't get any better than this.

The wild animal hunts and displays of animal tricks were fascinating. These took place in the morning. During the noon break prisoners were fed to the beasts. But best of all were the afternoons when horns blew and gladiators ran into the arena. Most held themselves proudly and it was always a surprise when one of these would die a coward's death and leave the arena on the end of a hook.

The dishonorable dead would be taken to the *spoilarium* to be stripped of their armor. If no relative or friend claimed the body it would be tossed into the Tiber, or into an offal pit full of dead bears, crocodiles, and other refuse.

The crowd always went wild when the gladiators entered and circled the arena with the music of horns. In their special seating area, women and girls would wave and scream the names of their favorites. The most famous and popular gladiators – those who'd survived many contests – often had badly chopped-up faces and runny eyes. Some had lost an ear or nose. Even so, they'd grin and wave back at the ladies.

Everyone admired and envied these men. I certainly did. I was sure my father had won many victory wreaths, prizes, and bowls of gold coins. I never stopped to wonder where his riches had gone – they'd vanished even as he had, like a snuffed-out flame, gone where a dream goes when the dreamer awakes.

One day I saw a poster that really thrilled me: ten crocodiles would be hunted by five black African natives. The way the hunters were shown – wearing crocodile skins, crocodile masks, and brandishing javelins – made them look as mean as their prey.

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“Wait’ll you see these guys,” my boss told me. “They’re from some kind of crocodile tribe. Even when they shed their tribal clothes and masks, their skin is scarred all over to make it look like croc skin, even their faces.”

“That must be really ugly,” I shivered.

“Some women actually think it’s beautiful. Anyway, after they’ve killed the crocs, they’ll be tiger meat.”

Then he told me that for the crocodile hunt the arena would be planted with trees and shrubs. Pools of water would make it look like an African swamp. Wow! I could hardly wait. Nobody liked crocodiles. They were the cruelest, most hated animals alive. This was going to be good!

And it was. The crocs were quick and smart and their hides tough, but one by one they were pierced by javelins and slain. When it was over, the bloody water was drained away and specialists checked that the beasts were dead. Then teams of mules appeared to help us pull them from the arena.

Approaching one victim I saw a javelin had broken off in the top of its tail. We were always supposed to pull weapons out of anything dead and put them aside, so I gave it a good yank.

Jupiter! This fellow *wasn’t* dead. He must only have fainted. As I yanked, he suddenly whirled his head around and looked at me with terrified eyes.

“You’re alive!” I cried.

It was like a moment between gods or spirits, out of time and place. Crocodile or man, so alone and terrified was he, so far from family and home, my heart went out to him. One thing was clear: whatever living thing he was, he’d soon be thrown to the tigers unless someone intervened. But should that one be me? I recalled swearing years ago never again to love a human being. If that vow still held, and yet I saved him, then this must be a crocodile.

I tried to reassure him with my voice. “Poor fellow. You’re hurt. Don’t be afraid. I’ll help you.” Turning the team around I fussed with the hook, as if attaching him to it. “Pretend you’re dead and they’re pulling you,” I told him, using gestures to explain what I meant. He understood; closing his eyes and scrunching in his head, he shuffled off on all fours behind the mules.

The only place I could think to take him was my own sleeping place beneath the arena. Other arena cleaners secretly kept injured monkeys and birds they’d saved from the wild animal hunts. I only hoped no one would mind that my pet was a little bulkier than most.

We got past the gate without incident and I sent back the mules. We then continued on down the dimly-lit underground passageway, hearing the screams and bellows of the wild animals caged beneath the amphitheater. I wondered if this fellow too had once cried out in terror in the holds

of ships, and in cages hauled overland, to finally arrive in this subterranean city of the doomed, there to be turned out at last into the hot circle of sand, blood, and death.

My sleeping place was a tiny cell, no larger than an animal cage. I helped the injured one lie down on the bits of straw that served as my own bed. It was difficult getting all of him inside.

"Rest here, big fella," I told him. Then I tried to think of a name. Croc . . . Croc . . . Crocchus! That's it! "Well, Crocchus," I said, "you stay right here, don't bite anyone, and I'll be back in a few minutes." Leaving the amphitheater I hurried to a nearby apothecary shop where I bought a powder that would heal cut flesh, then returned as fast as I could.

Crocchus was waiting and we were both glad to see each other. I mixed the powder with some water and applied it to his wound. "That should make it heal," I told him. Gratefully he rubbed the side of his snout against my arm. Kneeling down, I hugged his great head.

"Oh, Crocchus," I said, "it's been so long since I had someone to love. I can love you because you're only a poor beast, and loving you isn't like loving a man or a woman. I promise you, I'll do everything I can to help you live a happy life. When you die you'll die a brave death, a hero's death. Your death will be a time to rejoice, not grieve. I promise you this. I promise you this."

Later that day when my work was done, I went to the baths my boss frequented and found him sitting in a warm pool. I didn't get into the water, but stood on the side, wearing my usual towel.

He looked at me and laughed. "Mel! How's it going? I hear you have a new friend – *quite* a friend, in fact. I may ask to borrow him one of these days."

His words chilled me because I knew what he meant to do with Crocchus. Gathering all my nerve I said, "Sir, that's what I want to talk to you about. The truth is . . . well . . . I'd like to be Crocchus's handler."

"*Crocchus* is it?" he guffawed. "You've given the beast a name?" Then he beckoned me toward the water. "Come on in. Why are you standing there like that? Hiding something?"

"Oh no, sir," I choked.

"Then take off that towel. How can we talk business if you're out there and I'm in here?"

Ashamed but determined, I turned around and slipped into the water as fast as possible. My boss laughed heartily. "That's more like it," he said. "So, you want to be his handler. Well, that's okay with me as long as you keep up your good work. I'll add his name to our contract."

I thanked him and assured him I'd work harder than ever. "But . . . there's something else. Crocchus will be killed unless he gets training. I want to put him in a gladiator school. Can you give me the name of a good *lanista*?"

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“A good *lanista*?” cried my boss. “They’re all a bunch of butchers and pimps. I know every one of them, but I doubt any would accept your friend.”

“Oh, but one *has* to. Crocchus won’t survive an hour in the arena unless he’s trained.”

“Well, you see, Mel, it’s a matter of business. I don’t think there’s a *munerarius* in Rome, or even in the provinces, who’d run a gladiator who looks like Crocchus. I sure wouldn’t. But I’ll tell you what. Tomorrow I’ll speak to a certain *lanista* I’ve dealt with before. Then you talk to him. If he agrees to train Crocchus, and makes a gladiator out of him, I’ll think about it. Now get outta here. And put that towel back on before someone sees you.”

I heard his laughter as I hurried away, the towel wrapped firmly about my loins.

VI

A few days later Crocchus was feeling better, so it was time to talk to the *lanista*. I found the building, we climbed the stairs to his office, and I knocked on the door.

“Enter.”

We went in. I told the *lanista* that my boss had sent me and why we’d come. He didn’t want to hear about it.

“*Minime vero!*” he shouted. “*Minime vero!*” No! No! Enroll that piece of jungle meat? And what next? Women? Dwarfs? Cripples? No *munerarius* in his right mind would rent that fellow from me, certainly not Marcus Publius.”

“But,” I cried, “if Crocchus isn’t trained they’ll feed him to the tigers. He’ll die without a chance to show his courage.”

“I said *minime vero!* What part of *minime vero* don’t you understand?”

There was nothing to do but leave. I started toward the door when suddenly I heard, “Wait.” I turned to see the *lanista* with a cunning expression on his face.

“Tell you what, Mel,” he said. “If you’re so fired up about having your friend become a gladiator, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll train him and if he gets to be a winner, Marcus and I will split his first six prizes.”

“Great! You’re on!”

“Sign here.”

The training took place in a small arena at the barracks where wooden posts stuck out of the sand. Besides Crocchus there were several condemned slaves, prisoners in shackles, and a couple of guys from the upper classes who’d always dreamed of being gladiators. Non-participants, like

some giggling girls and me, were allowed to watch.

The *lanista* opened with a pep talk. “Okay, listen up. You wanna win? You wanna win big and often? You want victory wreaths, cash prizes and rich, beautiful, babes chasing you?”

Everyone except Crocchus was smiling and nodding.

“Well, here’s some tips. *Never turn your back on the enemy*. If you’re down, *never beg for mercy*. The crowd hates that. You gotta show bravery. You gotta show ‘em that you aren’t afraid to die. Don’t worry, we’ll teach you how to die bravely. If you show you have courage, thumbs will be up. And if you don’t . . .” He made a thumbs-down sign.

Pausing, the *lanista* looked around. “Any questions?” No one even coughed. “Good. Let’s get started.”

The prisoners were unshackled and the trainees offered prayers to the gods. Wooden swords were handed out and some began slashing at the posts, watched carefully by their trainers. One prisoner-of-war, a former fisherman, was given a net and trident and did well with them. Crocchus’s trainer fainted with a blunt spear as Crocchus leapt and twisted to avoid being poked.

All this while the *lanista* kept shouting stuff to keep the trainees energized. “Above all, remember this: wherever you’re from, you’re in *Rome* now and Romans don’t philosophize, we *rule*. We don’t play, we *kill*. We harden our bodies with work, not athletics. We do everything to placate the gods, and we worship our late, great, divine Augustus.” Then he added *sotto voce*, “And maybe some day we’ll worship Tiberius, if the dork doesn’t close down the games.

“The two main Roman virtues are physical courage and physical courage. Let the Greeks run and jump; we kill and die with excellence. Roman crowds want to see exciting contests between well-matched opponents, with brave men victorious and cowards dead. *Capiche?*”

Crocchus appeared very taken with the *lanista*’s voice and body language. Once, stopping practice, he just stood there watching and listening, seeming to get stronger and taller with each challenging word. Then suddenly the fisherman raised his net, whirled it, and sent it whistling toward Crocchus.

“Crocchus! Behind you!” the *lanista* shouted.

Instantly Crocchus ducked, rolled, and caught the edge of the net. Yanking it free of the man’s hands he spun it around his head and sent it flying back, ensnaring the other and pulling him to the ground.

The *lanista* was pleased. “Lookin’ good, Crocchus,” he said. Crocchus’s trainer smiled. I beamed.

VII

Two years went by, two wonderful years during which Crocchus metamorphosed from a hapless, helpless creature into a fearless fighter, the darling of Rome. Each time the gladiators ran into the arena the onlookers would cheer. But when the new hero, Crocchus, stalked proudly in, wearing his mask and gleaming crocodile skin, the roars overflowed the amphitheater and filled the city with waves of joy. High up in the stands women fainted, while men of all classes shook their heads in amazement, respect, and awe.

I could picture my brave father being adored by the crowds. If only I'd been born earlier, so that I could have adored him too.

What was different about Crocchus from the other net-fighters is that he raised his class of gladiator, *retiarius*, from the lowest to the highest rung of respect. Wearing no dignifying armor, expected to run from an opponent when they missed with their net, or engage in an ugly contest of trident-against-shield, even knife-against-knife, *retiarum* normally had an inferior status. But Crocchus never missed with his net and never ran. On the contrary, he was so skilled, so brave, that he inspired even his adversaries; the losers never groveled before him, but faced death bravely. Consequently, they'd win the favor of the crowd and walk out of the arena through the Gate of Life. Indeed, it became an eagerly-awaited ritual.

In those two years Crocchus fought six times and won six victory wreaths. Six times I trotted proudly around the arena behind him, carrying the winner's bowl of gold coins. And six times Crocchus and I trotted out through the arena gate where my boss and the *lanista*, winking at each other, waited to relieve me of my gleaming burden.

It didn't matter; Crocchus and I weren't in it for the money.

Of all his admirers, one woman in particular had come to my attention – an attractive woman, but old enough to be my aunt. I'd often seen her at the barracks watching Crocchus train. Once or twice I'd spotted her on the street looking at the posters advertising a Crocchus fight. And once I noticed her carefully writing his name on walls already covered with Crocchus graffiti. I inquired and learned that she was a wealthy divorcee named Lucia.

I didn't know it then, but Lucia had witnessed something inauspicious the afternoon of the sixth wreath. It had been a cloudy day and the sailors hadn't put out the awnings. While Crocchus was making his victory run around the arena, she happened to look up and saw a flock of crows flying over the amphitheater – a bad omen.

She'd said to herself, "Crocchus, you're the greatest of them all, but your life's in danger. I know it. I can feel it. Somehow I have to save you. But how?"

Not having seen the crows myself – and not being very superstitious

anyway – I was unaware of any danger. To me life was sweet and I believed it would go on like this forever. Then one afternoon in the baths I overheard a conversation between two citizens.

“I hear Crocchus Africanus comes here from time to time,” said one. “You seen him?”

The other turned pale. “They let swamp dung like him in the baths?” He peered into the water, turning around and around.

“Not usually, but the guy’s a celebrity.”

“He isn’t here now,” said his friend, patting the water with relief. “So tell me, how was Palestine? When did you get back?”

“Two days ago. Strange place, strange people. Jews going around healing folks, preaching, performing miracles. One guy even called himself king of the Jews.”

“Yeah? Was he an insurrectionist or just nuts?”

“Probably both. And I’d say he’s asking for it. King of the Jews my foot. So what’s Tiberius? Chopped olives? Then he tells everyone he’s the son of their god: a messiah. Drives the other Jews nuts.”

“Who’s our procurator over there?”

“He’s not a procurator, only a prefect, an equestrian. Name’s Pontius Pilate.”

“That’s a pretty low rank to put in a job like that. All Rome needs is an insurrection.”

“Don’t worry, Tiberius can always send Crocchus Africanus to net the guy.”

“Great idea,” the other laughed. “Crocchus saves the empire and they put a statue of him alongside the wolf, maybe give him a couple of baby crows to suckle.”

“Crows don’t suckle,” his friend corrected him. “The females lay eggs.”

“So, they’ll give him a couple of eggs to sit on, call ‘em *Omelet* and *Remus*.” He laughed and his friend groaned a deep groan. It reminded me how those senators had laughed and groaned that other time in the baths. *Their* conversation had been about eggs too. Was there something intrinsically funny about eggs, I wondered? If so, I had no idea what it could be.

Just then another man got into the water. One of the two recognized him and nudged his friend. “Know who that is? He’s one of the lawyers hired by Petronius Calvus. If they can overturn the judge’s ruling, Petronius could get all the money awarded his wife. Lucia would be pauperized.”

“That wouldn’t be fair. The money was hers to begin with. Petronius didn’t have an *as* when she married him.”

“Well, it’s the old story. The lady married for love and she married a loser. Losers have a way of winning divorce settlements.”

“You should know,” laughed his friend. “You should know.”

VIII

A few days later I was called to my boss's office. "I want you to help put those up," he told me, pointing at some new Crocchus posters.

I looked at one of the posters, then rubbed my eyes and looked again. "Boss! Is this true? Twenty-two armed pygmies are going to hunt Crocchus?"

He didn't bother to reply. "Take the posters and the paste pot," he snapped, "and follow me." Then he set off at a fast pace into the street. Stopping, he pointed at the wall. "Dab some there," he told me, "then stick one on."

"But boss," I cried, obeying him even as I protested, "*twenty-two against one?*"

"It'll be great," he assured me. "We'll have pools of water and exotic shrubbery where Crocchus can hide. Then these tiny guys will paddle out with tiny weapons – darts. Crocchus won't have his net or trident, but he'll have his jungle smarts."

Darts? No net or trident? His words alarmed me. "*Poison darts?*"

"Nah, *blow* darts. Poison *blow* darts. It'll be a first. The crowd'll go wild when the poison starts to work. What a death! They don't see *that* every day. C'mon, c'mon. Stick one there."

As I pressed another poster against the wall I saw that woman, Lucia, coming down the street. I turned once more to plead for Crocchus's life. "But boss, Crocchus will be killed. At least let him have a *net*."

He shook his head. "Y'know, Mel, it has to happen some time. People wanna see the great Crocchus fight overwhelming odds, and maybe even die. They wanna see him die bravely. I've got three politicians right now bidding for our contract. Given he's what he is, no lovesick gal's gonna buy him, retire him from the arena, and give him a villa outside Rome. So what choice do I have?"

Lucia was standing a short distance away looking at some posters. "Have you asked *her?*"

He turned, saw Lucia, and his eyes lit up. "Not yet." Then he walked over and introduced himself to her.

I couldn't hear what was said, but soon their talk became more animated. Once they glanced my way and I saw Lucia shake her head sadly. What had he told her? Finally they seemed to come to some agreement. Lucia turned and walked quickly away. My boss came back. I was terrified to hear what he'd say.

"Well," he said, "the lady made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

"She bought our contract? Does she want Crocchus to fight the pygmies?"

"Nah. She wants to retire him from the arena and give him a villa outside Rome."

My joy was boundless. “Fantastic!”

“You’ll be working for her from now on. Don’t forget to turn in your hook.”

He started to walk away, but there was something I had to know. “Boss, did you tell her about my father the gladiator?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I did.”

“Great! Thanks!” His words made me happy but I didn’t understand until years later why he looked away when he replied – why he didn’t look me in the eye. The only thing on my mind right then was to pull down the posters and go tell Crocchus the news.

I found my friend relaxing in our room. “Crocchus!” I cried, “I have great news!” Crocchus, whose understanding of languages had improved over time – though he still spoke in sounds instead of words – looked up with interest.

“They were going to have you hunted by twenty-two pygmies. Can you believe it? They were going to kill you with poison blow darts.”

Looking enormously pleased, Crocchus stood up, swayed dramatically, collapsed on the floor, convulsed once or twice, then lay still with closed eyes, beatific in “death.”

His crazy bravado filled me with alarm. “Crocchus! The hunt has been cancelled!” His eyes popped open. “A rich lady named Lucia bought our contract. She’s retiring both of us from the arena.” Looking dazed, Crocchus got to his feet. “She’s giving you a villa in the countryside. Crocchus, you won’t die! You’ll live like a prince!”

My news hadn’t made him happy – on the contrary. Proud, inconsolable, he gave me a withering glance and lay down on the straw, his back toward me.

Feeling miserable, I took a wreath from the wall, laid it on his head, and patted it. I wanted to remind him that he already was the greatest of them all, the greatest ever – and that that would never change. Sinking to my knees beside him I laid my cheek against his scarred hide. “I know, my friend,” I said, “it’s glorious to die bravely, and when we die I hope that’s the way. But Crocchus, this is the beginning of a whole new life for you. Please be happy. You’ll see. It’ll be great.”

Crocchus didn’t move. Gently I soothed his brow with my hand as the insane laugh of a caged hyena echoed through the gloom.

IX

Three days later a carriage arrived to take us to our new domicile. It wasn’t easy getting Crocchus to leave our little room; I finally had to drag him out by a leg. Getting him into the coach was no easier, like trying to force a large, angry foot with many toes into a small sandal.

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At the end of an hour's drive our carriage stopped in front of a gate. The gate opened to reveal gardens, forests, and fields surrounding a beautiful country villa with a tile roof and long reflecting pool. Crocchus and I descended, I with his wreaths on one arm and a small bag containing an extra tunic in the other. No happy camper, my friend carried only the sour expression he'd worn since learning of his retirement.

As we approached the house, Lucia, beautifully dressed and coiffed and surrounded by household slaves, came through the front door and held out her arms in gracious welcome. But to my horror, Crocchus elected to ignore her; turning aside, he stepped into the reflecting pool and walked its length kicking and churning the water with his feet like a spoiled child. Ignoring his manner, she greeted both of us warmly, but I was mortified by my friend's behavior.

"My name is Lucia," she told us. "Crocchus Africanus, I'm your greatest admirer. You honor me by accepting my humble gift." With a sweep of her arm she indicated the villa behind her. "I welcome both of you to your new home." She gave a signal and two male slaves stepped forward. One relieved me of the wreaths and bag, the other unfolded a toga and helped me put it on over my tunic.

"My first toga!" I cried in delight. "Is this my *toga virilis*? Does it mean I'm a Roman citizen?"

She laughed. "Not exactly. Let's just say it means you're a man – unofficially, of course."

As I felt the texture and weight of the wool, something inside me seemed to change. Lucia appeared to change too. Was it because I felt suddenly older and more mature – a real man – that she looked younger, even fascinating?

After welcoming us, Lucia showed us around the villa. There was an elegant parlor, a banquet hall, bedrooms, and baths. An atrium with magnificent views showed us three different countries: earth, water, and sky. Impressive too was a cellar in which snow to cool drinks was kept year round.

One feature of the house I was eager to explore was the library, where niches in the walls contained wooden bookcases. Open the doors of one and there lay works by Roman authors, from Plautus, Cicero, and Strabo to the moderns such as Ovid and Seneca, each scroll with an identifying tag. The bookcase at the other end of the room was stocked with Greek classics including the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Euripides and other playwrights were well represented, as were the masters of philosophy. An adjacent colonnade provided plenty of light for reading.

"This library was left me by my late first husband," Lucia said. "Please enjoy it."

The villa also had a *lararium* for the worship of household gods. Shrines to other gods were scattered throughout the rooms and gardens.

“Dear Crocchus, dear Mel,” Lucia said when our tour was finished, “I’ve made blood sacrifices to Jupiter and Janus. Priests have examined the entrails and told me the omens are excellent. Your slaves and household gods await you. Be good to them and they’ll serve you well.”

Having said this she hesitated, frowning, then added as blithely as possible, “Oh, and by the way, my husband has had my other properties denied me during the divorce proceedings. I and my slaves will be living here with you until that matter is settled. I hope you won’t mind.”

I quickly put her at ease, delighted at this opportunity to learn more about this fascinating woman.

When it was lunchtime, Lucia took us into the garden where slaves holding bowls of food stood around a table. “Please, recline and dine,” she told us. “Be at home.”

As we’d never seen such dishes, Lucia explained which were the eels, the snails, the ostrich wings, and the flamingo tongues. She urged us to try the *pâté de fois gras* that had recently been invented by Apicius, but when I learned it had been made by fattening the livers of sows with a diet of figs, I told Lucia that I didn’t eat pork and would have to pass.

She struck her forehead. “Oh, I forgot!”

“You didn’t forget,” I said. “I never told you.”

“You didn’t? Oh, I thought you had. Well, it doesn’t matter.”

I saw nothing resembling gruel, but reclined in comfort on one of the divans, helping myself to olives, bread, and oil; of all the delicacies placed before us, these were the only ones I felt were actually made of food. Crocchus, sitting some distance away by the reflecting pool, refused food brought to him by the servants. When Lucia saw him turn down a roasted boar’s leg and a large mullet for which she’d paid one thousand *sesterces* a pound, she was stymied.

“Mel,” she said, “what’s wrong with Crocchus? He should be happy, but he isn’t.”

“He’ll be okay,” I assured her. “Maybe he needs more action. He’s used to challenges.”

“You’d think someone born in the wilds of Africa would find life more agreeable in the country than the city.”

I too was puzzled by my friend’s behavior. “Maybe if you could introduce him to a female,” I suggested.

“*Minime vero!*” exclaimed Lucia in horror.

Now I was *really* puzzled. What was going on here? “Madame,” I began, but she interrupted me.

“Please, Mel, call me Lucia.”

“Lucia, could I ask . . . uh . . . why exactly you chose Crocchus when there were so many *other* gladiators to pick from?”

My question seemed to disturb her. She got to her feet, walked to a nearby bench, and sat down. Taking some olives, I walked over and sat

down near her.

“Let me explain,” she said. “I was married at thirteen to a wealthy man much older than myself. A few years later my husband died. I married again, but my second husband, whom I’d loved and trusted, decided to divorce me and marry my best friend. I couldn’t understand it. I’d carefully chosen our wedding date, had considered all the omens, made sacrifices to the gods, had priests examine the entrails, and yada yada. When he left me I swore I’d never marry again. The first time I saw Crocchus – strong, brave Crocchus – I knew he was perfect – perfect to be my life’s companion.”

Her explanation made sense but there was still much about Lucia I wanted to know. “Do you have children?”

She gave a short, harsh laugh. “Children? No woman of my class has children nowadays. If we did, our husbands would sell them or expose them. Men today don’t want to waste money raising worthless heirs whom they’ll probably have to kill later anyway. They prefer to spend their money on their mistresses.”

“You have no family to turn to?”

“My family disowned me when I married for love. I have slaves, and now I have Crocchus and you. I don’t want or need other friends; friends betray you. Now come, let’s walk.”

Getting to our feet we strolled side by side around the garden, but Lucia hadn’t forgotten my questions. “Mel,” she said, “you asked why I chose Crocchus over the others. Please understand that I’ve long been his greatest admirer. I watched him receive every one of his wreaths.” Then she told me of seeing the flock of crows. “Of course I took this as a sign that Crocchus would die very soon unless I did something to prevent it.”

“You’re prophetic!” I exclaimed.

She sighed ruefully. “Don’t I wish. Then another omen clinched it; a man I’d never met came up to me and asked if I wanted to buy Crocchus’s contract.”

“My boss.”

“He wanted top *denarius* for it, but I didn’t hesitate. And now,” she continued, “it’s *my* turn to ask questions. Tell me, why did *you* choose Crocchus to be your friend? He’s not the sort of companion a young man would normally select.”

Her question reached deep into a part of me that I was loath to explore, explain, or share. Then suddenly I found the words. “But Lucia, my reasons were similar to yours. I wanted a friend who couldn’t hurt me even if he betrayed or abandoned me. I wanted my friend to be someone who, even if he died, I’d never miss or mourn. After all, who would mourn the death or disappearance of a crocodile?”

“Are you sure?” she asked gently.

“Of course I am!”

My words seemed to satisfy her, for she didn't pursue the subject. "Mel," she said, "from this moment on I will devote myself to assuring the happiness of Crocchus Africanus. Are you with me?"

"Absolutely."

We both turned to look in the direction of the reflecting pool where Crocchus lay half in, half out of the water, his back to us.

X

Lucia was true to her word. For weeks to come the villa was a center of activity, overflowing with music, dancers, and feasting. But to our dismay Crocchus stayed out of sight the entire time, avoiding both food and entertainment.

Poor Crocchus. What would his future be? It was clear that by forcing him into retirement Lucia and I had deprived him of the thrills and violent challenges of the arena, and the right to a brave death in combat.

But Lucia wasn't one to give up easily, not when there were gods to call upon for help. One day I found her in the garden where she'd just sacrificed a chicken at a small shrine dedicated to Janus. Seeing me, she smiled.

"Mel," she said, "Janus is my favorite god, the god of beginnings. Beginnings! Doesn't the word thrill you? I know, I know, men fear beginnings – the start of wars, of battles, of sea crossings – and that's why they consult oracles and make sacrifice to Janus. But *I* worship Janus because I *love* beginnings. The first of January always fills me with resolution. It's my favorite day of the year."

I told her I wished Crocchus shared her enthusiasm.

"He will, he will. I sacrificed that chicken in his name. Janus will take note."

Together we walked around the garden where spring flowers, shrubs, and shade trees were coming into bud. I told her she had a beautiful garden, but to my surprise her face grew pensive. "I love my flowers," she told me, "but they aren't my greatest passion. Want to know what my dream is? Promise you won't laugh?"

"When have you ever heard me laugh?"

"Good point. Well then, my dream is to be a soothsayer, a clairvoyant. I already know what happened in the past. Reading the works of Caesar, Plato, and Homer I learn what happened long before I was born – events both historical and fantastical. So why shouldn't I be able to see into the future with the same clarity? The Oracle at Delphi tells the future, but the Pythia gets her information from Apollo. I'd like to tell people what *I* foresee. But *how*? How can I become clairvoyant?"

"Maybe there are exercises to strengthen one's prophetic powers."

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“If you hear of any, let me know. I’ll work at them every day.”

We walked on. For a long moment Lucia was silent, thinking her own thoughts, then suddenly she said, “Mel, we have to find Crocchus a challenge that will restore his will to live. He’s practically stopped eating.”

I had nothing to suggest. “The world is full of unmet challenges,” I assured her. “Something will turn up.”

* * * * *

That night I had a dream, the same I’d had many times before. In the dream I was transported to a far-off place, a country I’d never visited or heard of. I found myself standing on an infinite expanse of sand reaching to all the horizons at once. Before me was a kind of knoll or hillock – or perhaps a hummock, but not a proper hill. On top of this was a fellow who looked like me.

The dream would end the same way each time: suddenly he’d look up, see me, and be about to speak. And each time I’d awaken with a start, never hearing what he had to say.

I mention this here as a prelude to what I’ll next relate, to show that I wasn’t unfamiliar with dreams.

XI

The next morning Lucia, Crocchus, and I met for breakfast in the garden. As usual, Crocchus would eat nothing. How long, I wondered, could he go without nourishment? Was he taking his meals in a nearby stream, or dining off Lucia’s sacrificial animals?

Lucia came to breakfast accompanied by two of her personal slaves: Olivia, who oiled and perfumed her mistress’s skin, and Tressa, who coifed her hair. Since my arrival Tressa had been sending secret glances my way. We’d also exchanged several blushes. I found myself trying to avoid her eyes while never taking my own off her lovely face. But time after time her glance would ambush my gaze and we’d begin blushing again.

While this was going on I felt I had to hide my attraction to Tressa from Lucia, whom I also found fascinating at certain moments. What was wrong with me? Was I some fickle, Janus-faced boor – a man when wearing a toga, a boy when dressed in a tunic?

Lucia seemed nervous that morning. She sighed a great deal, scarcely touching the delicacies placed before us. Once or twice she rolled from her side onto her back and stared at the sky. After a while I asked what was wrong. She told me that during the night Jupiter had sent her a dream, a disturbing dream, full of omens. She was still trying to sort out what

they meant. I suggested she tell me the dream, to see if I could help.

"I was in the amphitheater," she said, "and everyone was shouting, but I couldn't see the arena clearly and had no idea what was going on. Then a shadow came over me and I looked up to see a huge flock of crows. One had its head turned sideways, looking down. Mel, through his eye I saw the amphitheater below filled with thousands of spectators. All were cheering at an empty circle of sand.

"Then the crow gave a loud cry. It must have been a signal, for suddenly the flock responded by letting loose their poop. The waste rained upon the crowd and flowed down the amphitheater steps, thick as lava. As you surely know, bird poop falling on you is a good omen, and that's what makes this dream all the more puzzling.

"Wiping the filth from my face, I could now clearly see two men in the arena. One was half-naked, armed only with a wooden sword. The other was Tiberius Caesar, but both he and his robes were carved of wood. While he stood still as a post, the other man whacked at him with the sword, causing no damage.

"Then all at once the sword glinted like metal and the emperor became flesh and blood. Preparing to strike, the attacker waved his weapon around his head. The crowd was shouting, 'Crocchus! Crocchus!'

"Crocchus appeared. Flinging his net over the man with the sword, he pulled it tight. The crowd cheered wildly. Then Tiberius stepped forward, removed his crown, and placed it on Crocchus's head. When I looked at the vanquished one I saw him in the center of the arena, still in the net, nailed to a wooden cross. The crowd roared. I woke up calling, 'Crocchus! Crocchus!'"

Lucia broke off, smiling reassuringly at her slaves. "Olivia and Tressa were terrified, weren't you girls? Well, now you know why your poor mistress cried out."

I glanced at Tressa and immediately her dark, smoldering eyes locked onto mine. Managing to break away, I looked at Lucia with sympathy. "No wonder you're nervous this morning," I said. "That was a strange dream. I have no idea what it meant. Do you?"

"In fact," she replied, "while telling it to you I got some inklings. I'm almost positive the man threatening Tiberius was a certain fellow over in Palestine who calls himself king of the Jews. A friend who returned recently from Galilee mentioned him to me."

"I've heard of him too. A Nazarene named Jesus."

"That sounds right. My friend says this fellow is mounting an insurgency against Rome. Even worse, he calls himself the son of the Hebrew god, and wants everyone to worship and believe in him as the Messiah. Now, Mel, you know how tolerant Rome is of other religions. We have no quarrel with the Greek or Egyptian pantheons and have always tolerated the Jews and their ancient traditions."

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“Very true,” I agreed, feeling Tressa’s eyes take mine.

“But this Jew cares nothing for our tolerance. He combines his religious blasphemy with political insurgency. That’s a bit much, don’t you think?”

Under the spell of Tressa’s eyes I was having trouble concentrating on Lucia’s remarks, replying almost hypnotically, as if from another world, “Yes.”

“And don’t you think his talk will offend our gods and anger Caesar?”

“Absolutely.”

“And therefore this Jesus of Nazareth should be killed before his insurgency spreads and brings down the empire, no?”

Tressa’s eyes shone like pools of dark fire. “Yes,” I nodded, “and the sooner the better.”

“Well,” said Lucia, “in that case I’d say Crocchus would be perfect for the job.”

At this my mind popped back to reality. “*Crocchus?*”

Crocchus raised his head, showing interest in something for the first time in weeks. Turning toward him, Lucia intoned solemnly, “Crocchus, you must kill this Jesus of Nazareth. The fate of the empire and its gods rests with you.”

Crocchus seemed to grow taller and prouder as Lucia continued. “Are you ready to sail to Palestine and kill this rabble-rouser?” Picking up a piece of pastry, she tossed it to Crocchus who gulped it down hungrily, defiantly. Enormously energized by Lucia’s challenge, he trotted off across the garden where we saw him dance about, growling and feinting at invisible foes.

“He’s a new crocodile,” I exclaimed with delight. “When do we leave?”

At this, Lucia’s enthusiasm seemed to deflate. “That’s the one problem,” she said. “The magistrate presiding over my husband’s lawsuit died last week while eating Egyptian figs. We await the assignment of another judge. In the meantime, all my assets are frozen. If I leave Rome now, my husband will win his case by default.”

“Then you have to stay and fight,” I told her. “He could make you a pauper.”

Lucia chuckled. “Mel,” she said, “I don’t care about material possessions; wealth is a shackle that enslaves all who believe that *they* control *it*. My splendid library contains only copies of copies, whereas life is full of originals waiting to be discovered.”

Then she frowned. “I worry only about the fate of Olivia and Tressa and my other personal slaves. And of course I worry about you and Crocchus. The deed for this villa hasn’t been legally transferred to his name yet, so my former husband might claim it for himself.” Lucia looked sadly off at Crocchus, who was surely less worried by that possibility than she.

“Oh, Mel,” cried Lucia, “if I were free of these shackles we’d leave for Palestine tomorrow!”

Her words continued to amaze me. “I never thought I’d hear a rich person call wealth a form of slavery.”

“Well, now you have,” said Lucia, “and I meant it.”

Just then her slave Servicius approached. “Madame,” he said, “there’s a lawyer at the gate asking to see you. His name is Iustus.”

Lucia chuckled. “Justice, is it? A good omen. Bring him here, Servicius.”

A moment later the slave returned with the very same lawyer I’d seen in the baths. When she saw who it was, Lucia looked startled.

Ignoring this, Iustus greeted her politely. “Good morning, madam.”

“Good morning, sir,” she replied. “I believe we’ve met. You’re one of the seventeen lawyers hired by my husband to represent him.”

“Exactly. And I’ve the honor of informing you that a new magistrate was appointed who has ruled in favor of your husband.”

His words stunned Lucia. “And who might this magistrate be who makes his decision before hearing *my* side of the story?”

“His name is Lucius Calvus.”

“*Lucius Calvus?* But he’s my husband’s brother. He should have recused himself.”

“Should have, could have, didn’t,” shrugged Iustus, taking out an official-looking document. “And so your now *former* husband has been awarded sole possession of all your lands, houses, furnishings, slaves, money, and jewelry, except that which you are currently wearing. You may also keep your personal slaves and,” he said, holding up a small bag, “this purse of gold coins. You, your friends, and your personal slaves have two weeks to vacate these premises.” He handed Lucia the paper and a pen. “Please sign at the x.”

“You mean,” she said, “that by signing this I agree to give up all my worldly goods except my personal slaves, this jewelry, my friends, and that bag of gold?”

“Yes.”

She looked at me in anguish. “Crocchus won’t get this villa.”

“He won’t care,” I assured her.

Turning to the lawyer, she said, “Will you add to the agreement that the six victory wreaths of Crocchus Africanus will be kept for him in a secure vault?”

“Of course.” Taking back the pen and paper, the lawyer began writing painstakingly.

Lucia and I walked away a little distance. “There’s also the matter of your contract,” she said to me. “But Mel, I have to tell you, that contract was a scam from the beginning. Your boss promised to enroll you in a gladiator school, but in fact he’d just have sold you to a *lanista*.”

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“I know.”

“You knew that? Did you also know that as a foundling orphan your civil status was undetermined and so the contract was never even recorded?”

“Yes, I knew.”

“Then why did you sign the contract, Mel? Why did you let yourself be conned?”

How could I explain it to Lucia? How could I explain that the day I met my boss I was nobody, nothing, just another homeless fellow on the dole? I had no family or friends. The contract, even more than the job, made me feel part of Roman society, the legal system, and the empire.

“Without the contract,” I told her, “I didn’t exist. *Crocchus* didn’t exist.” Then a question occurred to me: “Why did you *buy* the contract if you knew all along it was bogus?”

She looked at me with eyes full of sympathy and understanding. “I wanted you and *Crocchus* to exist too,” she said.

Together we walked into the house. Taking the contract from a cupboard, Lucia handed it to me and I tore it up. Then we returned to the garden.

The lawyer had finished writing. He gave the paper to Lucia who read it through. Satisfied, she signed it and handed it back. He gave her the bag of gold.

“Thank you, madam,” he said. “Two weeks then.”

Lucia, standing straight and tall, replied, “Please follow *Servicius*. He’ll see you through the gate.”

“Certainly, madam.”

As the two walked away, Lucia and I turned to one another, amazed by what had just occurred. Then together, as one person, we slapped hands and cried out, “*Ita vero!*” Yes!

XII

Confident they’d favor our journey, Lucia still wanted to consult the gods one more time. Leading me into her dressing room, she approached a small shrine. I watched as she unpinned her long hair, picked up a knife, and then – to my astonishment and horror – cut off her tresses and laid them on the altar.

“But *Lucia* . . .”

“To *Janus*,” she intoned reverentially, “father of the morning, the new year, the gate, and author of my new life, I dedicate my favorite possession, my hair. May he send us a sign to show that he favors our journey.”

We both looked around. Was there a small bird at the window? No. A sudden beam of sunlight? A pretty sound? Anything? No. But then

there was no bad omen either.

"I'm sure Janus will send us a favorable omen before we start out tomorrow," Lucia said. Then she removed her bangles, rings, and necklaces and laid them on the altar.

"To Jupiter, god of thunder and rain, I dedicate my jewelry. May his lightning spare our masts and his rain not shroud our view. Send us a sign, O god of gods!

We looked around. We listened. Nothing.

Lucia studied the objects lying on her dressing table. "Let's see. What else have I got?" Picking up her mirror she looked carefully into it, pulling her facial skin back with her fingers to achieve a younger image. Then she lay the mirror on the altar.

"To Neptunus, god of the sea, I dedicate my mirror, for it will not show me as I was, and I will not see myself as I am."

I was really impressed. "Ovid?"

"Well, Meleager credits it to Plato, but of course he never read Ovid." Then an idea struck her. "Oh, wait! We'll need wind to fill our sails. Let's see . . . who's the wind god . . . wind god . . . wind god . . .?"

I searched my memory. A couple of possibilities came readily to mind. "Fartus?"

"Nooooo."

"Flatulus?"

"Close enough. Ah, I have something perfect for him." So saying, she picked up a small silver bottle, opened the top, sniffed the contents, then passed it to me.

I sniffed. "Umm. Smells great!"

Lucia held the bottle high and said grandly, "To Flatulus I dedicate my perfume. May it sweeten the wind that blows from his fat cheeks and fills our sail. Send us a sign, O god of wind!"

To my dismay, as soon as she'd said this, I farted. Lucia was delighted. "Now, *that* sounded auspicious," she said.

I bowed. "Your humble servant."

"Which reminds me," said Lucia. "Before we leave I must go into town and register my slaves as freedmen and freedwomen."

I'd been looking all this while at her shorn hair, and now offered a suggestion. "Before freeing Tressa, why not have her do something with your hair?"

"Absolutely." Then she looked at me and said a trifle testily, "You know, Mel, I've seen you and Tressa looking at each other with burning glances. Perhaps you'd like me to wait a day or two before freeing her."

I blushed, unable to meet Lucia's gaze. Had she suspected that when wearing my toga I had feelings toward her similar to my more plebian, tunic-related desires for Tressa?

"No," I replied, adding as ambiguously as possible, "I'd rather share

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my first night of love with a free woman, if she'll have me."

"Will the hussy *have* you!" cried Lucia very unambiguously. "Why wouldn't she? She's had everyone else. Now go tell Crocchus we leave the day after tomorrow for Ostia, after which we sail for Palestine where we'll expect him to kill that Nazarene and save the empire."

Stepping into the garden I relayed Lucia's message. Crocchus was elated and bowed in gratitude toward the window from which she watched us.

"Crocchus," she called softly, "with the help of the gods I promise that you'll achieve glory, a glory like you've never imagined."

How I wanted to believe her, but we'd already made promises to Crocchus that hadn't been fulfilled. Somehow Lucia and I, with or without help from her gods, had to find a way to honor this latest one.

That night as I lay near sleep, a soft, sweet-smelling form came into my room, climbed onto my bed and lay down next to me. Instantly we were entwined in each other's arms, our mouths kissing to the exclusion almost of breathing. In the darkness I couldn't see who it was, but the long hair falling all over my face – and the perfume – were Tressa's.

"Mel," she whispered, guiding my sexual organ with her hand, "I'm going to give you pleasure, a pleasure like you've never imagined."

At this I felt my loins explode in blissful rapture. When I could speak, I said, "I think you just did." Having said this I found myself suddenly tortured with a strange new feeling – a feeling that I'd just done something inexcusably premature. "Bad omen?"

She grabbed my face and took my lips between her teeth as if to tear them from my face, then gently released them. "Not at all," she assured me. "The night is young, and so are you."

"Oh, Tressa," I moaned, giving myself up willingly to her loving, experienced hands.

XIII

We'd planned to begin our sea journey from nearby Ostia, but the morning of our departure that idea was scrapped. Discovering she was constipated, Lucia took it as a sign that the Tiber was silted up and the port of Ostia closed. This meant we'd have to embark instead from Puteoli.

"Janus works in mysterious ways," she told me.

So, with another carriage behind us carrying our bedding, two of her freedmen, and other amenities, we set out on the Appian Way for the other seaport serving Rome. As this was my first real journey, seeing the countryside and stopping at inns were new and revelatory experiences. On the third day we arrived at bustling Puteoli where it felt good to climb out and stretch our legs.

I was still in a state of bliss from my night with Tressa. How long I'd looked forward to my first coupling. Over the years my friendship with a famous gladiator had caused many women to seek me out, but I knew they were really attracted to my friend, not me. Crocchus held himself aloof from casual dalliance so I couldn't blame them for wanting second best, nor did I ever comply with their desires.

Tressa had re-shaped Lucia's short hair and it looked great. Wearing a simple tunic dress, and having overcome her constipation at about the fiftieth milestone, she looked happy and fresh. Without female help to coil and dress her, she too had chosen to travel with no more than a change of clothes and a light cloak. Before leaving home she'd divided up her few pieces of jewelry and other personal possessions among her freed slaves. Her small bag of gold coins made up our entire fortune.

One thing I'd gladly left behind was my toga. The left arms of Romans are normally bound in infancy; for whatever reason, mine hadn't been. Left-handed, I found wearing a toga very uncomfortable, designed as they are to favor the right arm. Without a toga, to feel like a man now I'd have to prove myself one.

Arriving at Puteoli, Lucia began seeking passage for us on a merchant ship bound for Athens or Alexandria, where she felt we'd more easily find a ship to Palestine. But as we looked around the port, her attention was drawn to a pretty ship with one bank of oars – a unireme named the *Golden Apple*. Beside her on the dock stood her owner/captain. We introduced ourselves and told him our destination was Palestine. He took us aboard immediately and began to sing his ship's praises.

"She cuts the waves smooth as a shark's fin," he told Lucia. "You'll love the ride. She's old," he admitted, "formerly a warship, but I made her seaworthy and put her back in the water myself. She has as many years ahead of her in hull and beam as you, I, or even your son Mel."

Lucia frowned. His assumption hadn't pleased me either, but we both ignored it. "What route would we follow?" I asked.

"Well, with a ship like this it's best to stay close to the land whenever possible, to take on fresh supplies and replace oarsmen if necessary. When the winds are favorable we'll head out across the open sea. I usually roll her across the isthmus on logs. That's four hard miles but we'll save ourselves a rough ride by avoiding Cape Malea."

Lucia looked worried. "If we stay close to land, won't that increase the danger from pirates?"

The captain chuckled. "Oh, Augustus Caesar pretty well got that scum in check. What's left of them today go mainly after merchant vessels. They don't bother small ships like this unless they know there's someone on board worth ransoming."

"There definitely *won't* be," chuckled Lucia.

I asked him how long the voyage might take. He replied that it was

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too early to benefit from the Etesian winds. “If we roll her across the isthmus we could reach Caesarea in two or three weeks, with a little help from Neptunus and Aeolus.”

“*Aeolus!*” cried Lucia, striking her forehead. “Damn! Bad omen.” She turned to me. “Mel, maybe we should cancel the trip. I offered my perfume to the wrong god.” Wringing her hands she began repeating, “What to do? What to do?”

“Oh,” I said, hiding my impatience behind a smile, “let’s just go.”

Lucia stared at me, then seemed to find new resolve. “You’re right,” she said. “Let’s just do it. Janus won’t let us down, not after getting my tresses and that chicken.”

Turning away, she removed the bag of coins from its place of concealment in her décolleté, took some pieces out and replaced the bag. She put the coins into the captain’s open palm. “Deal?”

He studied the coins, then shrugged unenthusiastically. “Deal. You can stow your stuff and sleep on board tonight if you want. I’ll assemble the crew and take on supplies. We’ll be off tomorrow at first light.”

The ship had some small sleeping quarters to the rear of the rowing benches that were suitable for the three of us. After stowing our bedding and bags and sending back the carriages, we went into town to enjoy our last hours in Italy.

And enjoy them we did. Had evil men not cheated Lucia and Crocchus of the fortunes that were rightfully theirs – had we been rolling in money – could we have been any happier? I doubted it. Let others seek the security of wealth, social ties, and status; we three were free of all shackles, free of all obligations except those we willingly had to one another and the empire. What lay before us was a great adventure to be crowned with a grand accomplishment that would shine favor forever on our friend Crocchus.

Life couldn’t get any better than this.

XIV

The next morning we left the port of Puteoli and entered the Tyrrhenian Sea. In the Gulf of Naples we passed the island of Capri on whose high cliffs stood the luxurious estate of Tiberius Caesar. From that magnificent outlook our elderly emperor now ruled, spending his time with scholars, philosophers, and literary men from all over the empire. Who wouldn’t envy such an “exile”?

Naturally there were other speculations. Many believed the emperor lived on Capri to hide from conspirators and assassins. It was rumored that he engaged in sexual orgies of every description and cleared his calendar by throwing his critics off the cliffs rather than by sitting down and reason-

ing with them.

I had no interest in gossip about a man so far removed from my sphere. How could I have imagined that some day I'd be one of the very few privy to the truth?

Following the coast south we rounded Calabria through the Strait of Messina and headed into the Ionian Sea. Then, because the winds were unfavorable for a direct crossing, we worked our way up to Cape Rizzuto before turning the *Golden Apple* toward Greece. At Corfu storms delayed us a few days and we took this opportunity to replenish supplies, stretch our legs, and flaunt our fluency in the language of Plato and Aristotle among the indigenous shopkeepers and waiters.

How colored by history were the places we passed in the days to come, for we sailed in the wakes of Caesar, Odysseus, and many other great men. There to port was Actium where Octavian had defeated the fleet of Mark Anthony. Just beyond we could see the temple atop the cliffs of Leucas from which criminals – to whose arms and legs powerful birds were attached to slow their descent – were thrown during the yearly sacrifices to Apollo.

The weather was fine and the wind not unfavorable. Lazing on deck I enjoyed watching Lucia, wearing only a towel, rub oil on her smooth arms and legs. Did she miss the attentions of Olivia? Once I considered offering to rub oil on those places she couldn't reach, but no sooner had the thought entered my mind than a bothersome spirit began torturing my body. I kept silent, determined not to let it have its way.

We soon reached another picturesque leg of our journey as we headed past a sea of rocks to enter the Gulf of Patrai. With the oarsmen active and the sail down, Lucia, Crocchus, and I lay comfortably on deck, enjoying the spring sunshine. Refreshing ourselves from a water skin that we passed between us, we watched some beautiful cloud formations starting to build above us.

Then suddenly a blast of wind struck the ship with a terrible jolt. The vessel began bucking as wave after wave broke against her. Clinging to the railing, I held Lucia as she struggled into her clothes. Everywhere above us burgeoning clouds rapidly filled the yellow sky. What was happening?

"Don't worry, folks," the captain shouted. "I know this coast like the palm of my hand. There's a cove over there where we'll be safe – if we can reach it in time."

"And if we *can't*?" Lucia's voice sounded more fraught with impatience at her inability to see the future, than with any fear of what it held.

"Then madam will get a full partial refund." Another shock knocked the sailor manning the oar rudder off his feet. Grabbing it, the captain shouted, "Port! Port!" The pitching vessel tried to nose left, but half the oars were out of the water. "I'll drop her in there or die trying! Hang on!"

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But by now the storm was upon us. Waves swept over the deck, engulfing us in foam, lightning, thunder, and howling wind. Suddenly I felt the ship begin to rise. Up she rose, straight up, light as a feather, seemed to hold for a moment in mid air, then dropped onto the rocks. As the vessel split apart we were swept away in a suffocating maelstrom of green water and bubbles.

XV

It was fortunate, since neither Lucia nor I could swim, that the waves swept us onto a small beach. There we three huddled as the storm passed over. When the sun came out again we sat up slowly, examining our bumps and bruises and wiggling our extremities. Luckily no bones were broken.

The first thing Lucia did was reach for her bag of gold. “It’s gone,” she announced. Amazingly, she didn’t sound sad or disappointed. In fact, her voice seemed filled with wonder at the new set of mysteries that were now our future.

Getting painfully to our feet, we looked around. The wreckage of the *Golden Apple* lay offshore, but where were the captain and the others? Then I remembered that the galley slaves had been chained to their benches.

“Oh, right,” said Lucia, “but I definitely saw the captain going overboard.”

Moments later we discovered his body among some rocks. “There lies your full partial refund,” I told her. Bending down I rummaged through what remained of the man’s clothing, withdrew a leather purse that was tied to his body, and emptied its contents into my palm. Sand.

Well, now we had to bury the fellow. I looked around, thinking that there never was a hook when you needed one. Pulling the captain by his feet, we dragged him across the sand away from the water’s edge. The furrow he left was a vivid reminder of my days in the arena. How long ago that seemed – another world. Because we lacked digging tools, we buried him in the sand.

After lunching on sea urchins, we started walking. The road to Athens was peopled with other voyagers, on foot and in donkey and mule caravans. Some of them, seeing our disrepair, offered us food and clothing which we were happy to accept. When one traveling fisherman loaned Crocchus his net, our friend not only caught many fish that we shared with the others, but made a riveting display of his prowess. Soon he was performing by popular request, and Lucia was urged to pass around a cup that was filled and refilled by townspeople along the way.

It wasn’t Rome – there were no bowls of gold coins or triumphal horns

– but after every show the rattling sound in Lucia’s cup was music to our ears. By the time we reached our destination we’d saved up quite a few drachmas.

In the magnificent harbor of Piraeus we took passage on a merchant ship to Rhodes. There we changed to another that took us to the magnificent harbor of Caesarea Maritima. Learning on shipboard that a religious festival was about to begin in Jerusalem, and thinking it likely that the “king of the Jews” would attend, we decided to go directly there. Luckily, despite the streams of pilgrims and goods headed in the same direction, we found room aboard a ship to Joppa, the port nearest our destination.

XVI

Joppa had a shallow harbor. Our ship weighed anchor offshore while we passengers were loaded into small boats, then steered precariously through an outlying reef of jagged rocks and a violent surf.

Rough as our passage was, here was another place breathing history. A fellow passenger told us that Andromeda had been chained to one of these rocks until rescued by Perseus. Somewhere off Joppa, he said, a man named Jonah was swallowed by a whale but survived the experience. None of us had heard of Jonah or his ordeal, but we agreed that being swallowed by a sea creature, and then cut from its belly or vomited up, could not have been a pleasant experience.

The town of Joppa rose above the port. On the waterfront we found a busy marketplace where traders of many nations sold every kind of fish and fruit. Merchants transporting bales of goods haggled with donkey, mule, and camel drivers. Because Lucia had twisted her foot, we decided walking was out. Still damp with sea spray, I went around bargaining with donkey drivers in both Hebrew and Aramaic, finally settling on one who offered sturdy, benign-looking animals. Mounting up, we joined the slow-moving traffic heading toward Jerusalem.

Despite delays caused by vehicle mishaps and spilled loads, it was an interesting journey. For the first several miles the land on either side looked well watered; where there was no cultivation, fine forests grew. Every hill was crowned with a watchtower and a fortified town. But we also saw ruins caused by the crush of centuries, warfare, or both.

Lucia seemed to breathe in history with every mile. She said she could smell in this air the blood of warriors long past – Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Romans – and of course the blood shed by the besieged people of Palestine itself, both Jews and Greeks. She marveled aloud at the bright future in store for this small, so oft-disputed country, at last secure under a strong, steady, Roman rule, and she spoke again of her desire to see as far ahead in time as she could see back.

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Going along we often noticed people on horseback riding in the same direction as we, but at some distance from the clogged road. They seemed in a special hurry, and many clutched lambs in their arms. I asked the driver who they were and why the lambs.

“They’re taking them to the Temple,” he told me. “As you must know, tomorrow is the fourteenth day of Nisan. Paschal lambs have to be sacrificed on the afternoon of the fourteenth, because the fifteenth begins at sundown.”

I translated what he’d said into Greek for Lucia, who wanted to know what happened at sundown.

At this the driver laughed. “Sorry, sir,” he said in Greek. “You speak such fluent Hebrew that I thought you and your mother were Jewish. The fifteenth of Nisan is the start of Passover, marked by the Passover feast. That’s when they eat the lambs.”

Overlooking his faux pas, I told him that the lady and I were Roman and that Crocchus came from Africa, but we’d been traveling a long time and were eager to arrive. “No chance of reaching Jerusalem tomorrow?”

He shook his head. “Like all the others on the road just now, we started late. Those with the lambs will travel all night, hoping to reach the Temple in time. There are always thousands of lambs. It’s quite a production.”

“It must be,” said Lucia. “Have you seen it? Can you describe it for us?”

“Well,” he said, “at first a huge crowd waits with their lambs while the burning of entrails is completed for the day. Then part of the crowd is let in. The owner of each lamb slits its throat with a sharp knife, then pours its blood into a gold or silver bowl held by a priest standing in a line of priests holding bowls. After receiving the blood, the priest gives that bowl to one of a long line of priests standing behind him, who gives him back an empty one. The blood-filled bowl is then passed down that line of hundreds of priests and the blood is splashed upon the altar, after which the empty bowl is passed back.

“When all the lambs of that group have been killed and flayed, their owners leave the Temple to take them home to roast for the Passover meal and another group is let in. I’m afraid you’ll miss the sacrifices and the first Passover meal. I doubt we’ll reach Jerusalem before the eighth or ninth hour on Friday. Sorry.”

“That’s all right,” said Lucia. “I don’t want to travel all night, but could we find an inn that has baths?”

Our driver threw back his head and laughed. “An inn? Baths? At this time of year? Not a chance. You’ll be sleeping in a campsite along with plenty of others. You’re lucky to have two strong friends to protect you from the thieves and brigands. Speaking of which, guess who I saw on this road the other day.”

“Who?”

“Governor Pontius Pilate. He always comes down from Caesarea with extra soldiers to keep an eye on things during festivals. He’ll have a lot on his plate *this* Passover.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning there’s a fellow from Galilee they say is trying to start an insurrection. Calls himself king of the Jews.”

Our ears pricked up. “Is his name Jesus?”

“That’s him.”

“Is he in Jerusalem right now?”

“Yes. He came with his family. Know what he did when he got there? He went right to the Temple, saw the moneychangers . . .”

“Oh, Mel,” cried Lucia, “remind me to change our drachmas into shekels!”

“ . . . turned their tables upside down, and tried to throw the whole bunch out of the Temple. Can you believe it? With so many pilgrims wanting to change money and buy those silver half-shekels to pay their Temple dues? Who does he think he is?”

“He thinks he’s king of the Jews,” replied Lucia.

“Some king,” laughed the driver. “If Pilate hasn’t found him already, I’m sure it won’t be long.”

Concerned, Lucia asked, “What will they do to him?”

The man shrugged. “They’ll crucify him. That’s the Roman way.”

She frowned. “Driver, we’ve come a long distance, endured many hardships, and time may be running out. Isn’t there some way we could possibly get there sooner?”

But he only smiled and shook his head. “I’m afraid not,” he said, patting his donkey’s neck. “This is as soon as it gets.”

The next day Lucia’s foot was better, but again we opted to ride. Setting out Friday morning on the same donkeys, she was almost mad with impatience to reach Jerusalem before Jesus was caught and killed; she was determined that Crocchus claim that glory for himself.

“It’s the *not knowing*, Mel,” she said. “I swear, not knowing what the future holds is like being blind; you keep stepping into shit.”

“So, someone cleans your shoes and you keep going.”

“Okay, but I’m not the only one who ever got impatient to learn the future.” Then she described how the great Alexander had once grabbed the Pythia by the hair and pulled her into the temple to get an answer out of her.

”What did she tell him?”

“That he was invincible. Well, *duh*.”

“Lucia,” I said, “I think that if *I* wanted to see into the future I’d be awfully nice to Apollo. He’s the god of prophecy after all.”

“Yeah. You could be right. If I had the money I’d maybe sacrifice a

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chicken or something. I dunno.” She sounded discouraged.

Just then the donkey driver announced some good news. “When we get to the top of this hill you’ll see Jerusalem.”

Even as he said this, the wagon ahead of us lost a wheel. Before they could take the bushels of spilled vegetables off the road, and with a gap now open ahead of us, we kicked the sides of our donkeys. But so lazy had the beasts become that at our urging they only leaned forward a little, hoping to create an illusion of moving faster.

Seeing our frustration, our driver with shouts and whacks of his stick got the bunch going. Avoiding the vegetables we charged up the hill, holding on for dear life to our diminutive steeds. Sure enough, when we got to the top we saw, rising from the crest of the hill ahead – Jerusalem!

How to describe the emotion we felt at our first glimpse of this fabled city with its great walls and soaring towers?

“Herod was a fantastic builder,” our driver told us. “See those three big towers? They’re called Phasaël, Hippicus, and Mariamme. He was a *real* king of the Jews, that Herod, not some pipsqueak rabbi going around *calling* himself king.”

A short time later we arrived at a city gate. Dismounting, we paid the driver. Then we three walked into the city.

XVII

The first Passover feast was over, but the festival was to last a week. On that Friday the narrow streets of the lower city were choked with crowds making their way to and from the Temple. Garrisoned at the huge Antonia Fortress adjacent to the Temple Mount, Roman legionaries kept a watchful eye on the human activity.

Lucia was sure they were looking for Jesus, to arrest him. She herself peered into every passing face, hoping for a sign to help her recognize this man she’d heard about but had never seen except in her dream.

I found being in Jerusalem a strange experience. Odors I seemed to recall from some other time, some earlier life – bitter herbs, burnt entrails, incense, the baking of unleavened bread – made these streets feel familiar.

By listening to snatches of conversation it was impossible to tell whether Jesus had already been arrested or not, for nowhere did we hear his name spoken. Nor did I want to raise suspicions by appearing unduly curious about a man who was disliked by the Jews and sought by the Romans.

But Lucia really wanted to know, and Crocchus was interested too, so after warning them not to show their feelings, I screwed up my courage and walked over to a legionary. “So, tell me, have you guys nabbed that rabble-rouser yet?”

He squinted at me. “*Which* rabble-rouser?”

“The one who calls himself the Messiah.”

“They *all* say they’re messiahs. Palestine is crawling with messiahs.

“He also calls himself Jesus of Nazareth and king of the Jews.”

“Oh, *that* messiah. Yeah, we got him last night.”

Lucia managed to control her anxiety. “Are they putting him on trial?” she asked.

“Done,” replied the soldier. “I think he was convicted of insurgency, or maybe blasphemy, or both.”

“So, what’s in store for him now?” I asked.

The man chuckled. “Not much. After they gave him to us, we crowned him ‘king of the Jews’ with a wreath of thorns. Then we crucified him.”

Unable to hide my dismay, I cried, “*Already?* You crucified him *already?*” Lucia looked as shocked as I.

“This morning, at the third hour. He’s on the hill they call Golgotha. Go take a look. You’ll know him by his crown.”

“Thanks,” I said, trying not to choke. “I guess we will. Which way is it?”

The legionary pointed. “Out that gate and straight ahead. You can’t miss it. But don’t hurry. He’s only been up about six hours. Could take him days to die.”

“Thanks again.”

Without a word Lucia, Crocchus, and I fell into step and headed out the city gate. Following the road, we soon saw a hill on which stood several crucifixes. From that direction came the sound of women weeping and wailing.

“C’mon,” said Lucia, quickening her pace. “Don’t worry – my foot’s doing fine.”

“But it’s only the ninth hour. He can’t be dead.”

Lucia didn’t slow down at all. “If he isn’t dead, Crocchus can finish him off by breaking his legs. *That* should raise our friend’s self-esteem, *and* please Caesar, *and* assuage the gods.” As she spoke, the sounds of grieving grew louder and more despairing – a bad omen. “C’mon guys,” she said. “Move it!”

We hurried up the hill to where the crosses stood. Nailed to one, surrounded by soldiers and weeping women, hung a man wearing a thorny wreath. He looked dead. Next to him on other crosses were men who’d not yet expired. To hurry them along, soldiers were cracking their legs with clubs, while others stood around looking on.

“Are we too late?” Lucia asked one breathlessly. “Is Jesus dead?”

“He sure is,” replied the soldier, “and he sure didn’t die like a Roman.”

“He *wasn’t* a Roman,” I pointed out.

But Lucia had to know. “How differently did he die?”

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The legionary nodded toward the limp figure being taken down from the cross. “Well, for one thing, he was up there only six hours, which means he couldn’t stand a little pain. And then, just before he dies, he cries out, ‘Father, father, why have you forsaken me?’ Does that sound brave? I don’t think so.”

This amazed me. “Is that what he actually said? In *Latin*?”

“No, not Latin. In Aramaic, or maybe Hebrew. One of the local conscripts translated it for me. He said it’s pretty common for Jews to say that when they’re crucified.”

“*Really?* I wonder why.” Common or not, the dead man’s last words had deeply moved me for no reason I could fathom. “Who was his father?”

“Some god. Ask his mother – she should know. That’s her over there with the other women. They’re all named Mary.”

“But why did he think his father forsook him?” I felt I had to have an answer.

At this Lucia intervened. “Let it drop, Mel. The guy’s dead. That’s the end of it.”

“The end of it?” A voice made us turn. Standing there was a tall young man with blond curly hair and a beard. “It’s not the end of anything,” he told us in Greek. “It’s only the beginning. This fellow had an army of followers. They call themselves Nazarenes. But don’t get me started.” And he walked away.

Lucia was thrilled. “Did you hear that? All isn’t lost. Crocchus still has a mission – to find and defeat this army of Nazarenes. What do you think Crocchus? Does the idea grab you?”

Crocchus, undoubtedly disappointed by the results of our journey so far, looked a little *comme-ci, comme-ça*, so Lucia turned toward me for a firmer response. “Mel?”

“We’ll have to make inquiries,” I told her. “We’ll have to find out where the Nazarenes are camped, how many there are, and how they’re armed.”

Seeing how disappointed Crocchus looked, Lucia reached over and stroked his brow. “Poor Crocchus. We’ve dragged you halfway across the world, and for what? To reach Jerusalem a day late and a shekel short.”

I suggested that it might be time to take Crocchus home to where he was born. “Would you like that?” I asked him. “You could find yourself a mate and raise a family.” But Crocchus turned away and gazed off into the distance – pointedly not in the direction of Africa.

The future didn’t look promising for our friend. His disinclination to return home worried me, for the only alternative might be his return to the arena. In that world of cruelty, politics, and greed I didn’t think he’d stand a chance.

As we walked silently back from Golgotha, even finding a place to

spend the night in that teeming city with our limited means seemed a challenge too great for our spirits.

XVIII

In fact, we didn't try to find lodgings. Turning around, we camped in the countryside for a few nights while deciding what to do.

During the day we wandered around Jerusalem, taking in the sights of what a local Greek-speaking guide called "the largest holy place ever built by man." He showed us the palace built by "King Herod the Hellenized," and Herod's greatest achievement: the Temple on the Temple Mount. Then our guide, who'd already surmised we weren't Jewish, surprised us by saying that Herod's Temple was called the Second Temple, but was actually the third.

"The first Temple was built by Solomon," he told us. "The second was built on the same spot by Zerubbabel. King Herod built this one on the footprint of the second, after tearing that one down. In fact," he said, "this Temple was built by the priests themselves. It took them a year and a half, during which time no rain fell, except at night."

Pointing to the Temple doors clad with gold, he told us that the gold had been a gift from a wealthy Alexandrian Jew called Alexander the Alabarch. "He's the brother of the philosopher and exegete, Philo Judaeus."

I'd heard of Philo, but hadn't read his works. That his brother had made such a gesture was impressive.

Then, leaning close, the guide whispered, "Herod the Great was not popular with the Jews of this city. They hated him for admiring and copying the splendors of Greece and Rome. That's why they refused to honor his Temple by giving it its own number."

One couldn't deny the Greek influence in Herod's masterpiece. The Temple's vast Courtyard of the Gentiles was surrounded by multiple rows of Corinthian columns so high they were dizzying, and so mighty that "three men with outstretched arms could barely reach around them." To this courtyard, filled with the wailing of beggars, the cries of lost children, the screams of caged sacrificial birds, the calls of merchants, had come, our guide told us, a rabbi from Galilee.

"The stranger overturned the booths of the money-changers and demanded that they leave the Temple. But now," he said with satisfaction, "they're back, and pilgrims can again pay their Temple dues."

"Was the stranger's name Jesus of Nazareth?" I asked.

"I wouldn't know his name," shrugged the man. "Such trash as that." And he spat.

The city was truly beautiful, but I found its magnificence cold. Despite shops stuck in every place imaginable, even under the steps leading

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up to the Royal Portico, despite the towers and fortifications, squares and parks, some human element was missing.

Then I realized what it was: lacking were statues and paintings. Nowhere to be seen were representations of beasts – much less the bronze or marble figure of a man or woman, be it deity or mortal.

“There were artworks – Greek statues and more – all over Jerusalem in Herod’s day,” our guide informed us. “He built a great theater, a hippodrome, and an amphitheater for gladiators. He built them – expensively – not just here, but in Caesarea and other cities. He introduced Greek athletics and music. In Jerusalem all these excesses have been suppressed. The only graven image tolerated by Jews here – oddly enough, may I say – is the gold Roman eagle at the entrance to the Temple.”

One evening we stopped in a leather-goods shop on Tyropoeon Valley Street, a place frequented by students and other wild-eyed young men called Pharisees. To our surprise, all their talk, whether in Aramaic or Greek, concerned Jesus of Nazareth.

Inside the shop, which displayed saddles, tents, and other leather merchandise, a young man named Eli stood on a stool in front of the crowd. He’d just finished speaking, and now turned to a colleague. “So, Saul, if *you* were Pontius Pilate, what would *you* have done?” Then he yielded his place to an intense, sharp-eyed man of about my age.

Saul paused before speaking. His eyes went slowly around the room taking in all who were there, including Lucia, Crocchus, and me. Neither Saul nor anyone seemed alarmed to see someone like Crocchus attending the gathering, but because he stayed in the back, away from the lamplight, it’s possible they mistook him for leather goods.

The question Eli had posed hung in the air, and now Saul seized it. “What would *I* have done to this man had I been Pontius Pilate?” he shouted to the enthusiastic crowd. “I’ll tell you what, my friends. I’d have scourged him myself with a flagellum as if he were the basest slave. Like you, I’m one of God’s chosen people and fire smolders in my blood. Like you, my circumcision is my covenant with God.

“Who was this brother, this rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, to blaspheme Jewish Law and traditions, to call himself the Christ and preach that his blood was wine, his flesh a wafer of unleavened bread? Who was this Jew to eat unclean food at the table with Roman tax collectors?”

“My brothers, our duty is clear. We must stamp out the evil this heathen breathed to life in our land – stamp it out before his gospel becomes a conflagration that engulfs all Palestine. We must find and punish every one of his followers who call themselves Nazarenes. I, Saul, intend to devote myself to this cause.” And then he shouted, “Are you with me?”

“Yes!” we all cried in one voice. “Yes, we’re with you!”

The room resounded with shouting and rejoicing. Lucia and I were carried away by the emotion of the crowd, and even Crocchus stepped

forward and bellowed his assent. We three were ready to join the cause.

Suddenly I found Saul at my shoulder.

“You must be pilgrims,” he said in a friendly way.

“In fact,” I said, “we’re Roman tourists, here to see your fabled city. My name’s Mel and the fair lady is Lucia. Over there is our friend Crocchus Africanus, whose fame as amphitheater fighter has perhaps not spread this far.”

“I’m sure it has,” replied Saul generously, “but I’m not one who would know. Let me introduce myself. My name is Saul. Through my father I’m a Roman citizen and my Roman name is Paulus. You can call me Paul. I come from Tarsus.” He grinned. “You can call it Tars.”

“We’re pleased to meet you, Paul of Tars,” chuckled Lucia, “and were impressed hearing you speak so fervently about Jesus and the Nazarenes. Your sentiments parallel our own.”

“I’m glad,” said Paul earnestly. “I hope you’ll join our cause.”

“We’d like nothing better,” I assured him. “Unfortunately, on our journey here we suffered shipwreck and lost everything we owned. Now we’re looking for a way to afford the least of life’s luxuries: food and shelter.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Paul graciously. “My father’s a man of substantial means.” As he spoke, his face seemed to cloud over. “In fact, he’s generously given me this shop so that I might have an honorable occupation as artisan – a leather worker.” His voice sounded bitter. “My father wants me to make saddles and tents for the rest of my life.”

I looked around at the samples displayed in the shop. “You do very good work.”

He chuckled wryly. “If my father knew that these samples were made, and my orders filled, by a shopkeeper a few streets over, he’d have me stoned. I exaggerate. Well, no matter. Please, honor me by being my guests. There are rooms above here where you can stay. Then, when you feel ready, you can join our righteous war. How does that sound?”

I turned toward Lucia.

“Meeting Paul was a good omen, Mel,” she said. “I’m happy to accept his generous offer.”

“Crocchus?” Crocchus indicated that he wasn’t adverse to the plan. I turned back to Paul. “That settles it. Count us in.”

XIX

The next day we moved into the rooms above Paul’s shop. Some of the space was filled with uncut bales of leather hides, but no work-in-progress was evident anywhere.

Out of gratitude, Lucia and I volunteered to run the shop for Paul when

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he needed to be absent. It wouldn't be much of a life for Crocchus, but I felt this break would let him rest up for his eventual battle with the army of Nazarenes.

Our first opportunity to join Paul and his friends came the next evening when several young men met in his shop. One of these, Benjamin, we recognized as the blond, curly-haired fellow who'd spoken to us on Golgotha. All who'd not brought a bat or leather scourge were given one, and Paul handed me a flagellum. I'll admit I was uncomfortable with the thing. In my dreams of following in my father's footsteps I'd always imagined myself wielding a sword or javelin, not a whip.

Without delay our group of about a dozen hurried through the streets, stopping outside a low building. This, Paul explained to Lucia and me, was a synagogue, a place of worship for Jews. Then, drawing himself up proudly, he looked around at all of us. "Are you ready?" he cried. We shouted that we were. "Then follow me!"

While Lucia, Crocchus, and I hung back to observe the procedure, the others ran shouting at the door and kicked it open. Crowding together to look inside, we saw many startled worshipers, all of them men.

Paul stepped forward. "Who among you believes that Jesus lives?" he demanded. "Who among you calls himself a Nazarene?"

Most of the worshipers were thrown into turmoil, but four stood straight, tall, and defiant.

Paul addressed them. "Are you ready to suffer for your anointed one – to die for him? Or will you recant?"

At this one of the four seemed to wilt. "I recant," he mumbled.

"I can't hear you," shouted Paul.

"I recant!" cried the man more loudly.

Paul's face softened. "Go in peace," he said. The man ran out into the street. Paul faced the other three Nazarenes. These hadn't wilted like the other, remaining defiant.

"Let's get 'em!" cried Paul. He and his gang threw themselves forward. Lucia, Crocchus, and I watched as they grabbed the men and began to beat and whip them mercilessly. Several of the Jewish worshipers joined in, cursing and reviling their former friends. But the three suffered silently and didn't try to fight back.

"Stop!" shouted Paul suddenly. Everyone froze. "Do you recant?"

"Never!" cried the three in one voice.

"Continue!"

The beating went on. I'd not seen such violence of man against man since leaving Rome, nor a punishment so well deserved. These Nazarenes had to be made to recant. Their insurrection against the empire and its gods couldn't be allowed to stand.

It wasn't long before the men were reduced to wretchedness. Paul lowered his scourge. "We'll not kill you, vermin that you are," he told

them. "The Council will decide your fate."

So saying, he and the others dragged the three men into the street. This drew the attention of some legionaries who were passing by. I was filled with apprehension as they came over; after all, Rome ruled here, not the Jews.

"What's going on?" one asked.

"We're taking these men to prison," Paul replied fearlessly.

"What was their crime?"

"Blasphemy."

The soldier looked at the figures on the ground and shrugged. "Be our guest." Laughing, he and his friends walked off.

As the wretches were dragged away, Paul looked pleased. "Our reign of terror is starting well," he said to us. "Why didn't you join in?"

It was a good question. Lucia was the first to come up with a good answer. "Well, Paul," she said, "I guess some Romans tend to regard bloodshed and torture as passive entertainment, not team sport. Crocchus is a trained killer of course, but he's currently in retirement."

I looked at our friend, wondering why he hadn't joined the fray. Then the answer hit me. "I think Crocchus prefers to fight trained professionals, not unarmed citizens," I said to Paul. "When we find the *real* army of Nazarenes with their swords and catapults, I'm sure he'll wade right in and do what it takes."

We all looked at Crocchus who didn't attempt to dispute my words.

"No problem," Paul assured us. "But this is just the beginning. I suggest we all go home and get some rest."

And so we did.

XX

In the days to come Paul was often away, seeking out Nazarenes in their homes and synagogues and throwing them into prison. Meanwhile time passed pleasantly for Lucia and me as we waited on customers and watered Paul's plants. Crocchus, bored to death, spent most of each day snoozing in a dim corner. Occasionally a customer, mistaking him for leather goods, would rub his hide or pull his snout, whereupon Crocchus would open his jaws and let forth a loud bellow. The poor customer, terrorized, would flee the shop. At first Lucia and I rebuked our friend for his inappropriate behavior, but after a time we got to enjoy those moments of release as much as he did.

Then one day Paul hurried into the shop. "Guys, close up!" he whispered excitedly. "Something's happening at the Temple. Come on."

We hesitated. The shop had customers; how could we ask them to leave just like that?

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“Paul, I don’t think . . .” Lucia began.

She never finished her sentence, for at that moment Crocchus reared up and gave his loudest bellow. Instantly the customers were falling all over each other as they ran for the door.

Lucia looked around the empty shop. “Lead the way, Paul,” she said.

The four of us hurried up Tyropoeon Valley Street while Paul filled us in. It seems a man named Stephen had defied the Jewish Council, blaming them for the death of the Messiah. They had then accused Stephen of blaspheming Moses and God.

When I saw we were starting up the steps of the Temple Mount, I reminded Paul that gentiles like Lucia and me weren’t allowed to enter the Temple.

“No problem,” he assured us. “Last week the Sanhedrin moved out of the Chamber of Hewn Stone and now meets in the basilica at the Royal Portico. Even *goyim* can go there.”

We hastened up the steps and over the arch. Arriving at the top we saw an ugly scene. A man stood in the courtyard surrounded by an angry mob of Council members who were hurling insults at him. Pushing our way through the crowd we heard the man shout, “How heathen are your hearts! How deaf you are to God’s message!” Then, looking toward the sky he cried, “Look! I see heaven opened and the Son standing at the right hand of God!”

Lucia, Crocchus, and I glanced at the sky but didn’t see what Stephen was seeing. The Council elders didn’t raise their eyes. “Cover your ears,” shouted one. “Don’t listen to him!”

Another cried, “Let’s take him outside the wall. We’ll deal with him there.”

At this, all rushed at Stephen and began beating him, but he didn’t give in. “You’re like a pack of wild dogs,” he cried. “Did Jesus die to save men like you? I don’t think so.”

That did it. Pulling and pushing they hurried Stephen toward the gate on the eastern side of the Temple Mount. We followed after them with Paul, who seemed to walk with difficulty.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked.

Paul told me he’d been born with a thorn in his flesh. “Don’t worry,” he said, “the pain will pass, hopefully before the flesh does.”

When we passed through the city gate the soldiers posted there said nothing – and this despite seeing a man dragged and beaten by dozens of angry Council members! Moments later the group stopped on a road where they pushed Stephen against a wall, then paused to remove their cloaks. Paul told them to lay these on the ground by his feet and he’d look after them. They did so, then turned toward Stephen.

“Will you recant?” demanded one.

“Never!”

“Let the stoning begin!”

All picked up rocks and began savagely stoning Stephen, who soon cried out, “Lord, receive my spirit!” Fatally wounded, he dropped to his knees, calling in a loud voice, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!” Then he fell dead.

When they saw that Stephen had expired, the elders tossed aside their stones and came over for their cloaks. We all looked at Paul, who nodded assent.

The stoning of Stephen by the Sanhedrin was like a signal to Paul; in the days and weeks to come he and his gang pursued their war against the followers of Jesus with even greater zeal. As a result, many Nazarenes fled Jerusalem to other cities so that Paul had to hunt them down in places like Ashdod and Ashkelon.

Meanwhile, we three waited for our friend to locate a major encampment of Nazarenes so that Crocchus could take them on and defeat them. When in town, Paul came to the shop to get his messages and go over the accounts. Half of the profits he insisted on giving to us.

The day Paul returned from Ashkelon, he came in looking happy and upbeat. “We did it!” he told us joyfully. “We cleaned up Ashkelon. Only a few are left – in Damascus!” And he slapped our palms with his.

The news was good for Paul, but calamitous for Crocchus. If what our friend said was true, the fight against the followers of Jesus was almost over, with no army of Nazarenes left for Crocchus to defeat – another terrible disappointment.

Lucia put a consoling hand on Crocchus’s shoulder, even while congratulating Paul on his victory, “Paul,” she said, “your name will go down in history along with that of Pontius Pilate as the savior of the Roman Empire and its gods.”

Paul looked puzzled. “Me and Pilate? Saviors of the Roman gods?”

“Absolutely.” But even as we praised Paul, at the same time I felt awful about Crocchus. “Don’t worry,” I told him. “We’ll find another noble task for you.” Then I remembered that a letter had come for Paul.

When Paul opened the letter, his face lit up. Some time before he’d asked the high priest to give him introductions to synagogues in Damascus so that he’d be able to go there, find the last remaining Nazarenes, arrest them, and bring them back to Jerusalem. His request had been approved.

“I’m going to Damascus!” Paul announced joyfully.

“Damascus?” cried Lucia. “Oh, Paul, can we come with you? I think Crocchus needs a change of scene. This has been a terrible time for him. Perhaps along the way we’ll find some stragglers in that army of Nazarenes.”

“That’s fine with me,” Paul replied. “We’ll start as soon as I can arrange some mules and a guide. And by the way,” he added, “thanks for keeping an eye on things.”

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At this I noticed Crocchus give Paul a ticked-off glance through half-closed lids.

XXI

It felt good being on the road again, facing new sights and adventures. Keeping shop is a decent occupation, but boring for those not born to the trade.

I couldn't help noticing that Lucia had made no offerings to the gods before we set off for Damascus. Nor had she made any since we'd arrived in Palestine. I wondered if this was out of respect for Paul's god. He'd earlier explained that the Hebrew god recognized no god but himself, and insisted that blood sacrifices be made only to him. Or, it could have been that after so many disappointments, she'd simply lost faith in the efficacy of the Roman pantheon.

The journey through Syria went well. One noontime, when we were nigh unto Damascus, we decided to take a latrine break. Climbing down from our mounts we went to seek privacy behind rocks and trees.

It was a stormy day. On this eastern cusp of the empire the thunder growled, the wind howled, and lightning bolts split the air. Even so, Lucia seemed little concerned with these omens. Rejoining us a few moments later she suddenly began acting wildly, waving her arms toward the sky and laughing and shouting crazily at the growing storm. "Look, Mel," she cried, "I'm not afraid of the gods any more. We've almost finished our journey, and hey! We're still alive! Isn't that the goal of life? To survive?"

"To survive? The goal?" I looked at Crocchus, the dedicated fighter, trained to fight and die bravely. "What do *you* think, Crocchus?"

But Crocchus only gave the two of us a dark look before turning away to gaze up at the sky.

Lucia was instantly contrite. "All right, all right," she sighed, hugging Crocchus. "I'll admit it, I've screwed everything up. *Mea culpa*. What more can I say?" She took my hand. "Mel, it'll take more than a god to turn things around now – we need a *miracle*." As she spoke, thunder rumbled in the black clouds.

"You know, Lucia," Paul said, "you're right to mock your pagan gods. The only god is *God*, the Hebrew God. Only *he* should be worshiped – not Jupiter, not Zeus, not dead emperors."

"What's your Hebrew god like?" Lucia asked him. "Does he play the harp like Apollo? Fly with the speed of Mercury? Throw lightning bolts?"

"God?" Paul paused to reflect. "Oh, well," he said, "lightning bolts yes, a few, but mostly he's your typical father type – short-tempered,

vengeful, controlling . . . overbearing . . . unforgiving . . . I'd say God's a lot like my old man." As he said this, the thunder growled.

"I guess I've already told you," I began, "that my father was a . . ."

". . . brave gladiator killed in a fight with a tiger," said Lucia and Paul with exaggerated weariness, finishing in laughter.

Well, maybe I *had* mentioned this to them once or twice before. "Okay," I said, "but at least he didn't *forsake* me." Then I paused, because it wasn't easy to admit the rest. "Except . . . deep down . . . I've always felt that . . . in a way . . . he *did*."

"Mel," Paul said, placing his hand on my arm, "are you sure you're not Jewish?"

"Cross my heart. But you know, Paul, there's something I don't understand. You seem to resent your father. You even seem to resent your *god* because he's so much *like* your father."

"Your point being?"

"Well, I'd think you'd have more in common with the *son* than with the father."

"The son?" He frowned. "*What* son? *Whose* son?"

"Jesus of Nazareth – the son of your god. We saw him nailed to the cross. Paul, you're almost his exact age. I'll bet he felt the same way about *his* father as you do about *yours*. If you're dissatisfied with your god, and have a choice, why not choose the son instead of the father?"

Paul stared at me. My words seemed to have left him confused and speechless. The very wind seemed to pause, making the air breathless and still . . . followed suddenly by a deafening crash of thunder and a blinding flash of light that hurled us all to the ground.

XXII

My head roared with a billion bursting bubbles of light. Suddenly I was transported to that place of sand, sky, and horizon I'd dreamed of so often. Before me was the hummock or hillock – there that fellow again. "Mel! It is I!" he cried.

"And you are . . .?"

"None other than your great grandfather, also named Mel. I've come to tell you that you're descended directly from me and mine, and are therefore a Jew."

"No! That's impossible! I'm not even circumcised."

"Oh, yes you are. That scar you conceal isn't the result of an accident. It's your covenant with God."

"But Mel isn't even a Jewish name. It's short for the Roman name Melius."

"No, no. Our greatest grandfather, Melchizedek, changed his name

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when he went to live in Rome. He thought Melchizedek sounded too Jewish. He was the first Mel.”

“But how can I be Jewish? I don’t even know what a Jew *is*.”

“Then let me tell you. We’re a race of wanderers and seekers. We spend half our lives trying to find and then push aside our fathers so that we can replace them. Look at Jesus, a typical case.”

“But I have no father to find or replace,” I told him. “Mine died when I was an infant. My mother disappeared when I was four. I was raised by pagans.”

“Doesn’t matter. Other typically Jewish traits are suffering guilt and having a strong sense of irony.”

“Ha! That proves I’m not Jewish. I feel no guilt about anything and don’t know the meaning of irony.”

“Are you sure? Irony is the Hebrew word for humor.”

“Humor? I know that word in four languages, but it doesn’t apply to me. I never tell or understand jokes. I never even laugh.”

“That’s because you were raised by *goyim*. But now that you know the truth . . .”

Just then a noise startled me. Suddenly I was awake, back on the Damascus road with my friends. Paul, blinded and dazed, was being guided to his mule by one of the drivers.

“Paul,” I cried. “Where are you going?”

“To Damascus,” he said in a strange voice. “Lord Jesus has called me. Goodbye, my friends.”

Lord Jesus? Paul was a Nazarene? Paul?

I hadn’t a moment to reflect on this before Lucia came up to me, looking agitated. “Mel, what’s going on? Are you all right?”

“I think so. There was that flash – then someone in a vision told me I’m Jewish. Have you ever heard anything so funny in your life?” As I said this, a sound burst forth from my lips that wasn’t a cough or a cry, but something that stretched my mouth wide and raised my cheeks to my eyes.

“Mel,” Lucia said, “laugh if you want, but it’s about time *someone* told you the truth. Of course you’re Jewish. You always were and always will be. Your boss told me you were that day I met him.”

Her words stunned me, but made sense too. Deep inside I knew she was speaking the truth, but I didn’t know what to reply. Just then Lucia looked over and saw Paul being helped onto his mule. “Where’s *he* going?”

“To Damascus. He heard the call of Lord Jesus. Paul’s a Nazarene now.”

“Paul? A *Nazarene*?” This time it was Lucia who looked stunned. “That was some bolt from the blue; you’re a Jew and Paul’s a Nazarene.” Just then Crochus approached us, his expression very glum. “I suppose *he’s* going to tell us that he’s a disciple of Sabak-re.”

Raising his eyes, Crocchus looked directly into mine. I knew what he was saying and a feeling of guilt overwhelmed me. "That settles it," I said. "Crocchus, I'm taking you back to Rome." Hearing this, his face lit up.

But now a change came over Lucia and she hugged our friend protectively. "Mel," she said, "you mustn't take Crocchus back to Rome."

"Why not?"

"I foresee death and disaster."

"But Lucia, we live with death and disaster around us every day. Everyone does. Anyway, Crocchus and I know it's better to die bravely than live as cowards. Right, Crocchus?"

Crocchus indicated his full agreement.

Lucia tried to speak, but I hushed her. "Think about Stephen," I said. "He couldn't have died more bravely if he'd been to gladiator school."

Still, Lucia insisted on making her point. "Mel, I know you blame yourself for Crocchus's unhappiness, but you'll feel even guiltier if you take him back and something awful happens."

Her warning made me answer in an ironic way. "Is that a prophecy? Did the flash make you prophetic?"

"Maybe it did."

"Then I suggest that while I'm taking Crocchus back to Rome, you go to Delphi, drag that Pythia out by the hair, and take her place."

"I think I just might. Anyway, we'll be traveling together a while longer, so maybe I'll have time to change your minds."

"You can try, Luce," I told her, "but I have a feeling that if I *don't* take Crocchus back to Rome he'll get there anyway, if he has to swim the Mediterranean." Then I went over to the muleteers, told them our plans had changed and that we wished to go the nearest seaport.

"That would be Sidon," said one, and they started turning around their beasts. Then the three of us mounted up and we began the journey to the coast.

XXIII

In the days to come, try as she might, Lucia was unable to dissuade me from what I felt was my solemn duty toward Crocchus; if his happiness depended on returning to the arena, I intended to see that he did.

Lucia by now had decided she would go to Delphi. In Sidon we bought provisions and boarded a ship bound for Piraeus. There Crocchus and I bid Lucia farewell and changed to a vessel called the *Sea Urchin*, bound for Ostia.

Both Crocchus and I were happy to be on the last leg of our voyage. As I lazed on the deck, eating bread dipped in olive oil, Crocchus amused himself by hurling nets at the fish leaping alongside the ship. Looking on

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were three passengers, Moishe, Aaron, and Samuel, burley young men from Galilee who had no hair at all on their heads or bodies.

To pass the time I talked to them, curious to learn why they had no hair. Was it a skin disease? A family trait? It was a delicate subject to raise, but I couldn't resist. "How come you guys have no hair?" I asked them.

"What's it to you?" said Moishe testily.

"I was just wondering," I said, smiling politely.

"We got suckered," Aaron growled. "Some lady told us she could color our hair green with some unguent she had."

"Did it work?"

Aaron showed me the top of his bald head. "Sure," he said sarcastically. "See the green?"

"I mean before it fell out."

"It was a compound of leeches, vinegar and something really green imported from France. Should've worked. Didn't."

"It's the last unguent *she'll* ever compound," said Moishe, and the three laughed.

As usual, I failed to detect any humor in what had been said. If I really was a Jew, it was sporadic.

Moishe looked over at Crocchus who was taking a snooze after lunch. "Who's your friend?"

"That's Crocchus Africanus," I told him proudly, "the great Roman gladiator. Crocchus won six victory wreaths."

"Yeah? Tough guy, huh?"

"Very. May I ask what you guys do?"

"I guess we do pretty much what we please," replied Moishe.

"A while back him and me were fishermen," Samuel said. "Aaron was a baker, but now we're Nazarenes."

"No kidding! You gave up your trades to follow the Messiah? I know a tent-maker who did that. He was on his way to Damascus when the flash hit him. When did you guys see the light?"

"We lived by the Lake of Galilee," said Aaron. "One day a Nazarene called Jesus comes along with about five thousand people. They were hungry, so to feed them he had his men buy five loaves of bread from me, and two fishes from Sam here. We thought this Jesus was some miser playing a joke, but it worked; they fed all five thousand with just that much food and the people swore they were completely satisfied."

Said Moishe, "It was obvious the bottom had just dropped outta the bread and fish markets, but this Nazarene was on a roll."

"And he don't mean a *sesame* roll," sneered Aaron, with a laugh.

This time I caught the joke and chuckled. "So what're you guys doing now?"

"Now we're doin' good works like Jesus said we should. We're

trollin' for souls."

"I take it you don't mean *filet of soles*." It was my first-ever attempt at making a joke, but no one laughed.

"Souls of non-believers and sodomites," grunted Samuel.

"Sodomites?"

"Ever hear of Sodom and Gomorrah?"

The names sounded vaguely familiar. "Wasn't Gomorrah Sodom's wife?" I wasn't aware of having made a joke this time, but the three skinheads laughed hard and exchanged glances. Moishe cracked his knuckles.

"Sodomites are men who have sex with men," he said. "Non-believers are folks who don't believe in the risen Christ."

"Oh, you mean you're looking for homosexuals and pagans."

"That's right. We wanna treat 'em like they well deserve. You guys aren't in either of those categories, are you? If you are, I'm sure we could arrange some kind of party for you."

"Well, we're not sodomites," I told them, "and Crocchus and I have never really discussed religion. We did go to Palestine to find Jesus of Nazareth, but he was already dead."

"*Risen*," Moishe corrected me. "He was already *risen*."

Again the skinheads exchanged glances, but this time they didn't laugh.

XXIV

Late one night, off the Gulf of Patrai, while the moon was hidden behind clouds, Greek pirates boarded the *Sea Urchin*. Stealing upon us unawares, they bound Crocchus, the three skinheads, and me, and lowered us onto their unireme, the *Sea Horse*.

It wasn't until they'd rowed some distance from the merchant ship and entered a small cove that the pirates turned to examine their catch. What they saw pleased them. Crocchus, we learned, was the one they were after; his abduction had been commissioned by a wealthy admirer living on the island of Capri. Nor did these Greeks seem displeased by the well-built, hairless skinheads who'd fallen into their net. While leaving Crocchus tied, they cut the ropes of the three Galileans and did the same for me, their designated translator.

Even freed, the skinheads didn't look happy. "We think these guys are coming on to us," Moishe whispered in my ear. "Think they're sodomites?"

It was hard to tell. I wasn't an expert on sexual proclivities, but you never knew about Greeks, so I told him it was possible. "Why don't you pretend to welcome their attentions and see what happens?"

The skinheads didn't like that idea at all. This seemed odd, given that

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they were seeking sodomites and the *Sea Urchin* was possibly full of them. So, to be helpful, I explained to the pirates why Moishe, Aaron, and Samuel were traveling the empire.

“They’re seeking *sodomites*?” repeated one Greek dimly.

“*You* know – men who love men. Maybe men like you.” Why, I wondered, were they looking at the skinheads so warily?

Then two of the pirates, Glaucon and Thrashymachus, took me aside. “Why are these guys looking for sodomites?”

I shrugged. “Maybe they’re sodomites themselves. After all, they believe in the risen Christ, if that tells you anything.”

“It could,” said Thrashymachus. Then he announced that we were anchoring for the night and that they needed to prepare a few things below. “Everybody please wait here.” Opening a hatch, he and Glaucon began to descend. The skinheads were right behind them, and I followed.

Below deck two dozen naked Greek oarsmen were resting on their benches. We six continued on into the cooking galley, a small room decorated with painted pots, bottles, and bouquets of dried flowers. A mosaic of Poseidon served as a splashguard above a basin.

Looking around, Aaron discovered a decanter and goblets in a cupboard. Thrashymachus rushed over. “Don’t you just *love* them?” he smiled intensely. “I bought them in Alexandria.”

But before I could translate, Moishe broke the stem off one of the goblets, then threw all of them into a corner where they smashed into pieces; a bad omen. Backing slowly out of the galley I pulled a carving knife from its slot, then turned and hurried up on deck. At my heels were the skinheads. Without losing a moment they pushed heavy barrels on top of the hatches fore and aft. Below, the trapped pirates and oarsmen shouted and pounded in vain.

While I cut through Crocchus’s bonds with the knife, a fight broke out between the skinheads and the pirates who’d remained on deck. But run and jump as they might, the athletic Greeks were no match for the slow, powerful skinheads. Then Crocchus joined the fray. Grabbing Samuel’s arm he was about to rip it from its shoulder, when from the corner of his eye he saw Aaron coming after me, brandishing an iron bar. With a cry, Crocchus raced to block him. At the same instant I saw Moishe grab a fishnet and whirl it over his head.

“Crocchus,” I shouted. “Behind you!”

But Crocchus ignored the warning. Even as the rough filaments were settling over him, he grabbed me, lifted me up, and dropped me overboard. “Crocchus . . .” There was no time to say more. The last thing I saw was Crocchus looking down at me as an iron bar, clutched in a burly fist, struck him on the head.

In the water I thrashed helplessly, but a moment later some of the pirates escaping over the side landed next to me. They kept me from sinking

until we found firm sand under our feet and were able to reach the shore.

The night was almost gone, but time could not stand still, and I could only fear what day would bring. During the hours of darkness I sat crouching on the sand, listening to the noises and silences from the ship, fearing desperately for my friend's life. At some point I fell asleep; when I awoke it was day.

Getting to my feet I looked around. The *Sea Horse* was gone, as were the Greeks who'd saved me. Hoping that somehow Crocchus had escaped and reached shore too, I ran up the beach like a crazy person, looking right and left, not knowing whether I'd find him in the surf, on the sand, or in among the trees. I had to find him; I had to find him alive.

And I did, but the scene was like nothing I could have imagined. Crocchus, covered with wounds, was tied to a tree, his arms wide out, as if upon a cross of wood. On trees next to him were Thrashymachus and Glaucon, both mutilated, both dead.

I rushed to my friend and looked for a way to untie him. "Crocchus," I was sobbing, "hold on. Please don't die. I'll get you loose."

But it was too late. He looked upon me – can I call it lovingly? Then his eyes closed for the last time. His head dropped forward.

I fell to my knees weeping. "Oh, Crocchus, you've died your brave, brave death, but I wish you were alive. I wish you were alive."

In time I recovered enough to find the strength to do what was necessary. I buried Crocchus and put a stone upon his grave to mark the spot. The two Greeks I buried together so that death would not part them. That done, I ate some sea urchins and made my way to a road, a road I'd walked before that passed a beach where once before I'd dug a grave.

On that road I walked and walked until I arrived at the center of the world, a place called Delphi.

XXV

Only weeks had passed since I'd last seen Lucia, but it seemed a lifetime. As I walked up the well-worn road, ahead of me Apollo's temple gleamed amidst the towering hills. Over the centuries how many had come here to consult the oracle?

That wasn't the purpose of my trip. I didn't want to know the future; the past was bad enough. I only wanted to see Lucia again, to tell her about Crocchus . . . but perhaps she already knew. Had her warning to me been a prophecy or a hunch? It didn't matter. She wouldn't reproach me for disregarding her words – she'd understand and forgive. Oh, Lucia, I was thinking, if you aren't at Delphi, where else in the wide world can I hope to find you?

Reaching the temple at last, my eyes went to an inscription above the

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entrance: *Gnothi Seauton*: Know Thyself. I repeated the words aloud once, twice, three times, but they seemed to echo in a void. I had no idea what they were trying to tell me. Know myself? It made no sense. I already knew more about myself than I wanted to know, and felt I'd be better off if I could forget it all again.

Walking up the steps, I entered the temple. At first I didn't recognize Lucia who was dressed in white like a maiden, her hair falling loosely down to her shoulders, but she recognized me. A moment later we were in each other's arms.

"Oh, Mel," she cried, "I'm so glad you've come."

"So you're the Pythia now," I smiled, happy for her.

Pulling gently back, she avoided my eyes. "In a way. I make a kind of living giving prophecies to pilgrims and tourists." Then, taking my arm she led me outside and pulled me down beside her on the temple steps. "Mel, I've so much to tell you. You remember Paul and the way he hated Nazarenes and working with leather?"

"Of course."

"And how he was converted to Christianity in that lightning flash?"

"Christianity?"

"Yes. That's what they'll call it some day. Well, Paul will soon be traveling throughout the empire to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, and he'll support himself by making tents! Isn't it ironic? Instead of stamping out Nazarenes, Paul's going to spread the message of Jesus *everywhere*."

"That *is* ironic," I agreed. But I couldn't keep up this chatter. My mind, so heavy with recent memories, needed relief. I had to share this burden before it crushed me. "Luce," I said, "something terrible has happened to Crocchus."

Quickly she put her arm around my shoulders. "I know it has, Mel. But tell me about it. Tell me about Crocchus."

And so, with my knees drawn up to my chin, I related what had happened after Crocchus and I had left her at Piraeus. I told her about the *Sea Urchin* and meeting the three skinheads who were seeking sodomites.

"Oh, Lucia," I cried, beating my temples with my fists. "How could I have been so stupid, so blind to their real intentions? *Mea culpa! Mea culpa!*"

She begged me not to blame myself and asked me to tell her everything that had happened. And so I did, and when I'd finished Lucia was weeping in my arms and her hair was wet with my tears. I waited until her sobbing ceased, then helped her to her feet.

"You've had an awful time, dear Mel," she said, touching my face with gentle hands. "Poor Crocchus. Poor you. What can I say?"

What could she say? *What could she say?* Suddenly I felt myself seized by a terrible anger. My anger wasn't at Lucia, or even the cruel skinheads. It was directed at whatever force had created this world and the

killing, torturing, creatures called men. But most of all I was angry at a man named Mel, who'd stood in the bloodthirsty throng cheering so many men and beasts to cruel victories and violent deaths.

"What can you say?" I cried. "Well, oracle lady, now that I've given you all this *bad* news, how about you give *me* some *good* news – something great to look forward to."

Lucia hesitated. "Mel," she said, "maybe you should ask Paul about that. He believes the Good News is that folks can have eternal life in heaven if they believe in Jesus Christ. That's the gospel he's teaching."

I stared at her in horror and disbelief. "Paul's good news is eternal life? *Eternal life?* Luce, would *you* like to live forever?"

"Don't ask me, Mel. I'm clairvoyant now, but eternity's beyond my range."

Grasping her by the shoulders, I stared hard into her eyes. "Luce, what kind of human being would want to spend eternity looking down from the sky at the horrors below – at the cruel, willful murder of men and beasts? Paul calls that *good news?*" I released her and stepped back. "Luce," I said, "I don't want *Christian* good news. Give me some good news for an *atheist Jew!*"

My words and manner had startled her. Speechless, she stared at me. But having started, I wanted to say all that was on my mind. "Listen, Luce," I said, "some day I'll preach my own gospel, and this is what *my* good news will be: that when we die our bodies will turn into dust and our souls will extinguish like snuffed candles. The *good* news is: there *is* no afterlife. The *bad* news is . . ." I felt my chest deflate, my shoulders sag. "The *bad* news is: what horrors await us if I'm *wrong?*"

I fell silent. Why was I saying these things to my beloved Lucia? It would be better if I left. "Goodbye, my friend," I said, embracing her. "We'll meet again some other day, some other place." I turned and started walking away, when suddenly she spoke.

"Mel, there's something you ought to know."

I paused without turning. "What?"

"Mel, your father *wasn't* a gladiator. He was a Judaeen slave. He cleaned arenas like you did. A lion killed him when he tried to take a thorn out of its paw."

What? What had she said? It didn't make sense. I turned toward her. "My father cleaned arenas? He tried to take a thorn out of a lion's paw?"

"Yes. Your boss told me that."

I stared at her, feeling as if my whole life was suddenly in my chest, in my throat, on my tongue. How clear in my mind's eye was that moment, that scene between my father and the lion. How that poor arena cleaner must have pitied – loved – that injured beast. "Lucia," I cried, "my father *wasn't* a brave gladiator. He was a brave . . . *man*. Oh, Lucia, thank you, thank you."

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I pulled her to me and as we embraced I heard her soft voice in my ear. “Goodbye, dear friend. Be strong and brave, for I can promise you this: you will live in interesting times.”

“Goodbye, my darling Lucia.” Releasing her I turned and started down the hill. As I walked, cares and concerns I’d carried for years seemed to drop from my shoulders. My entire life, even my love for Crochus, had settled into a new perspective. How easy now my step, how high my chin. How free my soul.

Reaching the road below I turned and looked up at the temple. Lucia, her white dress bright in the sunlight, was still standing there. I waved and she waved back. Then I hefted my bundle and started walking.

Part II

THE STONES OF JERUSALEM

I

That day so long ago as I hefted my pack, looked upward, and waved farewell to Lucia high above by the Temple of Apollo, I had no idea where I was going.

The words I'd read an hour earlier above the temple entrance: *Gnothi Seauton* – Know Thyself – which had meant nothing to me then, now echoed in my mind. Know myself? How did one begin to know one's self? Was I to stare into the face shining back at me from the blades of swords, or into those calm expressions looking up from quiet pools – stare until I pierced the orb of my reflected eye, then deeper go, into the realm of soul?

Now, thanks to Lucia and the vision of my great grandfather, I could tell myself that I'd found and possibly replaced my father in some arcane Jewish way, but at the same time was without a real family or place to call home.

Walking along I glanced over my shoulder from time to time to see the road behind me disappear with each step as fast as it lengthened in front. The road led to Rome, the place I was born. I knew that if I turned around and walked in the opposite direction, that road too would lead to Rome. It was said that all roads did, as if it were some kind of physical law or spell. Only I wasn't going to Rome. I intended to wander and seek – not seek my father again from some different angle or perspective, or even my dear mother – but seek knowledge of myself. That grave command, *Gnothi Seauton*, had told me it could be done.

It was March, a time of ploughing and planting. The olive trees, their toes deep in dung and tillage, reached skyward with their feathery arms, preparing to flower and bear more fruit. The fig trees were another story. Nazarenes from Palestine were hard at those trees, demanding that they give them ripe fruit, cursing and lopping off their branches when they refused. It didn't calm or amuse them to be reminded that this wasn't fig

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season; they felt their acts had a sacred precedent. After all, hadn't Jesus incinerated a fig tree for failing to produce a ripe fig?

It was bewildering to me, this antipathy among the followers of Jesus toward fig trees and sodomites. When I mentioned to one fig-thirsty Nazarene the good news that I'd seen his Messiah nailed to a cross on his way to eternal life, adding that despite this I'd opted for atheism, I was lucky to escape with my life.

Otherwise, the fields along my way were peaceful, busy with serfs doing the hard work of farming. The son of a slave I might be, but who could have felt freer than I at that moment? I was beholden to no patron, was signatory to no contracts, and my name was inscribed on no tax rolls. As long as I didn't run afoul of any laws, I didn't officially exist; what once had been a sorrow had now become a joy.

My freedom allowed me to use the few resources I possessed to buy some rags. From these I fashioned a wadded chest upon my own and padded hips upon my straight ones, concealing these outcroppings beneath a woman's dress. Arriving at a town or wealthy country house I'd don my costume and, with other itinerant entertainers, set about earning a few coins, or some bread and oil. There was always plenty of wine. It wasn't a bad life, but it didn't involve the mind – just the stomach and the organs of desire.

For springtime in Greece wasn't all planting of cereals and watching the grazing beasts and barnyard fowl busily procreating. It was also the time for a man to plant his own salt seed in celebration of his fertility. All that Tressa had taught me that last night in Rome I put to good use with many a country wench, and my circumcised member worked well.

I stayed with this life as solstice followed equinox and equinox solstice. Then, with yet another springtime approaching, I began to ponder the future. Simply put, I'd not yet found a place, or the means, to settle down and live the ideal life of study I'd long imagined for myself.

Suddenly an idea struck me: I'd leave my future entirely to Chance. This wasn't a completely idiotic decision, for whether men wish it or not, their lives are normally governed by Fate, Chance, and Accident. Many dignify this victimization by calling it the will of some god, but Chance had no god or goddess that I knew of, whereas Fate had three. I went with Chance.

My plan was this: I'd go to the port of Piraeus and board the first ship – no matter where it was headed – whose captain would offer me employment in return for passage. I'd wash decks, ply oars, kill livestock, empty chamber pots, lift, carry, heap, pull, or whatever else was needed. At voyage end I'd disembark and remain in that country until some chance event moved me on again.

Leaving my life wholly and unequivocally to Chance made me feel I'd exercised as much control over my future as possible.

II

In mid-March the sea became navigable so I headed toward Athens. In the port of Piraeus were a number of vessels bound for all parts of the empire. There I was able to make a deal with the first captain I approached. How surprised I was to learn that his ship, the *Sea Onion*, was headed for Caesarea, and that her cargo was Passover pilgrims bound for Jerusalem!

The *Sea Onion* was a merchant ship owned by an Alexandrian Jew who at this time each year pulled his vessel out of grain transportation to convert into a passenger ship. He did this with imperial permission, for Rome badly needed the grain these ships brought and was loath to lose even one for a few weeks.

How strange to think of returning to Palestine – once again at Passover – but this time knowing I was a Jew. What would it be like to walk in the land of . . . *my people*, that devout and prickly race whose god I wouldn't worship in either of its manifestations: Hebrew patriarch or crucified son?

One job described by the captain of the *Sea Onion* seemed inoffensive enough. There'd be families aboard whose slaves weren't seaworthy. Their masters required servants to replace them during the voyage, and would pay one drachma a day. I told the captain that sailing had never made me ill, that I spoke both Aramaic and Hebrew, and that I was a Jew, should that be a prerequisite. My one failing was not being able to swim, but when I admitted this, the captain confided that he couldn't either.

"I have an excellent family in mind for you," he said. "They are only three – Ezekial the father, his son Benjamin, and daughter Sarah. The mother died some years ago by her own hand."

His words astonished me. "She *killed* herself?"

"So I've heard. Or she may have been run over in the street or had an accident in childbirth." He shrugged. "Or it could have been the result of a botched abortion or a beating, or even both, a beating *and* an abortion."

"Really?"

"I've heard the story of her death told many ways. The husband, you see, is famous in Jerusalem, being a wealthy man and a member of the Sanhedrin. Because of his renown he's often the butt of gossip."

"The butt of gossip! How terrible for him," I cried. "What a pity he didn't spend his days in quiet study instead of sitting in judgement on his fellow Jews. Poor man," I sighed, "to have erred so tragically."

I didn't mention my eagerness to meet Benjamin and Sarah. Being twice as orphaned as they, I was sure we'd empathize with each other.

III

The *Sea Onion* had been in port already several days, undergoing renovations and taking on supplies. My future employer, in Athens on private business, was staying with his son and daughter at the house of a man named Nathan.

“Ezekial will be sending a carriage for you,” the captain told me.

In fact, what arrived at dockside was less a horse-drawn carriage than a cart with a donkey positioned at the front. Still, so long had I trekked on foot, this seemed a great luxury and augured well. I climbed in and after journeying through the streets and monuments of the city, we arrived at a pleasant park liberally furnished with fountains, statuary, and benches.

I’d hardly put my feet on the ground before I heard my name called. “Mel!” Hurrying toward me were a young man and woman. I recognized the fellow right away as one I’d met twice before – first on Golgotha and again as a member of Paul’s gang. What a strange twist of Chance to meet him again, and in Athens of all places.

“How are you?” he cried, giving me a swift embrace.

“I’m afraid I forgot your name,” I admitted.

“I’m Benjamin, son of Ezekial. I can’t believe father hired *you* of all people.” He looked around. “But where are Lucia and Crocchus?”

It was too large a question to deal with just then, and besides, I could hardly stop looking at him. No longer the angry, bearded Pharisee, Ben was smiling and clean-shaven. His manner of dress was different too; he now wore his sandal straps wound almost to the knee, and the cut of his high-belted tunic was, in a word, godly.

“You’ve certainly changed,” I told him admiringly.

“I’ve been living in Alexandria for over a year, studying art, philosophy, and athletics. Dad had me tracked down and I agreed to spend Pass-over with him and Sarah in Jerusalem. I’m in Athens to join them for the sea crossing.” Reaching out, he put his arm around his sister and hugged her. “Sarah says I’m completely Hellenized. Does it show?”

“It does. It shows all over you. Does it show that I’m a Jew?”

“You weren’t before?”

“I was. I just didn’t know it.”

“Such things happen,” Ben said kindly. “But Mel, I’ve often wondered about your friend Crocchus. I really liked the way he handled himself. What became of him?”

The sudden question almost moved me to tears, and I was grateful when Ben realized it and changed the subject. “We’ll talk about old times later,” he said. “But first let me apologize for the donkey cart. My father’s such a miser; he could easily have afforded a large seashell pulled by swans.” Then he turned to the young woman still hugged to his side. “Let me introduce my sister, Sarah. Sarah, this is Mel. Mel is that friend of

Saul I told you about who came to Jerusalem with a Roman lady and a . . . crocodile?”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mel,” said Sarah.

With my eyes on her beautiful face and her sweet voice in my ears, no casual greeting could describe *my* pleasure at meeting *her*. “Likewise, I’m sure” wouldn’t do it. Not even “delighted to make your acquaintance.” “*Transfixed*” was the only word to describe being helplessly impaled on the gaze of two green eyes, eyes set in a face haloed by fiercely tight golden curls.

But I couldn’t stand there like a dolt drinking her in; I had to say something. “He wasn’t really a crocodile,” I blurted, hoping she wouldn’t think me a complete fool.

Neither Sarah nor her brother seemed in a hurry to introduce me to their father. Ben sent the donkey cart home and the three of us walked and sat and walked some more while Ben and I reminisced.

He was particularly eager for any news I might have of Saul, whom I’d always called by his Roman name, Paul. “I went by his shop several times,” Ben told me, “but it was always closed. Then it reopened as a cheese shop. The owner told me Saul had set off for Damascus and no one had heard from him since, not even his father back in Tarsus. I think his family considers him dead.”

“In a way he is,” I said. “Dead to them, anyway, since they’re religious Jews.” Then I described to Ben and Sarah how Lucia, Crochus, and I had joined Paul on his journey through Syria, and how one stormy day when we were nigh unto Damascus, a great light surrounded us, blinding and knocking us all to the ground.

“How awful! Was anyone hurt?”

“No, but Paul had a vision. He heard the voice of Jesus and was converted. Paul became a Nazarene – a Christian.”

Ben looked stunned. “*Saul* did?” Grabbing me by the shoulders, he cried, “Saul became a *Nazarene*?” Then he paused. “Wait. You said ‘Christian.’ Is that the same as Nazarene?”

“Yes. Lucia says that ‘Christian’ is what Nazarenes will be called some day.”

“But Saul *hated* Nazarenes,” Ben exclaimed, shaking my shoulders. “He would have hated Christians too. So why would he become one?”

“Such things happen,” I told him, releasing myself gently. “I myself never hated Nazarenes until I saw how they treated sodomites and fig trees.”

Ben stared at me a moment, then leaned toward my ear. “You know, Mel,” he said in confidential tones, “‘sodomite’ isn’t considered a nice word in this part of the empire, whereas ‘homosexual’ is a felicitous combination of the Greek *homos* and the Latin *sexus*.”

“Your point being?”

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“My point is that sodomites, persons who make love as the people of Sodom did before God destroyed that city, are condemned in the Bible. Since then the term has been used in a derogatory, hateful way to mean homosexual, a proclivity celebrated in Greece, but which in Judaea is punishable by stoning to death.”

“Point taken,” I said, adding ruefully, “I see now that had I read the Bible as avidly as I read philosophy, Crocchus would be alive today.”

Then I told Ben and Sarah about Crocchus’s death at the hands of the three skinhead converts. By the time I finished, all three of us were sobbing.

Wiping my eyes on a square of cloth kindly proffered by Sarah, I said, “Now tell me about yourself, Ben. I take it you’ve given up scourging Nazarenes, but does your newfound love of Greece mean you’ve abandoned your Hebrew god for the likes of Zeus and Apollo?”

He laughed. “Not at all, Mel, but don’t get me started. I’ll tell you of my life in Alexandria to while away the time on shipboard. Now we can’t delay any longer – Sarah and I must take you to meet our father. But don’t worry. You’ll not be our father’s slave; you’ll be Sarah’s and my dear friend. Anything dad asks of you we’ll do with or instead of you. We’ve looked after the old bastard for many years and it’s second nature to us.”

I assured them that this wasn’t necessary, that I’d made a deal with the captain to pay my passage by my labors and there was nothing short of sodomy I wasn’t prepared to do.

Then, laughing, the three of us turned our steps toward the house of Nathan where their father awaited.

IV

Handing my life to Chance had so far proven advantageous beyond my wildest imaginings. When Ben, Sarah, and I arrived at the high wall surrounding Nathan’s property, keepers opened the gate for us with great obsequiousness. As we walked toward the house, slaves exuded from every portal as if the building itself was some kind of event. Yet there was something wrong with the picture.

“Marble statuary would look great in this garden,” I remarked to Ben.

“Marble statuary?” he repeated in a puzzled voice.

“Statues of Neptune or Apollo. *People*. Men and gods. And maybe some animals.”

“Umm . . . Mel,” began Ben very patiently, “you *do* know that Jews don’t tolerate graven images of gods, people, or anything else created by the Lord.”

“I’ve heard that,” I told him. “Our guide in Jerusalem mentioned it. But this is Greece. If Jews hate statues so much, why do they live in

Greece? Athens has more sculpture than Rome.”

“Well, some Jews can appreciate Greek art without actually wanting it in their garden,” Ben explained. “Nathan’s a Jew, a Hellenized one of course, but I don’t think he’s gone Greek to the extent he’d own or exhibit pagan idols. That would be considered blasphemous. He’d certainly never invite a man like my father to be a guest in his house if he did.”

“Really?” It was clear that my knowledge of Jewish beliefs and traditions was next to negligible. I told them that after my experience with the skinheads I’d located a copy of the Septuagint and had read the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sarah smiled. “Then surely you recall what the Lord did to the widower Lot and his daughters.”

Her smile notwithstanding, I thought I detected a certain edge to Sarah’s voice as she asked me this. If that denoted bitterness, it didn’t seem directed at me.

Of course I remembered the story of how, when Lot’s daughters saw their innocent fiancés killed along with the sinners of Sodom, the heartbroken young women got their father drunk, had intercourse with him, and bore sons by him. But it wasn’t a story I wished to examine closely with my new Jewish friends, one of whom I was falling in love with.

“I recall it,” I told her, relieved when she didn’t pursue the subject.

Still, now that I was a Jew, with a mission to know myself, I felt it my right and duty to seek to understand these people – my people – and their angry, vengeful god who was said to have created all of us in his image.

V

Introduced to Ezekial, I immediately recognized him as one of the Council elders I’d seen stone Stephen to death, though he showed no sign of recognizing me. A short, bearded man of about sixty, Ezekial appeared intent on, and by all indications was normally successful in, getting his way. I had the feeling that if this man were observed walking up the hill toward Apollo’s temple at Delphi, the Pythia would be seen fleeing through a rear colonnade.

There were two things I observed when Ben and Sarah introduced me to their father. First, that the man immediately noticed how my gaze melted when it touched upon his daughter, and second, that it didn’t seem to worry him at all. This certainly wasn’t because he approved of my infatuation with this flesh of his flesh, but because he knew it would lead nowhere if he had anything to do with it, which he would.

It was clear that Papa Ezekial never left anything to Chance, least of all the destiny of his only daughter. Chance would never be invited to throw knucklebones in *his* game of life. In the Ezekial household surely

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even the three Fates, unacknowledged and bereft, wept together in a corner.

Although this pen could go on describing every crease and fold in the man's face, delineate – nay, flesh out for you – the great protrusion of his belly, the fat neck and chins, the tortoise beak, and bring to life his enormous feet, I'll restrain it. Not to rein it in might allow it to engrave an image forever on some reader's mind, making my pen guilty of blasphemy.

What puzzled me was how a toad like this could father two such handsome children.

Ezekial didn't speak, but listened intently as Ben outlined what his father would expect of me during the voyage. My day would begin before sunrise. After seeing to his first bath, and if it wasn't a fasting day, I'd supply the old man with bread, oil, pickled fish, and numerous other dishes. The *Sea Onion* carried a large stock of goats, sheep, and chickens. To slaughter these according to Jewish ritual, two *shohetim* were part of the crew. The reasoning was that if one *shohet* fell overboard, the other would be on hand to keep the killing kosher.

After the animal carcasses were salted, drained of every drop of blood, and cooked, I'd serve the meal. I'd also pour wine as necessary and make sure there were soft cushions to recline on.

"I'll show you," Sarah told me graciously in her beautiful, dutiful Hebrew. "Keeping kosher on a ship has its challenges, but it's not impossible."

My other duties concerned my master's ritual baths.

"I'll show you," said Ben. "Dad's obsessive about ritual purity, and it doesn't help that ritual baths aren't portable. Luckily for him, he doesn't consider a tub and cistern installed on a ship as portable. Right dad?"

The old man grunted, then got up and left the room.

"At home his bath is hewn out of the same rock that makes up the foundation of our house," Ben continued. Then he told me that the *Sea Onion* was referred to among certain Hellenized wags as the *Kosher Cruiser*, and its yearly journey as the "Passage to Pesach." "Little did I dream I'd be a passenger to Pesach one day," he sighed with mock rue.

After our final supper on terra firma, Ezekial commanded that there be light, and there was light. Slaves brought enough olive oil, as the saying goes, to have oiled every athlete in Antioch for a year, and enough flax to have wicked Athens for a month. Then, with Ben and me as his audience, and squinting in the brightness, he took up a parchment scroll and began mumbling its contents aloud.

I'd never been treated to devout readings and benedictions before and attempted to find them fascinating. But very soon my mind took its own course and I found myself thinking about Sarah, imagining how she looked preparing for bed and the sound of her soft breathing as she slept. Ben did little better than I; after a half hour of holding his eyelids open with his

fingers, his head tipped back and he snored.

The next morning while Ezekial said his prayers – which he did religiously five times a day – Ben presented me with two new tunics made of fine linen and some strips of soft leather. Later that morning an itinerant shoemaker fitted soles of tough animal hide to my feet, drew the straps through, wound them up my legs and tied them with a flourish. Happy to take these gifts, I also took the hint to rid myself of the coarse garments I'd worn for the past months.

Strangely, not once during my stay had I met our host Nathan or any of his family. Were they away? If so, why had they chosen to be absent while the Ezekials were visiting?

"I believe my father settled his business with Nathan," Ben told me. "He must then have left for Ashdod to see his son Eli, who lives there. Nathan owns a house in a very expensive part of Jerusalem, right next to the Temple Mount. It was practically the only house left there after Herod enlarged the Mount. My father's been trying to buy it from him for years. *Our* house was built in an area of tombs carved into rock in the time of Solomon and the First Temple. It drives my father crazy to live over a cemetery, something considered unclean. But with land inside the city walls scarce, like many others he had little choice. Nathan's house is located so that one can walk right out of his bath and into the Temple with no chance of being defiled along the way. My father would *kill* to own it."

"Do you think they struck a deal before Nathan left?"

"I don't know. My father never discusses business with Sarah or me. We learn what goes on from our servants."

"I'll try to keep you well informed," I smiled.

That afternoon I made a curious discovery. Attempting to locate a bird whose song had intrigued me, I found myself in a small wood not far from the house but separated from it by a stream. Inside the wood, in close and haphazard proximity to each other, stood perhaps a dozen pieces of fine marble statuary. How, I wondered, had they come there, and why?

Looking at what I just penned I can't help laughing. How much I had yet to learn about my people.

VI

Given the nature of our voyage, I assumed none of our fellow passengers had made burnt offerings to Aeolus, Neptunus, Zeus, or Poseidon. I mentioned this to Ben as we stowed our belongings in the sleeping bay reserved for paying passengers who were single adult males.

"Just pray that no member of a family cursed by the Lord for a thousand generations is on board," he replied grimly. "You think *Zeus* hurls lightning bolts."

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His words got my attention. “Has your god ever done anything *nice* for mankind, besides creating women?”

“Don’t get me started,” said Ben.

Ben had paid my passage, allowing me to sleep in the bachelors’ quarters rather than with the slaves, hens, and ewes. Even so, on a converted grain ship full of cavernous depths and small, irregular spaces, no matter where one slept one knew some day or night it could become a pitching, yawing hell.

Ezekial had arranged private adjoining quarters for himself and Sarah, determined to keep her within the sound of his voice at night. I could understand this. Had *I* been transporting a motherless lamb in a ship full of wolves, I too would have guarded it closely. But being on the side of the wolves, my thoughts were constantly on finding ways to get Sarah alone with me as often as possible.

This wasn’t easy. The ship was as permeated with pilgrims as an old wooden plank with worms. Some, like Ben, were Hellenized youths being hauled home for Passover by family members. Their reluctance made sense. Why would any young Jew lucky enough to live in Athens or Alexandria willingly return for even a week to a Jerusalem ruled by a Roman governor, a high priest, and a Sanhedrin?

Ben, Sarah, and I stood on deck as the *Sea Onion* passed out of the Port of Piraeus into the Aegean Sea. All around us were half-whispered conversations between mothers and their sons and daughters. This included a great deal of eye-play back and forth across the deck. It was clear that matchmaking was in the air.

Ben and Sarah had no mother urging them to go forth and multiply, only a jealous, controlling father. Every now and then during his daily walks around the deck, Ezekial would send the three of us stern glances to interpret as we wished.

“I never want to marry,” Sarah confided suddenly one day, much to my astonishment.

I was about to ask for an explanation, when Ben interrupted. “My sister has a terrible skin disease. Whenever marriage is mentioned she gets red spots.”

My astonishment changed to horror. “Sarah, is this true?”

She smiled. “The spots are real, but the disease isn’t. Our mother showed me how to apply the color to ward off suitors. She told me if she’d known this trick as a young girl, she’d never have had to marry my father.”

“When the danger’s past the spots mysteriously disappear,” Ben explained.

“But Sarah,” I said, “your father guards you so closely. Don’t you think he must suspect something?”

She shook her head. “I’m sure he doesn’t, but I will say I’m some-

times puzzled how he can stand my presence, why he doesn't drive me away. My father has a horror of all that's unclean, and there's nothing less clean than a skin disease. Yet somehow he tolerates mine. I'm sure he believes the spots are real. Nobody but Ben knows the truth, and now you."

How was I to take this? Had she let me in on the secret because she didn't think of me a possible suitor, or because she wished me to pursue her in spite of any spots that might appear?

"But Sarah," I said, "if you don't want to marry, you shouldn't have told *me* of all people that your sores are bogus."

At this she smiled into my eyes with such a frank, open gaze that I felt my heart jump. Ben was smiling too. Somehow I'd passed Charybdis. Now all that remained was Papa Scylla.

VII

How suddenly our sea crossing had changed from an ordeal into a romantic adventure. What a strange thing love is, I thought, when the most opposite of persons – a religious Jew and a Jewish atheist – can be attracted to one another. And my vow never to love another human being? Dismissed. Recklessly and emphatically dismissed with my other childish fantasies.

Except for two days when howling storms passed over us, the wind was strong and favorable and the sky blue. But I had little time to enjoy views from the deck. Even with help from Ben and Sarah my duties kept me busy much of the time. Ezekial, if he fasted for a day, after sundown ate enormously, complaining about every morsel of food and drop of wine.

"The food is cold." "There isn't enough of this." "I don't eat that stuff." "This oil is rancid." "That loaf is burnt."

He also complained that the ship was unclean – that passengers had to pray and eat too close to where they defecated. Ben told me that at night the rolling of the ship caused his father to eject his seed onto his stomach, an act forbidden by the Law of Moses.

Both Ben and Sarah helped me in my duties, but only Sarah's smile, which she managed to hide from her father at the same time she revealed it to me, kept me from going mad.

When deprived of sea and sky, there was still much to see below deck: the grinding of grain, the ritual slaughtering, the washing of soiled linen in salt water and urine, and the applying of unguents by the two ship's doctors. Below was an entire village in a tight, seagoing microcosm, occasionally elevated to chaos by wind, wave, and the crash of thunder.

I saw little of Sarah outside of mealtimes, and never alone. One day she appeared on deck with two tiny red spots just above her décolleté.

Catching my eye she smiled and winked conspiratorially. I could hardly contain my delight; she was keeping herself for me!

There were many matters I wanted to discuss with Ben and Sarah. I wanted to ask Ben why, with the marriage market in full swing on the ship, he paid no attention at all to the mothers and daughters gyrating about him. Soon this reticence, his athletic good looks, his high-belted tunic and easy bearing, plus the fact that he was occasionally seen in the company of another high-belted fellow (me), started rumors that he and I were, as they say, a couple.

This impression served me well, for I had only Sarah on my mind. But when a frustrated mother excoriated us for living selfish, narcissistic lives and told us we should be stoned, I decided to question my friend.

“Ben, are you a homosexual?” I asked one day as he and I were preparing his father’s bath.

He burst out laughing, then looked around to see if he could speak without being overheard. “No, I’m not,” he replied softly. “Nor am I another Narcissus, in love with my own image. I’m as hot-blooded a lover as you’ll find anywhere, and favor women.”

His words amazed me. “Then why do you ignore the efforts of these desperate mothers? They think we’re a pair.”

“In that case it’s lucky the decks aren’t paved with stones,” he chuckled, “or we’d never reach Caesarea alive.” Having said this, his voice took a hard edge. “Mel,” he said in a forceful whisper, “it’s not that I love a certain woman less, but that I hate a certain father more. I’ll never give grandchildren to the man who killed my mother. To spite him, I’ll not even marry the woman I adore.”

Dumbfounded, I stared at Ben as a thousand questions flooded my mind. Why didn’t I blurt them out? Because coming through the door was the man of whom he spoke. Ben saw him too, and both of us went quickly mute.

Carefully we helped Ezekial into the first tub. I opened the canalization leading from the cistern, letting water pour out over his enormous feet. In the second tub the water gushed over the balding head, hairy back and shoulders, chest and genitals. During this whole process not one word was uttered. I don’t know what Ben and his father were thinking, but I was wondering how any ritual could cleanse a man of the heinous crime Ezekial was accused of by his own son.

Indeed, I was tortured by the conflicting accounts the captain had given me of the death of Ben’s mother. Had it been a suicide, a botched abortion, or a beating? Had Ezekial killed her as Ben said? I didn’t *have* to know the truth; birds shocked at my ignorance wouldn’t have fallen from the sky. But because the dead woman’s son was my friend, my employer possibly her killer, and most of all because I loved her daughter, I

felt compelled to learn the truth about this woman, and promised myself that I would.

VIII

While waiting to ask about Ben and Sarah's mother, another matter came up. A man on board was seeking anecdotes about the healers and exorcists roaming Palestine in the time of Jesus of Nazareth. I made it known that I had some information to pass along, though I couldn't help wondering about his intentions.

It wasn't long before the fellow was introduced to me. His name was John Mark and he was about my age. I guessed from the dark stains on his fingers and clothes that his business had something to do with writing, but he denied the connection.

"The ink stains result from a recent altercation with a scribe," he told me in Aramaic laced with Greek and Latin. "At present I'm writing my story on the scrolls of memory, for there's no way I could carry about so many pens, ink, and papyrus as would be needed for my task."

"What's your task?"

"To write the story of Jesus of Nazareth."

I was immediately interested. "Are you writing a biography?"

Mark closed his eyes and shook his head a little wearily. "I'm not sure what it is," he confessed. "I'm hoping at least to make it chronological, a kind of narrative. But I know nothing about his birth or education, so how can it be called biography?"

"Where does your story begin?"

"I think I'll begin it with the prophecy of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. I'll begin with the beginning – *archē* – of the Good News – *euangelion* – of Jesus Christ, Son of God. I guess I'll end it with the death of Jesus and the Resurrection. So I think I'm writing history, not biography."

I'd never heard of John the Baptist and was curious to learn about him.

"When will you write your history?"

"Before I die. I'd like to include the Messiah's return to earth."

"His *return*?"

"Jesus will return at the end of the world, and that should be very soon."

"Then you'd better hurry. There may be no more pens or papyrus at the end of the world, not to mention people alive and able to read your history."

"I'll take that chance. Anyway, I'm not sure it's a history either. What I'm trying to do is gather as much information as possible and make my meanings clear, so that the Good News of Jesus Christ doesn't get

overlooked or misinterpreted. My work will teach the significance of Jesus to current and future generations. And I want it to show how earthly events are controlled by supernatural powers. I guess it could be called a gospel.”

As we spoke I sensed a gap widening between us. “I’m not sure I can help you,” I told him. “You see, I don’t believe in the supernatural. I don’t believe in the Roman, Greek, Egyptian, or Hebrew gods and am unlikely to adopt any new god, especially if he promises eternal life.”

Mark stared at me. “Why is that?”

“I’d hate to live forever looking down on such a cruel world, or even spend eternity trying *not* to look.”

“I know what you’re saying,” Mark nodded, “but eternal life and redemption are what Jesus is all about. When he returns he’ll redeem the chosen people and goodness will prevail on earth as in heaven. That’s his Good News in a nutshell.”

“Well,” I told him, “I’ve seen ordinary people – people who say they believe in Jesus – being cruel to others in his name.”

“Like what? I’d like to know what you’ve personally witnessed.”

So I told him about Aaron, Moïshe, and Samuel, the three newly-minted Christian skinheads looking for sodomites, who killed Crocchus and the pirates. Then I told him about the Nazarenes who were killing fig trees because they’d heard Jesus had killed one. “Put *that* in your gospel,” I said.

One word I’d used caught Mark’s attention. “Christian? What an interesting term. Does it mean the same as Nazarene?”

“I think so. The first time I heard it was in Delphi. My friend Lucia does prophesy in Apollo’s temple there.”

“Tell me about the fig trees,” he said then. “This isn’t the first time I’ve heard Jesus mentioned in connection to fig trees, but I was skeptical.”

So I told him how some Nazarenes traveling in Greece said that Jesus had incinerated a fig tree because it wouldn’t give him a ripe fig, even though it wasn’t fig season. “The fact that their messiah had done this seemed precedent enough for their own actions.”

“This is what I’m looking for,” Mark told me, closing his eyes and putting his fingers to his temples as I often do when trying to memorize something. “This is true oral history. It’s now my task to figure out what Jesus had in mind when he did that. I’m sure there’s a parable in there somewhere.”

Pleased that my story had helped him, I asked Mark if he’d heard about Jesus feeding five thousand followers with two fishes and five loaves of bread.

“No, but I heard about him feeding *four* thousand with five loaves and *no* fishes. At least I *think* it was Jesus. I tell you, Mel, the last time I was in Palestine there were so many prophets, messiahs, miracle workers, ex-

orcists, and healers roaming about, I didn't know who had done what. To keep from going mad I decided to credit all of the outstanding miracles to Jesus of Nazareth. I also interviewed a few of his disciples; they told me they'd been very afraid of him."

"Why?"

"They were always terrified he'd ask them to explain one of his parables. The disciples found his stories incomprehensible and when they'd screw up he'd mock them as fools in front of everyone. Apparently they ran off and deserted him when he got in trouble at the end."

"His calling himself king of the Jews really freaked out Rome."

"Calling himself their king and not keeping kosher freaked out the Jews," said Mark. "But now tell me your loaves and fishes story."

So I told him about the three hairless men who converted to Jesus when they saw him feed five thousand with just two fishes and five loaves. "They figured the bottom had dropped out of the fish and bread markets, but that Jesus was on a roll."

"I assume they didn't mean a *jelly* roll," Mark chuckled.

"Absolutely not."

"Mel," Mark said when I'd finished my story, "Do you think these three fellows were credible? This now makes nine thousand that I've been told were fed to repletion on crumbs and fins, but I've yet to find a single individual who partook of these meals."

I had to reflect. The skinheads hadn't actually lied to me about anything; they just hadn't let on that when they found some sodomites they intended to kill them.

"I don't know," I told Mark. "Now that you mention it, their story about the loaves and fishes does sound impossible. It's impossible to satisfy five thousand with that amount of food, no?"

"No," replied Mark. "Feeding people like that isn't impossible, it's *miraculous*."

"If it's *true*. It's miraculous if *true*."

The word "miraculous" reminded me of something else, so next I told Mark about how when Lucia, Crocchus, and I were on the road to Damascus with a Pharisee named Paul of Tarsus, he was struck by lightning. "In the flash Paul had a vision. He said he heard the voice of Jesus calling to him. I don't know if it was a miracle or the result of being struck by lightning."

"It's a fascinating story," said Mark. "What happened to this fellow?"

"He went on to Damascus. As far as I know, no one's heard from him since. Still, when I saw Lucia at Delphi, she prophesied that one day Paul would be spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ all over the empire."

"That's very interesting," said Mark. "Your friend Paul sounds like a true believer and a true apostle. I'll try to track him down. If you run into him again, please mention that you met me."

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I told him I would, but that now it was almost suppertime and I had to go serve my lord and master.

“Your *Lord and Master?*” he asked, amazed. “I thought you were a non-believer!”

“I mean Ezekial, the father of my friends Ben and Sarah. I’m serving him during the voyage. Ezekial’s a member of the Jewish Council in Jerusalem. I was there when they stoned a fellow named Stephen. Ever hear of him?”

Mark turned pale. “I’ve certainly heard of Stephen and his martyrdom. You’ll have to tell me more. But first, do you happen to know if your master was there the day Jesus was judged and handed over to Pontius Pilate?”

“No, but it sounds like something he’d be mixed up in. I’ll try to find out. But now I’ve got to go. Oh! I forgot to tell you! My friends and I saw Jesus nailed to the cross.”

“You *did?*” cried Mark. “Why didn’t you say that before? Wait! Come back!”

But I had to run.

IX

At dinner I saw Sarah again. She’d missed two meals because of illness caused by the yawing of the ship and the smell of vomit not her own. The illness had given her face a certain pallor, but it brightened when she saw me. How I ached to embrace her. When I placed food in front of her I could sense the warmth of her flesh near mine and feel the hairs of my forearm reach out to hers, and hers to mine, as if these tiny threads were trying to mesh us together.

Could Ezekial’s heavy-lidded, tortoise eyes see the forces working between his daughter and me? I’d never known the man to be in good spirits and this mealtime was no exception. Eager as I was to ask him if he’d been there when Jesus was judged and handed over to Pilate, I decided to wait until the meal was over. The man and I hadn’t yet exchanged a single word. He sometimes shouted complaints and orders into the air, intending them to fall into my ears, but anything I had to say to him I said through Ben. This would be an exception.

“Patron,” I said when the right moment came, “were you present when a certain Jesus of Nazareth, who called himself the Messiah, was judged by the Council and turned over to Pontius Pilate?”

The terrible eyes shifted sideward to take me in. The tortoise beak opened. I was aware that both Ben and Sarah were watching us intently. The old man shifted his position, farted, and seemed about to speak, but when his gray, tortoise tongue moved, no sound came forth.

“He wasn’t there,” Ben said quickly.

“Did he *say* that?” I blurted. “I heard no word from him at all.”

“That trial took place during Passover,” Ben explained. “The Sanhedrin doesn’t meet during Passover. If Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy at that time, the Council had nothing to do with it. More likely, the high priest judged him.”

I was surprised to hear Ben defend his father. Since he had no reason to lie, I felt I could honestly tell Mark that Ezekial hadn’t been there.

Because I loved Sarah and Ben was my friend, during our conversations that touched on religion I was tortured by certain unspoken thoughts. Neither of them knew I was an atheist. It was easy to confess I’d never worshiped the Roman and Greek gods, and didn’t believe Jesus was a messiah, but how could I tell them I didn’t believe in the Hebrew god? Ben, who’d studied philosophy in Alexandria might be more open-minded, but Sarah? She wasn’t a free spirit like Lucia, ready for new beginnings, able to throw away all she possessed, even her gods, to follow a dream. Still, if I wanted to marry her, I had to tell Sarah the truth about myself – even if it meant losing her.

Finally a chance came to speak to her alone. I was on deck one afternoon when she came looking for Ben, and I seized the opportunity to put the matter straight once and for all. So, after we’d greeted each other with our usual overt timidity, I said, “Sarah, I must tell you that I don’t believe in an afterlife.”

She regarded me a moment in mild astonishment. “Nor do I.”

“Then you aren’t religious!” I cried, hardly daring to hope.

“Mel, many Jews believe that our bodies come from dust and into dust return. Some believe our souls live on after death – I think Ben does – but I don’t.”

Her words made me realize once again how little I knew of what it meant to be a Jew. “But Sarah,” I said, “I don’t even believe in the Hebrew *god*, or *any* god, for that matter.”

My eyes hung on her lovely face. Strangely, I saw no signs of shock, anger, or horror there. And could that slight twitch at the corners of her mouth be – dared I hope it – amusement?

“If you really meant what you just said, Mel, I suggest you don’t repeat it to my father.”

She may have intended this as a kind of gentle joke, still her words sent a chill through me. Wasn’t hiding a truth the same as lying? “But Sarah,” I said, “what if someday we need his blessing?”

This time she chuckled outright. “We’d never get his blessing, Mel,” she said, not noticing that I’d almost stopped breathing. “My father has other plans for me. Just know that I love you because you’re a free man, truly free in your soul, not a slave to what others think and say. You’re the kind of man my mother described to me when I was a child, someone innocent but not stupid, trusting but not gullible, civilized but not obedient to

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a Law written by old men centuries ago, a Law interpreted by generations of other men with political and social ambitions."

I could hardly comprehend what I was hearing. "Then you don't believe in your god either?"

"There's surely a God, but he has nothing to do with my father, my brother, the priests, or the Scribes. I deny their stupid rules, traditions, and interpretations every day of my life."

"I take it Ben doesn't feel the same as you."

Sarah's brow creased. "As Hellenized as Ben is, he's still a Jew, a male Jew, born in the shadow of the Temple. It's from his belief in the Law of Moses and Jewish tradition that he draws his power and pride."

"So you think if I told him I'm an atheist it wouldn't sit well with him?"

"He'd try hard not to react like his father – overbearing and dismissive – but that patriarchal strain hidden deep in Jewish men seems to come more to the surface with every year of their lives. Sooner or later he'd come to consider you worse than a pagan. There's no such category for Ben as 'Jewish atheist.'"

"Then maybe I'm not a Jew at all!"

"Maybe not," she smiled, "but your nose is Jewish and I adore your nose."

At this we both burst out laughing and I watched with love and admiration as Sarah waved goodbye and hurried off to find her brother.

X

As fast as wind and wave sped us toward Palestine, so did days and nights speed us toward Pesach. As place and event converged, my waking moments were more and more occupied by my patron's need for ritual bathing. It became both a concern and a joke among passengers and crew that Ezekial's obsession with purity would result in emptying the ship's cisterns, and that this would happen sometime before our arrival. To deviate from our course now to take on a fresh supply of water would make us late for the start of Passover.

Soon, so great was the fear of running out of water, that those who normally prayed for fair weather now beseeched their Lord to send drenching rains. Some shipboard wags even proposed that Ezekial purify himself by standing naked on the deck in wet weather, preferably not tethered. Rabbis were heard debating whether ritual bathing on board ships could be considered purifying anyway, and if it were, whether in dire circumstances seawater might be substituted for fresh.

The day before our arrival, Ben and Sarah took me aside. "Mel," Ben said, "do you know what Passover is?"

I didn't. I told them I'd grown up believing myself a pagan and had never thought to study the Bible. Moreover, since my only knowledge of Passover was from my earlier visit to Jerusalem, I found it difficult separating that event from the crucifixion of Jesus, which had occurred at the same time.

"Passover, or Pesach," Ben told me, "has nothing to do with Jesus. It's the day we celebrate the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. This took place when the Lord smote the land of Egypt. The Exodus of the Jews from Egypt was the most momentous event in Jewish history after the fall of Adam. The reason we eat unleavened bread at Passover is to remind us that our people left Egypt so quickly they didn't have time to wait for the yeast to rise. We sacrifice the paschal lambs and splash their blood on the altar to commemorate how the Jews were told to splash lamb's blood on their door posts so that the Lord, seeking to kill every firstborn son of the Egyptians, could identify the houses of Jews and *pass over* them."

I thanked Ben for sharing that story with me. But there was another matter I was curious about – their mother's death. And so I asked if he and Sarah would tell me about that.

Shaken by my unexpected question, the two looked at each other, hesitated briefly, then shrugged and nodded. Instinctively all three of us looked toward the horizon to check the height above it of the sun. What we saw told us we'd soon be called back to their father's side. Sarah began to speak rapidly.

"It happened when Ben and I were young," she said. "Our mother's name was Ruth. She and I were especially close and she confided many things to me. She told me she was married at thirteen to our father, a man many years older than she. He'd divorced his first wife because she was barren and had a bad smell. After his divorce he was obliged by the Law to marry a virgin if he married again.

"Our mother told me when I was old enough to understand – and later I told Ben – that she'd been in love with another man and was never happy in the marriage forced upon her. She didn't agree that the destiny of women – or of men for that matter – should be completely controlled by the Law of Moses, or Torah, which is what Jews call the first five books of the Bible. Soon after giving birth to me, she called together women from our family who thereafter met one day each month and spoke of matters important to them. They decided that those who wished to bear no more children should refuse their husbands or have abortions."

"Our mother was a little strange," Ben chuckled, looking chagrined, "but we loved her dearly."

"Of course these decisions resulted in some wives being divorced. One wife disappeared and was never heard from again. Others were forced to yield to their husbands and died at the hands of abortionists.

Two were suicides, including our mother. She threw herself from a high wall. Now you know.”

Astounded, I looked from Sarah to Ben. “She *killed herself*?”

“Yes,” said Ben. “We can’t forgive our father for driving her to suicide. Since then he’s taken three more virgins to wife, and divorced each one for infertility.”

“I must have misunderstood you earlier,” I told Ben. “I thought you meant that your father had actually *killed* your mother.”

“It amounts to the same thing,” said Sarah, placing her hand on my arm. “Come, Mel, we have to go. Father’s waiting. And remember, we try to honor our father as much as we can. You understand, I have no other home but his.”

They walked away and I slowly followed. Sarah’s last words had brought up an important point. If she had no home but her father’s, what roof, what family, what aunts, uncles, and cousins would she have were she to marry a penniless orphan like me? It was a sobering thought, and one to which I, in my loneliness and isolation, had not given due attention.

XI

The day before our arrival at Caesarea, Mark sought me out and we had another conversation. He wanted to hear everything I could tell him about the crucifixion of Jesus, beginning with whom we’d seen on Golgotha that day. “The disciples had already fled,” he told me, “so they weren’t there. Tell me what you remember.”

Who’d been there that day? The wailing women were still clear in my mind, and I distinctly recalled the legionary mentioning that one of the women was Jesus’ mother.

But when I told him this, Mark shook his head. “I’ve heard on good authority that his mother Mary wasn’t there, but that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph were.”

Then I remembered something else. “Wait,” I said. “The legionary told me *all* the woman were named Mary. He wouldn’t have said ‘all’ unless there were more than two, right?”

“It’s possible.”

“My friends and I didn’t reach Golgotha until after Jesus was dead. He died at the ninth hour.”

“Was it still dark?”

“Dark? In the middle of the afternoon?”

“I heard that on the day Jesus died darkness covered the land at noon and a curtain in the Temple was rent in half.”

His words puzzled me. “I’m sure there were no dark clouds that day, and no eclipse of the sun. It was a very ordinary day. When our tour

guide took us to the Temple he never mentioned any torn curtain. Two others were crucified at the same time as Jesus.”

I could sense that Mark found my information disappointing and I couldn't blame him. Had *I* planned to write a gospel, or a history, or a biography of a great man or a god, I wouldn't want *my* hero's death to appear ordinary either. Hoping to give him something more to his liking, I asked if he wanted to hear Jesus' last words.

“And *how!*” he exclaimed.

“A legionary who was there told us that Jesus cried out, ‘Father, father, why have you forsaken me?’”

Mark's jaw dropped. He stared at me. “That's from the Psalms. It's the first line of the twenty-second Psalm. This fellow actually heard him say that?”

“No, no. He didn't speak Aramaic or Hebrew. Someone translated it for him.”

Mark frowned as he considered my words. “Well,” he said at last, “either someone was mistaken or the Psalm was prophetic.” He paused to reflect, then concluded that both were equally possible.

“The legionary told us that Jews often say that when they're crucified. He also told us he thought Jesus wasn't very brave because he died in only six hours. He said crucified Romans often hang on for days.”

Mark ignored this. “Did you see what was done with the body?”

I told Mark that we hadn't – it was getting late and we needed to find a place to sleep. “Why do you ask?”

“I was told that on that Friday, Joseph of Arimathea put Jesus' body into a tomb carved in rock and rolled a boulder across the entrance. Mary Magdalene and some other women saw where they put him and the day after the Sabbath went back to anoint his body with spices. They didn't know how they'd get past the boulder, but when they got there they found it had been rolled aside. They entered the tomb and met a man dressed in white who told them that Jesus had been raised. He told them to tell this to the disciples, but the women were so terrified they ran out of the tomb and never told anyone at all.”

“If they never told anyone, how did *you* find out? Did the man in white tell you?”

Mark reflected a moment. “Actually, the guy in white told his cousin and the cousin told me.”

I'd never heard any of these things. “Will you put this story in your gospel?”

“Unless I learn differently.”

I felt I had to speak. “Mark,” I said, “Lucia, Crocchus, and I were in Jerusalem helping Paul in his leather shop for weeks after the crucifixion, but we never heard anyone say that Jesus had risen from his tomb. In fact, somebody who came in the shop to order a saddle told us he'd seen Jesus

walking along a road some days *after* the crucifixion. We'd seen him dead on the cross, so naturally we didn't believe him."

"I know," sighed Mark. "What can I say? I hear Mary Magdalene and some others saw him too, including the disciples." Suddenly he paused, thought a moment, and snapped his fingers. "Of course!" he exclaimed. "That Jesus was seen alive later doesn't prove he never died: it proves that he was bodily resurrected. Fantastic!"

Then Mark asked why my friends and I had traveled from Rome to Jerusalem in the first place, if we weren't Passover pilgrims.

He listened closely to every word of my reply, seeming particularly interested in our reasoning that Crocchus, by killing Jesus, could save the empire from insurrection and the Roman gods from insult. Meanwhile, I secretly hoped Mark would find the story of Crocchus so beguiling he'd put it in his gospel. If he did, the story might stand a better chance of being read some day than if I wrote it down myself.

XII

Arriving in the port of Caesarea, as my final act in his service, my patron had me pour the last cup of ship's water over his hands and feet. I did so, wishing instead to dash it in his face or use it to cleanse myself ritually of *him*.

On the dock Ben paid me double the drachmas owed me and we embraced with the joy of the newly disembarked. Everywhere were scenes of rejoicing as family members greeted family members. How different it was from my last arrival in that land, at the shallow, treacherous port of Joppa. Then I'd haggled with donkey drivers; now I looked around half-expecting to see a giant seashell pulled by swans. But this was Palestine after all, not Greece.

In fact, no relatives were there to greet the Ezekials. Our transportation was two horse-drawn carriages and a baggage cart. While her father insisted there was not enough room to include me, Sarah easily demonstrated that there was. Still, since Ezekial refused to let her ride in the same carriage with me, Ben and I sat in one carriage with some of the baggage, while Sarah rode with her father in the other.

Perched next to our driver was a slim, keen-looking man named Ari. Now free, he'd formerly been a slave for the Ezekial family and was a favorite of Ben's. As we clopped along, Ari filled Ben in on the latest news. The first story concerned the prefect of Judaea.

"A year ago, shortly after you left for Greece, Pilate did the most unforgivable, the most monstrous, the most blasphemous thing a governor could do. But I'm sure you've already heard."

"You mean the standards?"

“Yes, for one.”

“I’ve heard two or three different accounts. Tell me yours.” Ben turned to me. “Mel, listen to this.”

“Well, one dead of night, Pilate ordered his soldiers into Jerusalem bearing silver images of Tiberius on their standards. The next morning when the Jews awoke, the emperor’s face was everywhere.”

Ben turned to me. “Can you believe it, Mel? Graven images of the emperor in Jerusalem? Pilate must have been mad. He could have ignited an insurrection.”

I suppose Ben wanted me to feel as indignant as he, but my take on Ari’s story was different from his. I could picture Tiberius and Pilate one afternoon on the cliffs of Capri, drinking wine and dreaming up ways to stick it to the Jews. “I’ve got it!” exclaimed Tiberius at last. “One dark night why don’t you send a battalion of legionaries into the center of Jerusalem carrying medallions of me attached to their ensigns? That should freak the bastards out.” Of course I kept this vision to myself, while muttering aloud, “Mad, crazy, insensitive.”

“So,” Ari continued, “when they saw what had been done, hundreds of furious Jews rushed to Caesarea and demonstrated for days in front of the governor’s palace. Pilate surrounded them with his army and threatened them with death if they didn’t go away, but they said they’d rather die than overlook his blasphemy. When he saw how deeply they felt about it, he ordered the images removed.”

“A good thing,” said Ben. “I heard the same story. Pilate’s less the monster for having the good sense to back down.”

“More likely he was afraid of being recalled to Rome and beheaded. I suppose you’ve heard about the aqueduct too.”

“I have.” Turning to me, Ben explained, “Pilate took money from the Temple treasury to construct an aqueduct for Jerusalem. Actually,” he said, turning back to Ari, “I happen to think that was a *good* idea. Better to take the money out of Temple offerings than add to the taxes we pay Rome.”

“But this time,” Ari continued, “when tens of thousands arrived at his palace, protesting the use of sacred funds for secular purposes, Pilate ordered them beaten with clubs. Some of the soldiers got a little carried away and unarmed protesters were killed.”

“I heard that too,” said Ben. “But Pilate’s plan made sense. When it’s finished the people may hate the Roman aqueduct, but they’ll love having the water.”

Ari smiled. “And so will the priests; they’ll use it to fill the Temple cisterns. In fact, it’s whispered that there was collusion between Caiaphas and Rome, for how could Pilate have taken money from the Temple treasury without permission from the high priest?”

“And what high priest would refuse a provincial governor who has the

power to dump him and appoint a different high priest?” added Ben cynically. Then his voice softened. “But tell me about the family,” he said. “Surely all’s been quiet on the *home* front, no?”

Ari laughed. “Let me see. Two of your cousins, Jacob and Mendel, have joined the Zealots, swearing to save God-fearing Palestine from pagan Rome. I recently discovered that both boys carry daggers.” Ari paused. “But isn’t there another cousin you’d rather hear about?”

To my surprise, Ben blushed a deep red. “How is she?” he asked in a choked whisper.

“She’s well.”

“And?”

“Unmarried still.”

Ben sighed with what sounded like relief. “Does she know I’m coming home for Passover?”

“She knows,” Ari smiled. “Everyone knows. Preparations are underway to celebrate both the Exodus and the Return. Everyone’s at the house waiting to greet you. So many wanted to come to Caesarea that it was decided nobody should, so as not to cause envy.”

How different these lives were from mine. Family, household, tradition – and I with only a change of tunics, a pair of sandals, a few drachmas that I *must* remember to change into shekels, and a hidden, impossible love.

XIII

The Ezekial clan lived in a house in the Upper City of Jerusalem. As I wasn’t expected to become a permanent family member, a sleeping place was found for me that was only slightly smaller and dimmer than the one I’d shared with Crocchus under the amphitheater. Ari accompanied me there, but as we arrived at the doorway he turned toward me with an agonized face. “Patron,” he said in a tragic whisper, “you must help me.”

Amazed, I whispered back, “Of course I will. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to say something that I’m unable to say.”

His words were puzzling; if he was unable to say it, how was I to hear it?

“I can say it to *you*,” he told me, “but I can’t tell Ben.”

“What is it then?”

“I can’t tell him that his cousin Rebecca, whom he loves, is betrothed to another.”

His meaning struck me like a blow, a blow that would fall a thousand times harder on Ben. “But now that he’s returned,” I said quickly, “can’t he stop the marriage by claiming her for himself?”

“He’ll not marry,” Ari said. “He doesn’t want to honor his father with grandchildren, and this makes it all the more ironic.”

Not stopping to question what he meant by “ironic,” I said, “Perhaps Ben can still do something. The groom-to-be surely doesn’t want to wed a woman who loves someone else. Who’s the man?”

“It’s not a man,” sighed Ari. “It’s Ezekial himself.”

“*Ezekial?*” I repeated in a cry that tried to be a whisper. “How awful! How ironic! How can that possibly be?”

“She’s a virgin,” shrugged Ari, “and her father has consented to the match. There’s nothing she or Ben can do about it. When Ezekial married Ruth, the mother of Ben and Sarah, she was in love with another man, but her father gave her to Ezekial. Of course, that’s natural. Marriages are supposed to be political and economic, not romantic. Cupid is always the stumbling block, Mammon the enabler.”

By my calculations, Ezekial had by now married four virgins, divorced three for childlessness, and driven to suicide the one wife who’d given him children. That was curious. “Why could only one of his wives bear children?” I asked. “Why only the mother of Ben and Sarah, and not the others?”

Ari shook his head. “The man is impotent with women. He can only ejaculate into his own hands. The Law forbids this. It’s a sin for a man to waste his seed, and very unclean.”

“No wonder he’s always purifying himself. He used up all the fresh water on the *Sea Onion*.”

“That’s nothing. He had a second bath carved out of the foundations of this house for his use alone. He believes the Lord will overlook his sins if he purifies himself constantly.”

“But if Ezekial’s the father of Ben and Sarah,” I insisted, “how could he be impotent?”

Ari was silent. He didn’t look at me. Waiting for him to speak, the only possible answer hopped into my mind. “Are Ben and Sarah not his?” I asked, almost without inhaling. “Does he know?”

“He knows, for he allowed it to happen. He wanted children so that everyone would think he obeys God’s commandment, but his other wives were only for show and to stimulate his prurience. Anyway,” Ari continued, “after Ben and Sarah were born, Ezekial gave their real father two choices: either leave Palestine forever or marry another woman. Unable to face exile, he decided to marry. When Ruth heard this she was so distressed she threatened to reveal to everyone the true paternity of Ben and Sarah.”

“And did she?”

“No. She hesitated, knowing that if she admitted to adultery, then she and her former lover would be judged by the Sanhedrin and condemned. Even worse for a mother, her offspring would be outcasts. While she hesi-

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tated, Ezekial took her one night to a high place, stoned her to death, and threw her from the height.”

“*He stoned her to death?*”

Ari nodded. “That’s what the Law of Moses demands in such cases. Ezekial could tell himself that she was responsible for her own death because she transgressed the Law.”

His words amazed me. “Jews consider adultery a crime punishable by death? Rome would become a ghost town if it instituted that penalty.”

“The Jewish Law permits death by stoning for certain crimes, but guilt must first be established by judges. Ezekial sits on the Council, so is a judge himself. He knew the Council would find her guilty but that Roman law would prohibit them from ordering her execution. By killing her himself, he hoped to silence her forever.”

“But how did he get away with it?”

“He made it look like an accident, as if she’d died from the fall. Many believed she committed suicide. Neither Ben nor Sarah knows the truth. I know because I helped my master wash off the blood when he returned home that night. Believe me, since then I’m very careful what I eat around here. No one knows his secret but me, and now you.”

Hearing this my first thought was to forgo supper and bolt from the house. Restraining me was my love for Sarah and my concern for Ben. “Why, after all this time have you spoken of this,” I asked Ari, “and to *me* of all people?”

“I’ve long kept the secret of their mother’s death, but only last night learned about Rebecca’s betrothal. I think Ben must be told about both these matters, and the sooner the better.”

“I’m amazed that Ben and Sarah didn’t guess that Ezekial wasn’t their father. Neither of them resembles him.”

“No, they don’t at all.”

“Do they resemble their mother then? Did she have green eyes and curly, light-colored hair?”

“No, but in this large clan there are all sorts of family traits – eyes, hair, noses, teeth. Their real father was in the family too. Anyone who looks around can find any likeness he seeks.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“You must tell Ben that Rebecca is engaged to his father. I can’t bring myself to tell him, yet he needs to know.”

I shook my head. “I think it would be better if he heard it from you, or from Ezekial, or from Rebecca herself. I’m almost a stranger here. It’s too intimate a story for me to relate; Ben would resent it. He might not even believe me.”

“I’m sure Ezekial won’t announce his marriage intentions until the last possible moment, and then it would be too late. The only reason *I* know is that household slaves and freedmen sooner or later know everything. Last

night I overheard Ben praying and speaking of Rebecca. Rebecca herself can't warn Ben because she doesn't know what's planned for her."

"She *doesn't*?"

"If she did, she might kill herself or flee, though I don't know where she could possibly go. No Israelite would take her in. Ben would certainly not run off with her, for he'd never do anything to bring down the wrath of the Lord. They'd be outcasts wherever they went, and if caught might be stoned to death, in defiance of Roman law."

"But what good would it do to tell Ben in advance?"

"It would give him time to think about it, not rush off and do something rash; Ben's a good man and I want him to live. Please, Mel, tell him for me. I swear, I'll owe you one." He paused. "If that's not enough, I'll owe you *two*."

Speechless, all I could do was stare at Ari. Seeing my anguish, he suddenly smiled. "Well," he said, "if you want some *happy* news to tell Ben at the same time, I'll tell you another secret. I was planning to tell him myself, but you're welcome to."

Happy news? Did the world contain any happy news? I didn't want to hear another family secret, but the promise that it would make Ben happy made me curious. "All right," I said reluctantly. "What's the happy news?"

"You can tell Ben that his sister is also betrothed, and to a very fine young man – Eli, the son of Nathan."

His words made me laugh. "That's impossible," I said. "Ben has only one sister – Sarah. Sarah's not betrothed."

"Yes, she is," said Ari. "Ezekial reached an agreement with Nathan while he and Sarah were in Athens."

I was unable to take in his words. "You're speaking of *Sarah*? Ben's sister Sarah?"

"That's right. She's the lucky lady."

"But . . ." I broke off, casting about for a way to refute his words. "But Sarah has red spots on her skin. Who would marry someone with red spots?"

Ari flashed a broad grin. "Only a man who also has red spots," he chuckled. "Eli has a skin disease that's been in his family for generations. The spots cover his entire body and aren't open sores, so he's not considered unclean according to the Law. Ezekial is a good father to have found his spotted daughter a spotted man to marry."

"But . . ." I couldn't speak. Ari, who knew everything, must have known Sarah's spots were bogus. Wasn't it equally obvious to him that she and I loved each other? I could only stare at the man. He was surely ignoring the fact of our love because it created an impossible situation for Cupid – or a hopeless one for Mammon.

If that was the case, there was nothing to do but take my darling and

flee. Scenes flashed through my mind of us walking together on an endless road, Sarah riding a donkey, Sarah asleep in my arms beneath a sheltering tree. “Why would Ezekial do this to his daughter?” I demanded.

“Mel, there’s a piece of property, a house by the Temple Mount . . .”

Suddenly it was clear: spotted Eli needed a wife, therefore his father had agreed to sell his property to Ezekial in exchange for “spotted” Sarah. “She must refuse to marry him,” I cried. “She doesn’t love him. Her life would be miserable.”

“Refuse her father’s wishes?” Ari regarded me as if I were mad. “No young girl can refuse her father’s wishes concerning marriage or anything else. It’s the Law. Would you want her stoned?” He chuckled. “Refuse an *Ezekial*? Who do you think she is – the high priest?”

His words convinced me of one thing: Israel held no hope for Sarah and me. We’d have to escape to Rome. I’d train to be a gladiator. I’d kill men, I’d kill beasts, and I’d pour mountains of gold at the feet of my beautiful Sarah. We’d put our lives in the hands of the Roman gods and they’d protect us.

How safe and sane Rome seemed to me now – the amphitheater less dangerous than the Temple, the sword more honest than the stone, Jupiter more forgiving than the Hebrew Lord. And best of all, Rome was just down the road – *any* road!

How could I have shunned for so long the place I was born?

XIV

Nights came and went – nights full of snoring and days full of family. The central courtyard of the house bustled with members of the Ezekial clan as Passover drew near. With no private place to talk, and no opportunity, I was unable to deliver Ari’s messages.

The city itself was no less busy. Once again Jewish pilgrims had come from every corner of the empire to partake of the Passover festivities, see the wonders that King Herod had wrought, buy souvenirs, and pay their half-shekel dues to the Temple.

While I seldom left the family compound, I caught only occasional glimpses of Ben and Sarah. When our eyes met we’d smile and nod and they’d go their ways, attending to family duties. Meanwhile, I couldn’t keep myself from scanning every male face and exposed limb for signs of a skin disease that might be acceptable to priests.

Finally I did see a man with spots so I went up to him and introduced myself as a friend of the family. He told me his name was Eli, son of Nathan. “Is your wife here?” I asked, trying not to stare at his skin.

“I have no wife,” he replied pleasantly, “but am soon to marry Sarah, the daughter of Ezekial.”

At these words, which I'd both expected and feared, coldness gripped me. "Oh?" I said, trying to look pleased. "No one in the family mentioned this to me. Does Sarah know?"

"She knows if her father told her," he replied. "We're cousins, but I live in Ashdod. I myself learned of our good fortune only days ago when my father brought the news from Athens. We'll announce our engagement after Passover. I've come to live in her father's house for a week, as tradition demands."

"To what purpose is this tradition?"

"To assure the groom that he marries a virgin." Eli laughed. "Of course, I've no doubts about Sarah." Then, with a nod, he disappeared into the crowd of kinsmen.

Distressed by his words, I saw Ari come up to me wearing a smile. "I see you met Eli," he said. "What do you think of him?"

"He's covered with a terrible skin disease," I whispered urgently. "I don't understand why they even let him into Jerusalem. How can the priests consider him clean?"

Chuckling, Ari leaned over to say in my ear, "He's clean because his father paid every priest from Caesarea to Jerusalem to *certify* him clean. Of course it helps that his spots aren't open sores."

"But that's not fair," I exclaimed. "They say that Jerusalem with its Temple is the cleanest, purist place on earth. How can such a skin be allowed inside the city walls, much less into this house? How can a purist like Ezekial let a spotted hyena like Eli marry his daughter?"

"Once they're married, Eli and Sarah will live in Ashdod. As part of the deal, Eli has agreed never to set his spotted feet in Jerusalem again. By the way, have you met Rebecca?"

Ari nodded in the direction of a girl standing off by herself, a girl with a beautiful face and long, dark tresses. Her bearing was graceful and her dress hung elegantly from her supple frame. I wondered aloud how Ben could stay away from such a person for even an hour, much less years.

"Well, he has no choice at the moment. It's the time of her monthly blood; she's unclean. That's why she's not helping prepare the food."

Clean or unclean, I couldn't help feeling that her and Ben's problems were not my top priority. I wanted to speak to Sarah – alone.

Ari promised he'd arrange for me to meet with Sarah, and with Ben too, after the Sabbath. Telling them Ari's awful news wouldn't be easy, I knew, but *someone* had to do it.

"Don't forget that you'll owe me one or two," I told Ari. "Maybe even *three*."

"That day may come," he replied. "If it does, I'll be there."

XV

On the fourteenth day of Nisan, Ben insisted I go to the Temple with him and the other men when they took the Paschal lamb to be slaughtered. After this was done, I accompanied the flayed carcass home while the others spent the day at the Temple listening to sermons ushering in Passover. At the house the women oversaw the preparation of the food and that evening, when the men returned, platters and bowls of blown glass, silver, and gold were brought out. These held a meal that included the lamb, fishes with an egg on top, unleavened bread, and vegetables. Wine was poured into gold and silver goblets.

I was not hungry for food, only for the closeness of Sarah, which was of course denied me. “Eat, eat,” Ari would whisper, putting choice morsels in my bowl. But when he saw me ignore these, dribble oil over unleavened bread and chew it down with olives, he said in despair, “Mel, are you *sure* you’re Jewish?”

I don’t know whether all present were as filled to repletion as the nine thousand, but as linen napkins wiped fingers clean of greasy lamb and vegetables, and teeth were cleaned with silver picks, I heard more sighs and belches than complaints.

Ari was as good as his word. After the Sabbath, when most of the family were off sightseeing and shopping, he beckoned me to follow him. We crossed the deserted courtyard and entered a narrow corridor leading to a small garden that was open to the sky. He motioned for me to enter, then disappeared. Seated on a garden bench was Sarah.

“Sit down, dear Mel,” she said, offering me a seat near her.

Then we were silent, our eyes searching each other’s face as if looking for a key to unlock that other psyche. I, who’d never had trouble speaking my mind, could find no words to tell her how beautiful she was. Poetry I once knew by heart deserted me; entire languages languished in the desert between my tongue and palate.

Seeing my eclipse, Sarah reached over, plucked a flower, and handed it to me. I put it to my nose. This resulted in a loud and terrible sneeze, then another. A sign from the gods? No, this wasn’t Rome or Athens. She proffered a square of white linen. I blew with the hollow, resonant tone of a Temple horn. She laughed with the breaking laughter of a brook. I thought to myself, we don’t need further ceremony to become husband and wife; we two are one.

One we might be, yet I knew even less about Sarah than about myself. So I was glad when she began to speak about her past. Because of her restricted life, most of her memories were her mother’s handed-down memories of a land Sarah had never seen.

“My mother was born in Galilee, in Capernaum. She loved her life there and often spoke of it. Capernaum – all of Galilee – is very different

from Judaea, and so her life was different too. Having no Temple or priests, worshipers met in synagogues to listen to the teachings of their rabbi. Gentiles weren't excluded, though they couldn't enter farther than the threshold. Women could sometimes sit in a special balcony. My mother told me Capernaum was a Hellenized city where Greeks and Arabs lived, so the Jews had a vision of the world beyond Palestine."

Listening to Sarah, I was thinking that compared to Jerusalem, life in Galilee was paradise. When we were married, that's where we'd live.

"My mother told me that unlike Judaea, Galilee is a fertile land. It rains enough to grow trees of many species: palms, and all kinds of fruit trees. Trade routes bring merchants from everywhere. The Lake is large and full of fish. Parts of the Lake have fresh water, and other parts have salt, so there are many varieties of fish. Since it's not necessary to work hard to live happily, the people of Galilee are kindly and generous." She chuckled. "Of course, the gloomy Judaeans are contemptuous of them."

"I can understand that," I smiled.

"My mother was a beautiful young woman. That was her downfall. One day a man named Ezekial was travelling through Capernaum and happened to see her. He spoke to her father, and the marriage was arranged."

"But you and Ben were born in Jerusalem, no?"

"Yes. I've never visited Galilee except through the memories of our mother."

"It sounds like a perfect Eden."

"Not quite," said Sarah. "It had one problem."

"What was that?"

"Mother said it was full of thieves and brigands. No one was ever safe from them."

Her words reminded me of the murderous skinheads who'd lived by the Lake of Galilee. I told Sarah what they'd said about the five thousand, adding, "Those brigands figured the bottom had dropped out of the fish and bread markets, but that Jesus was on a roll."

"I suppose they didn't mean an *onion* roll," she laughed.

"No, they didn't," I said, wishing I could take her in my arms and kiss her.

If she felt the same urge, she made no sign. "Jesus came from Galilee," she went on. "It's said he considered Capernaum his home. Perhaps that's why he was so independent in his thinking, always challenging the status quo, even as my mother did, but in a different way. He was said to be tolerant of prostitutes and Roman tax collectors, but contemptuous of Scribes and Pharisees. It just happens," she added, smiling, "that my family is Pharisee, and some of our best friends are Scribes."

Her words reminded me of a question that had long puzzled me. "Why did Jesus hate scribes?" I asked her. "What did he find evil about

men whose job it is to copy things down on papyrus and parchment?"

If Sarah thought my question that of an ignorant fool, she didn't let on. "In the beginning," she told me, "scribes were copyists, editors, and teachers who spent years of their lives studying Torah. Most have eyes that see only as far as the end of their noses, so they never travel or see the world, but spend their time hunched over their work. Today, these learned Scribes have become a wealthy and powerful class. As Doctors of the Law they enforce their official interpretations of it with a binding authority. I suppose one could say that, in general, Jews want to live according to the Law, and Scribes tell them how to do it. Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes too make up the Jerusalem Sanhedrin."

Her words prompted another question: "Sarah, why do Jews love the Law of Moses? It's so cruel."

"You don't understand your own people," Sarah chuckled. "To a Jew there's nothing more wonderful and exalting than knowing and living the word of the Lord. It's our divine grace. Tradition is what keeps Judaism alive."

"Then your father with all his ritual washing is enjoying himself tremendously because he's doing what his Lord tells him to do?"

"I think my father is one of those more interested in the rituals than the happy religious feeling," she told me. "His washing is obsessive, as if he's seeking absolution for some terrible crime, even beyond the guilt Jews normally feel."

This reminded me of something my great grandfather had said – that Jews suffered from guilt. "What do Jews normally feel guilty about?" I asked her.

"Well, about events like Adam's expulsion from Eden and the destruction of Solomon's Temple. Jews blame these calamities – and all calamities that befall them – on their disobedience to God, on their breaking of their Covenant with God. You see, Mel, Jews believe that on Mount Sinai God dictated to Moses the first five books of the Bible – the Torah. The Torah is our Law. It contains the entire religion and history of our people, to which our traditions are tied. God also gave Moses the Ten Commandments, which forbid Jews to commit murder, among other things."

Was this the moment to tell Sarah my terrible message about her father's crime? I opened my mouth to speak, but different words popped out: "Sarah, I love you. Will you marry me?"

Her eyes told me my question wasn't a complete surprise. "I love you too, Mel," she said. I held my breath as she paused a long moment. "But my father has promised me to another."

"To that spotted hyena?" I cried, leaping to my feet.

"That's the one," she said, chuckling aloud at my choice of words. "I have no veto power over my father's wishes, and only one way out."

"Which is?"

“To do what my mother did – throw myself from a high place.”

“No, no! Your mother *didn't* do that. That's not how she died!”

Sarah stared at me. “What are you saying?”

There was no way now to avoid telling her the truth. “Sarah,” I said, “your mother didn't kill herself. Your father stoned her to death and threw her from the height.”

“You're mad!” exclaimed Sarah. “Why would he kill her?”

“Because she'd threatened to reveal a terrible secret.” I broke off, hating to say more.

“What secret?” she demanded.

There was no way to put off the inevitable. “Her infidelity.”

“Her *what*?”

Sarah looked stunned. How I wished I'd not said anything, but at the same time I knew she had to know. Old lies, such as those told to me about my father, had a way of making people live those lies over and over again.

“Ezekial isn't your father,” I went on, “or Ben's. Your mother had a lover and you and Ben are the products of that union.” As I spoke I saw the blood drain from Sarah's face.

“Who told you this? It can't be true!” But even as she denied it, I saw to my infinite sorrow that my terrible words had found their home. She believed me. “*Ari* told you,” she guessed immediately. “That gossip *Ari*.”

“Was he wrong!” I cried, hardly daring to hope it. “Was he lying?”

She considered this a moment, then said, “*Ari's* never wrong and never lies. He finds out everything. He reads your thoughts and the language your body speaks. Secrets fly to him and cling like iron to lodestone. If he told you that Ezekial killed our mother, and that we are not the children of his loins, it must be true.”

“Then if Ezekial *isn't* your real father,” I said, “can he still force you to marry Eli?”

Sarah sighed deeply. “Oh, Mel, my dear Mel, no one must ever know the truth. It would open a Pandora's box of misery for all concerned.”

“It already has,” I said bitterly, hopelessly. Still, now that we were talking of such matters I decided to get the rest out into the open. “*Ari* told me another secret. It concerns Ben and Rebecca. Do you want to hear it?”

Sarah smiled, perhaps seeking to calm my obvious distress. “Go ahead.”

I told her that Ezekial was planning to marry Rebecca. “Neither she nor Ben knows this yet; *Ari* can't bring himself to tell Ben, so he asked me to do it. He's afraid Ben might get so enraged he'd kill Ezekial.” Saying this, I realized Ezekial's death might be the best solution for everyone.

“No,” said Sarah, “my brother wouldn't kill anyone. Down deep Ben's a child of Torah. He'd sooner break a woman's heart – and his own – than break one of God's Commandments. Remember, only a few years

ago he was an ardent Pharisee beating up Nazarenes. The time Ben spent in Alexandria can't have profoundly changed his inner core, just as a lifetime in Jerusalem would never change you."

"Change me from what to what?"

She smiled. "Mel, you may have been born a Jew, but you were raised a pagan, far from our people and the Law. I think that down deep you'll always be more pagan than Jewish. Something amazing would have to happen to change that."

"Something amazing *has* happened," I told her. But as I was about take her hand in mine, Ari appeared and beckoned me to follow him.

XVI

I thought Ari would take me straight to Ben, but instead we walked aimlessly through the busy streets as if he had no particular destination in mind. He asked no questions about my meeting with Sarah, but I had the feeling this was because somehow he already knew, had perhaps even imagined in advance everything that would pass between us. In a world that I found constantly surprising and complex, Ari seemed to have mastered life's underlying structure perfectly, like a man able to walk on a sea made of a billion drops of water.

Silently we walked, soon finding ourselves on Tyropoeon Valley Street near where Paul's shop had been. When we came to the familiar doorway I stopped. As Ben had said, it was now a cheese shop. We went inside and I asked the apprentice whether they had the address of the shop's previous owner. He said no, but that finally someone had come to collect the bales of animal hides stored in the rooms above.

As Ari and I went out, I was remembering Paul. Was it really surprising he'd abandoned Judaism? After all, he was born and raised in Tarsus, a Hellenized city in Cilicia. Governed for the past several years by philosophers, Tarsus was considered on a par intellectually with Athens and Alexandria. I recalled that on the road to Damascus Paul had mentioned studying the Bible in Greek, and that the services in his synagogue there were conducted in Greek. This didn't mean much to me at the time, but now I also recalled Paul saying that his father had sent him to Jerusalem to join the Pharisees and become more immersed in Judaism.

Why hadn't these efforts to make his son a better Jew worked? Why had Paul become an apostate to Judaism? Perhaps because, as Sarah said, a person raised among pagans might well be a pagan for life.

After leaving the bazaar we entered a part of Jerusalem unfamiliar to me. We passed through a square where Zealot youths talked vociferously on subjects that seemed to energize their listeners. Ari still said not a word. I'd never known him to remain silent so long. Did he feel ashamed

for putting me in this awkward position?

“Mel! Ari!” Ben was coming toward us across the square. I turned to say something to Ari, but he’d disappeared into the crowd.

Ben led me to a small park where we sat down on a bench. How his dress and appearance had changed since his return to Jerusalem! His tunic, made of courser cloth, was belted lower, no sandal straps wound up his legs, and he’d begun growing a beard.

“Well, Ben,” I said, “what’s it like being home again?”

He gave a sharp laugh. “Don’t get me started.” Then, after reflecting a moment he said, “Mel, I had no idea what was in store for me. On the Sabbath my father took me with him to pray. What a scene! The Temple, filled with worshipers, glistened in the sun. Thousands more filled the esplanades. To me it was like a reawakening, an affirmation. Suddenly I felt the power of the place – the power of Torah.

“My father introduced me to some other Council elders who were there with their sons. You know, Mel, walking on the esplanade, through the colonnades, talking with his colleagues, my father was a different man. Seeing the way he walked, his firm step, his proud bearing, I felt an intense desire to live in Jerusalem again and perhaps one day become a member of the Sanhedrin myself.”

Impressed by my friend’s earnestness, I cried, “Then go for it! Get yourself elected, or whatever it takes.”

Ben laughed. “It isn’t as simple as that. One way to get on the Council is to be selected. I doubt they’d select me because of the time I spent in Greece and the life I led there. Being one of the seventy-one is a big deal, Mel. You even help decide when months and years begin and end.”

“It’s like being a god,” I laughed.

“Exactly. And of course Rome has a say in deciding who’s put on the Council. Sometimes they interfere, sometimes they don’t.”

“How else might you get on it?”

“One can inherit the job, which could happen if my father died, or resigned in my favor. Personally, I think he’d rather die than resign.”

“He certainly doesn’t seem ready to die,” I commented.

“No. He even told me he plans to marry again.”

I froze. “Did he tell you . . . *whom* he plans to marry?”

“The girl’s name is Rebecca,” Ben chuckled. “Quite a coincidence that we’re both involved with girls named Rebecca, don’t you think?”

Here was my opportunity to tell Ben the truth – that there was only *one* Rebecca – one Rebecca with two suitors – but I felt I’d rather have my tongue ripped out than say it. Furthermore, having learned that his ambitions might depend on his being Ezekial’s son, how could I possibly tell him he wasn’t?

“Ben,” I said, “you once told me you’d *not* wed Rebecca. You told me you didn’t want to honor your father by giving him grandchildren. Have

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you changed your mind?"

Ben sighed. "Mel, while living in Alexandria I found life there so stimulating that I have to admit I did put aside the obligations of Torah in everything from kosher laws to morality to filial duty. I did more than put them aside – I actively rebelled against them. To me, Hellenism represented a kind of freedom.

"When I told you I hated my father for driving my mother to suicide, that was true. His action made me resent the obligation the Law puts on us to become husbands and fathers. Besides, I felt marriage and children would interfere with my studies of philosophy, the arts, and athletics. But now that I'm back in Jerusalem, I realize I was blaming my moral waywardness on acts of my father, when it really had nothing to do with him."

Ben paused a moment to choose his words. "Mel, today I want nothing more than to resume my former life, with Torah at its center. Yes, of course I wish to marry Rebecca, if she'll still have me after my long and selfish absence. In fact, today I'll ask my father to speak to hers."

I couldn't bear to hear another word. How I wanted to strangle Ari; he must have known everything Ben was telling me. My strong inclination was to tell Ben nothing at all, to let him learn of Ezekial's perfidy from Ezekial himself. Nothing was worse than family secrets, and I wasn't part of their family – yet – so none of this was my business.

Then I remembered how at Delphi my friend Lucia had had the courage to tell me the truth about my father. Her words had redefined my life and I'd always be grateful. Perhaps that was what friends were for – to tell a friend the truth, no matter how painful. I took a deep breath.

"Ben," I said, "Ezekial isn't your father. Your mother was unfaithful with another man and both you and Sarah are the result. Ezekial was aware of this from the beginning. Your mother didn't commit suicide; Ezekial stoned her to death. But that's not all. Ben, there aren't two Rebeccas. There's only one – yours – and Ezekial plans to marry her himself."

I stopped speaking and looked at Ben, wondering what he could possibly say. His face was expressionless. When he spoke his voice was almost a whisper. "I knew that," he replied. "Somehow, deep inside, I knew all that."

As strange as his words were, how could I not understand and empathize? For had not I myself always known, deep down inside, the truth about my "gladiator" father and my being a Jew? What is it in humans that we deny the truth in order not to deal with it?

"What will you do?" I asked Ben gently, but with great curiosity; perhaps what he found to do about Rebecca would also work for Sarah and me.

"I suppose," he replied, "that I could kill Ezekial. But as this would be a criminal act under both Jewish and Roman law, it isn't an option."

I waited for him to suggest another plan, but he remained silent. Was he out of options already? “There must be *something* you can do to stop him,” I urged. “Think of poor Rebecca. Think of yourself. Do you know that he’s promised Sarah to Eli, essentially trading your sister for a piece of real estate? He must be stopped. Sarah and I love each other.”

“Mel,” said Ben, “ours is a very old, patriarchal civilization. True love has had much practice surviving under harsh conditions, and sometimes finds a way.”

“Then tell me what ways there are,” I cried. “Adultery? That’s also a capital crime according to your Law.”

“All right,” said Ben, looking up at the darkening sky. “I’ll do something right now. I’ll go and ask Rebecca if she still desires to marry me. When I have her answer I’ll take it from there. Wish me luck.”

I wished him all the luck in the world, thinking as I watched him walk off that another of Lucia’s prophecies had proven true: I was certainly living in interesting times.

XVII

After Ben left I walked back to the place I’d last seen Ari. In the public square, under the watchful eyes of the soldiers, Zealots continued to harangue the crowd, spreading their message of hatred toward Rome’s pagan gods. I noticed Jacob and Mendel, the Zealots from Ezekial’s household, holding lighted torches as they talked excitedly to Ari. The soldiers seemed unmoved by what was going on. Did they understand what was being said? I decided they must, for many of them had been recruited in the eastern provinces and understood Aramaic. What they knew, and I didn’t, was that reinforcements were already on their way from Caesarea.

That evening riots broke out in the city just as the legions arrived. Early the next morning I was awakened by Ari. He held a dagger in his hand.

“Get up. Come!”

“What’s happening?” I cried, pulling on my clothes.

“Sarah has left for Ashdod. Hurry. The marriage is today.”

“*Today?* How can that be? How long was I asleep?” But before Ari could begin to reply I grasped the hand that held the dagger. “Give me this.”

“It belongs to Mendel. He slipped it to me just before he was arrested. I’m going to dispose of it.”

“*Give it to me!*”

“Then hide it in your clothes.”

As Ari and I left the house and started running down the hill, we saw the city and Temple veiled in smoke. Between panting breaths he ex-

plained that overnight more Roman legions had arrived and that all the city gates were closed but one – the Eastern Gate on the far side of the Temple Mount. Ezekial, with Sarah and Eli, were headed there. “They have a carriage waiting in the Kidron, but so do we. If Ezekial stops to pray, we’ll gain on them. If not, we’ll try to overtake them on the road.”

At the bottom of the hill we slowed our pace so as not to attract attention; soldiers were everywhere. “Nathan’s so eager to marry off Eli and have grandchildren,” Ari explained, “that he told Ezekial the wedding must be today because he’s sailing for Athens tomorrow. Ezekial’s so eager to close the deal that he too is willing to turn civility and tradition on their heads.”

“How could anyone want a house that badly?”

“He believes the Lord will punish him and all Judaea until he stops living above a cemetery. Tomorrow morning he and Nathan will examine the bridal sheets. If all is well . . .”

“The bastards!” Grasping the dagger’s handle I noted that it fit my hand perfectly. “There *will* be blood,” I said to Ari, “but it will be Ezekial’s, and it will be today.”

Arriving at the Temple Mount we hurried across the Courtyard of the Gentiles toward the Eastern Gate. Passing through it we saw them up ahead, getting into a carriage which then took off at great speed. Leaping into our carriage we shouted to the driver to whip his team and catch the other.

There was little traffic; with the city in turmoil and the gates closed, most merchants and tourists were staying away. Then suddenly, instead of continuing on the main road, the carriage ahead slowed abruptly and turned left onto a country road leading around a hill. Had they seen us? Were they trying to evade us? As they disappeared from view we shouted to our driver to follow.

O horror! Moments later, rounding the hill, we saw a terrible thing: a girl leaping from the carriage ahead. It was Sarah. As she fell her dress caught on the carriage door and she was dragged. When finally the driver could stop his team, Ezekial and Eli jumped down. I saw Ezekial push Eli roughly away, pick up a stone, and fall upon Sarah. I didn’t wait for our carriage to stop. Leaping out I ran, screaming a warning. But as in a nightmare, I felt like I was running in chest-high water.

The hated arm rose and fell, rose and fell. Eli, crying in horror, flung himself back into the carriage, which turned about and raced off.

Reaching Ezekial, I grabbed and pulled him from Sarah’s limp form. He tried to shake me off, crying, “She still *lives!*” as if I were some angel sympathetic to his cause whom he must bid be patient. Again he raised the bloody stone.

“No,” I cried, clinging to that arm, that head, my fingers tearing at his flesh, his eyes, pulling him backwards, throwing him to the road, kicking

his face as he scrambled and rolled, crushing with my foot the hand reaching for the fallen stone.

“Watch him!” I shouted to Ari as I ran to Sarah’s side. “Hold him!”

Bending over her I wasn’t able to believe what I saw. All was fatal. No one, not even a soldier, could survive such an attack, much less this gentle girl. “Sarah,” I begged, “please hold onto your life.” Taking her in my arms I waited for a sign, a sign from some god, *any* god, Hebrew or pagan, that he or she would save her.

Had I not been looking for that hopeful sign I’d have closed my eyes – not because this sight of Sarah was too awful, was worse than not seeing her at all – but out of respect; I felt she’d not want anyone, especially me, to see her this way.

A shout. I turned. Ezekial had thrown Ari aside. Covered with blood, the monster grabbed up another stone. “She still lives,” he cried, raising it high as he advanced.

At the same time another arm went up, at the end of this a dagger. Throwing myself at him I planted the blade with all my strength in that so hated chest over which how many times I’d poured ablutions. No ablutions now. No absolutions. Death! Again I thrust, stabbing that neck, that beak, jaw, cheek, eyes, again and again until the monster fell, gasping, gurgling, streaming unclean, unholy blood, until suddenly he shook mightily, straightened like a slaughtered bull, and expired at my feet.

Turning, I threw myself on the ground by Sarah, only to find that while I was away – in that short moment – life had left her. So gently had it departed that no one in the world, not even I, had seen or heard it go.

“Oh, Sarah,” I said, “I promise you, my dearest love that afterlife or not, when I do die our dusts will mingle. You and I will be earth together. Roots will visit us. Stones will lie as friends within our bosom. We will be earth and stones will be our harvest.

“But now,” I cried, “for Ezekial’s sins I call down a curse and a prophecy. I call whatever force there be who thinks it is a god, to strike Jerusalem, tear every stone from out the Temple walls and throw them thickly on the ground. And if there be no god, by god I’ll do the job myself and never rest until not one stone stands upon another, until the Law is crushed and Judaism lies in ruins. Upon that fateful day the Jewish people will go off, dispersing to every corner of the earth.

“But you, my darling Sarah, your dust and mine will stay, tossing about, playing like children, like lovers, laughing and rejoicing on the wind, burying our stones wickedly in one another.”

“Mel.” It was Ari’s gentle voice. “I’ll bring a doctor.”

“Too late,” I said, laying my face on Sarah’s still-warm breast. “Too late.”

XVIII

Ari disposed of the dagger and we left Ezekial's body in the road. Let some other find that roadkill. Let him pick it up and hand it off to those who wash, anoint, and place filth like that into coffins made of gold and silver so that never will their liquefying flesh poison the earth, sicken the worms, disgust the crows.

Covering Sarah in her shawl, I took her in my arms and with Ari at my side started walking. No one on the road attempted to interfere. *A corpse? A female corpse covered with blood?* To even *look* upon such compounded impurity would oblige a pious Jew to ritually bathe his eyes. But perhaps he who wrote the Law had never loved a woman. He'd surely never known my Sarah.

And so I bore her, holding her dear body with a love so great it felt like pride, a pride in her so great it changed at certain moments to its opposite, despair, that then became defiance. No one in a thousand miles was purer or more holy than this woman in my arms. To bear her proudly was my duty and my right. Was I not trained to carry off the innocent dead, like my father before me?

We walked through hills on whose terraced slopes grew olive orchards. What soil less likely ever to be disturbed than that of an olive grove? I'd bury Sarah here and come back another day to claim her.

When Ari saw me pause at the foot of one hill, he told me it was called the Mount of Olives and that its other side faced the Temple across the Kidron Ravine. "People climb up there for the beauty of the view."

His words made me hesitate. I didn't want Sarah's grave trampled by crowds of tourists and crazy worshipers. There were other hills about that looked as peaceful as ancient scrolls – papyri that ploughs and peasant feet had written on and only trees had read.

So we walked on. Ari had heard my promise to Sarah – my prophecy about the destruction of the Temple. "In the Book of Daniel there's a prophecy about the Temple's destruction," he told me. "It says that an abomination – an awful horror standing in the place it should not be – inside the Holy of Holies – will render the Temple desolate."

"That prophecy was made a long time ago," I pointed out, "but the Temple stands."

"It was rebuilt."

"Then a new prophecy is in order."

Ari made no comment. Strangely, it didn't even occur to me then that as a Jew the Temple was *his* Temple, yet he'd not reproached me for my dire intentions in its regard. Soon we came to a hill of low stone terraces planted with olive trees. I nodded to Ari, and we climbed it. At the top we found some jutting rocks that on hot afternoons would shade a certain spot; one of these would also mark the grave that some day would be Sarah's

and mine. Then Ari went back to the house to get what we needed, while I sat with my darling in the shade of an olive tree.

When Ari returned he brought bread, a skin of water, and two shovels. He also brought me a clean tunic and sandals, as mine were stained with blood. The clothes he brought were those Ben had given me in Athens, the same I'd worn when I first knew Sarah.

"Thank you, Ari," I said. "You owe me nothing more. Your debt is paid."

"We'll see," he replied. "One may still remain."

I'd wanted to dig Sarah's grave alone, but seeing he'd brought two shovels I couldn't deny this good man the right to dig beside me. I was no jealous god after all, wanting all power, love, and honor for myself.

Together we dug until the hole was so deep we could be sure no scavengers or plough would ever dig so far. Then Ari climbed out and handed Sarah's body down to me. I embraced her, carefully arranged her shawl around her, and laid her in the earth. Tears falling from my eyes upon that dear cloth would remain with her through all eternity.

"Farewell for now, my darling," I said. Then I climbed out of the grave and in the light from the setting sun, we buried her.

XIX

After smoothing the earth to obliterate any signs of burial, Ari and I sat side by side on the outcropping of rock, sharing the bread and water. We looked toward the west where smoke still hung above the hills. Occasionally, distant shouting and sounds of battle reached our ears. We sat quietly as the moon rose behind us. My eyes wandered from Sarah's grave to the shadows of olive trees stenciled in moonlight on the soft earth, and from there to the full, grieving moon.

Now, as my darling blended into earth, I needed to be alone to study my revenge. Why were Jerusalem and its Temple still standing centuries after repeated prophecies and razings? Indeed, what was the connection between a prophecy and its fulfillment? Obviously it wasn't enough just to predict a thing, and then sit back and wait for some god to make it happen.

"Did you hear what I was thinking?" I asked Ari.

"You were wondering whether Ezekial's body has been found."

"Exactly right," I nodded, and our laughter mingled on the night air, a sound more improbable at that moment than the song of a mosaic bird.

"He was found," Ari said, "but not immediately identified." Then he handed me a leather pouch that had been overlooked in some weeds near Ezekial's body. "It contains a record of Sarah's and Eli's betrothal."

I took the papers out and tore them up. Again Ari's thoroughness and astuteness had impressed me, yet despite all we'd been through I knew

nothing of him or his past. As my plan was to leave for Galilee in the morning, this might be my last opportunity to find out. "Have you any family?" I asked him.

He told me he'd been sold into slavery at a young age and eventually ended up as a playmate and servant for Ben. "Ben and I studied the Bible together. I wasn't born a Jew; Ezekial had me circumcised."

"But you're so Jewish!" I exclaimed. "You're much more Jewish than I, who was circumcised as an infant. You even care about food and how much of it people should eat. What were you before?"

"My ancestors were French. They lived in the city of Lyons. My grandfather was captured by Julius Caesar and brought to Rome for Caesar's triumphal procession. Later he died in the arena. His son – my father – was sold to a Roman and married a Syrian slave. Twelve years after I was born their master sold me to a Jewish merchant who took me to Palestine and gave me to Ezekial to pay off a debt."

I listened to his story with amazement. His life had been as ruled by Chance as mine. "You weren't on the *Sea Onion*," I observed. "Were you with Ben in Alexandria?"

"No. He wanted to live on his own for a while and lead a Hellenistic life without anyone looking over his shoulder. It was Ben who insisted I be converted to Judaism. Under the Law of Moses a Jew can't be enslaved longer than seven years, while a gentile can be enslaved for life. Ben didn't want that to happen to me. After seven years in his service I was freed, though I remained with the family."

"Did you ever revisit Rome to find your father and mother?"

"I was in Rome once with Ben, Sarah, and Ezekial, but had no time to seek my parents. Perhaps I'll go again some day."

"While in Rome did you go to the amphitheater?"

"No. There were no games when we were there, but we wouldn't have gone anyway."

"Then you never saw Crocchus, the great gladiator?"

Ari laughed. "Never, but his name was everywhere. One couldn't be in Rome an hour without hearing of the great Crocchus Africanus. Some aficionados actually believed the fellow was a real crocodile."

"That doesn't surprise me," I sighed. "It was an easy mistake to make."

Ari climbed down from the rock, his face suddenly serious. "Mel, I must tell you what I learned just now at the house."

"What is it? What's happened?" Alarmed by his manner, I followed him down. "Rebecca was pregnant. I knew this, but somehow Ben learned of it." Ari paused.

"You say she *was* pregnant? Did she have an abortion?"

"No. When he found out, Ben killed her."

"*Killed* her!" It was worse than anything I could have imagined.

“Was he arrested?”

“No. There was no crime; he made it look like a suicide.”

I was stunned. “Then nothing will happen to him?”

“That will be for God to decide.”

As the moon passed overhead we spoke in low tones, each trying to absorb this terrible event. Then Ari leaned forward and touched my shoulder gently. “Mel, I know you want to be alone with Sarah now, but we’ll meet again some day. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, my friend. Thank you.” Watching Ari walk away I felt sure we’d meet again. Friends like him were rare, and stood out wherever they were. And besides, he still thought he owed me one.

When Ari was gone I sat a long while watching the moon and thinking my thoughts. Then I lay down on the soft earth of Sarah’s grave. This was as close as ever we’d be until our wedding night.

XX

The next morning when I awoke the moon had disappeared and it was day. Birds twittered in the olive trees. I told Sarah I’d return and kissed the earth above her dear body. Getting to my feet, I started down the hill.

Upon reaching the road the first person I saw was John Mark. I shouldn’t have been surprised running into a friend like that, but I was. “Mark,” I cried, “what are you doing here at this hour?”

After greeting me, Mark explained he’d awakened before dawn feeling a great urge to find a place to pray.

“Why didn’t you go to the Temple?”

He looked at me in surprise. “I’m not a Jew.”

“You’re *not*? Is *no* one I know Jewish? Mark, I thought *all* Christians were Jews.”

“Most are, but not all. My grandfather was captured in Britain and brought to Rome for Caesar’s Triumph, then later fed to bears in the arena. My father joined the Roman army under Tiberius and was killed in an accident at sea. There is, however, a Jewish side to my family and I have Jewish cousins, one of whom was converted. After my mother died of grief I began my travels, finally reaching Palestine where I learned of Jesus and his teachings.”

While I stood speechless, Mark went on to say that the soldiers had quelled the riots and the streets were clear. “Not much force was used. Apparently Pontius Pilate has learned it’s easier to occupy a land if you take care not to engage or enrage its citizens too much, especially the Zealots.” Then he looked at the hills surrounding us. “I know one of these is the Mount of Olives, but from here they all look alike to me. Do you know which one it is?”

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“It’s over there,” I said, pointing. Suddenly an idea came to me. “Jesus made a prophecy on the Mount,” I told Mark.

“I haven’t heard that. Do you know what he said?”

“Something about the Temple. He said that every stone in the Temple would be thrown down – not one would be left standing.”

Mark was astounded. “Did he really! Do you have that on good authority?”

“The best. He also talked about some awful horror standing in the place it shouldn’t be. Would the destruction of the Temple be a terrible thing?”

“Terrible? It would be apocalyptic for the Jews – the end of the world. But at the same time it would signal the return of the Messiah, who would save God’s chosen people.”

“I thought *Jews* were called the chosen people. Why would Jesus save the Scribes and Pharisees? Didn’t he hate them?”

“‘Save’ means ‘convert.’ He’d convert the Jews and give them everlasting life.”

“Would that mean the end of the Law of Moses?”

“Absolutely. But tell me, do you know if Jesus said *when* the Temple would fall?”

“It will definitely happen within my lifetime,” I told Mark, “and when it does I’ll return here to claim the one thing in the world I love.”

“What is that, Mel?”

Tears suddenly filled my eyes. I waved my arm to indicate the hill rising above us. “She’s there,” I told him. “She’s waiting for me there.”

XXI

“We’ll surely meet again,” said Mark, and who was I to disagree?

Setting out this time I had no pack to carry. I’d planned – how long ago it seemed! – to follow where Chance led. It had led me to Judaea. My steps now turned northward, toward Galilee. I wanted to see Capernaum, the Lake of Galilee, and other places Sarah had described. If only I could have carried her home, instead of leaving her in this gloomy land of deep gorges and rocky plateaus. Judaea’s landscape was cruel and unforgiving; no wonder it spawned unforgiving, vengeful people who worshiped a god made in their image.

Such thoughts, while in some way satisfying, were not uplifting. I was glad of that. I didn’t want the burden of my loss lightened. Not yet. What had to change now was my own inner strength, my ability to carry this burden with ever-greater courage, ever-greater determination, ever farther, until the day I could convert it into the fulfillment of a promise and a prophecy. Then I’d return to take my reward, my darling, my prize.

All day I walked. Starting out the next morning I began hearing behind me the tramping of boots. Everyone was moving to the sides of the road. Not knowing what was coming, I hid behind a boulder to observe what it could be. While there, I took the opportunity to relieve myself.

Then passed before my eyes something I'd never seen before. There were easily a thousand infantry and cavalry, centurions in crested helmets, legionaries bristling with swords and javelins, and teams pulling catapults and battering rams. A soldier noticed me. Suspicious, he gave a shout and he and others altered their route, filing past my boulder on both sides like a stream passing a rock. Their inexorable flow washed me, stumbling and helpless, along with them.

Quickly I managed to explain that I wasn't hiding from *them* per se, but had gone behind the rock to relieve myself. Hearing my fine Latin and the name Melius, they apologized and released me to go my way.

All this had been noticed, however, by another in the procession – a big man riding in a military carriage. When he called to his driver to stop, the long columns of troops before and behind his carriage halted too.

"Who's this fellow," the commander demanded of his men, "and why have you released him?" The soldiers repeated what I'd told them, that I was a Roman named Melius who'd only stopped to relieve himself.

"And did you succeed, Melius?" he asked. "Are you relieved?"

All looked at me. "*Certe*," I nodded.

"Strange," frowned the leader. "This fellow, who speaks Latin and whose name sports a Roman suffix, was born with a Jewish nose and wears a tunic that would cause Apollo to shed tears of envy. Come closer, prodigy."

With a legionary on either side I approached the carriage and was introduced to Pontius Pilate.

"Get in, Melius," he said. "But I'll call you Mel if you don't mind."

While I had little choice in the matter, I was quite agreeable to being called by my own name. "Not at all, Your Excellency," I replied awkwardly, seating myself on the bench opposite him.

"Lose the titles, Mel," Pilate said brusquely, signaling the driver to get moving. "Call me Pont. It may sound rude to the ear, but it's better than what many call me behind my back. Whatever you are, the cut of your tunic tells me you're not a Judaeen, so what exactly are you?" But before I could reply, he passed me a water skin and I was glad to send a stream of cool water down my throat.

Then I said, "I think I'm a secular, somewhat Hellenized Jew."

"Good. I like it that you're able to speak frankly to your superiors."

"Your humble servant . . . uh . . . Pont."

"Did you see how nicely I put down that insurrection, Mel?" Pilate asked then. "It could have been a perfect blood bath. I swear, I do my best not to ruffle Jewish feathers, but with these *mishugenhahs* it's not easy.

Don't mind me," he laughed, "I've picked up some of the local tongue since coming here. Even tasted kosher chicken once. Awful stuff."

"They drain all the blood out of meat and chicken before cooking it."

"Is *that* what it is? No wonder these Judaeans are such a whiney bunch. If they're not bathing, praying, or complaining, they're eating bloodless food." He shuddered.

"I knew one who bathed several times a day and never stopped complaining," I told him, not mentioning that the last time I'd seen him he was bathed in his own blood and had been rendered speechless.

"The way the Jews love water, you'd think they'd be eager for the aqueduct I'm building, but they've fought it all the way. They didn't want to pay for it with Temple money, so they rioted. I ask you, Mel, would they have preferred a Roman tax? I don't think so. Luckily Caiaphas is more sensible. He was the high priest when I got here, and as long as I'm governor, the high priest he'll remain."

His mentioning the aqueduct reminded me of something else: the soldiers with images on their standards. When I asked Pilate about that I thought he'd fall off his seat laughing.

"Oh, Mel, Mel," he gasped, "Caesarea is a great town but you don't know what it's like occupying this god-forsaken outpost of hell, keeping an eye on people who despise you. The Judaeans aren't just prophets of gloom and doom, they're boringly predictable. Normally when I move my troops I carefully avoid passing in or even *near* Jerusalem. I'm so careful of Jewish feelings I even mint our currency locally, without the emperor's picture on it.

"But once in a while," he continued, "even a simple prefect has to have some fun. So one night I sent the legionaries into Jerusalem with silver busts of Tiberius on their ensigns, just to see the predictable reaction. I wasn't disappointed. The Jews howled. Thousands came to Caesarea to riot in front of my residence. I was inside laughing my head off while my wife scolded me for acting like a child. So, attempting to placate her, I boldly threatened to kill them if they didn't leave. And what did they do? They swore they'd willingly die unless I ordered the images removed. So I did; I certainly wasn't going to provoke an insurrection by my wife!" And he laughed heartily.

"Someone once told me Jews had good senses of irony," I smiled, "but he forgot to include provincial governors."

XXII

For the rest of the journey Pilate alternated between serenading me with snatches of songs of the Italian countryside and dropping off to sleep. His brief naps gave me time to think about Sarah, look at the land, and

even doze off a little myself.

As we neared Caesarea the lines of soldiers and hardware began to break up. Some men went to their garrisons, others returned to their wives and children. Pilate seemed in no hurry to get home, so we snacked on field rations while he took me on a tour of his encampments.

It was dark when we arrived at the palace and descended from the carriage. Immediately we were surrounded by servants and clients, whom Pilate waved away. As we approached the house the front door opened to reveal a large, handsome woman dressed in a red gown, her hair coifed upward onto a kind of crown or comb.

Pilate introduced her as his wife, Claudia Procula. I saluted her as Madame and was about to thank Pilate for the ride and take my leave, when Madame said graciously, "As soon as my husband has bathed, we will dine. Please join us, and of course you must remain our guest until it's time to continue your journey."

I was happy to accept the invitation and followed Pilate to the warm baths where slaves massaged us with oil, then on to the ornate dining room that was comfortably furnished with low tables and cushioned couches – all the comforts of Rome!

"Nothing here is kosher," Pilate assured me pleasantly. "Enjoy."

I thanked him, noticing a look on Madame's face that didn't seem to encourage humorous sallies. Claudia Procula then informed me – reminding her husband at the same time – that politics and religion were forbidden subjects at her table. So, instead of conversation, we were entertained by harpists and singers, after which a slave named Ovidius read poems aloud in Greek and Latin.

After dinner we went outside to sit in the garden. Above was the same bright moon that watched over the grave of my darling. I seemed to hear it shouting, "Fool, why are you in Caesarea? Why aren't you with *her*?" I could give no satisfactory answer, so to keep from going mad with guilt and sorrow I turned my attention to conversation with my hosts.

All day I'd wanted to ask Pilate about his decision to crucify Jesus of Nazareth, but had found no good opportunity to do so. Since I was leaving the next morning, this might be my last chance to bring the subject up – *if* his wife would allow it. So, to begin, I chose what seemed an innocuous question, hoping it would get past Madame Scylla: I asked Pilate how many troops he had.

"Not enough!" replied Claudia Procula before her husband could get out a word. "Not enough to do the job they want him to do." Then she sat back and waited for her husband to confirm this.

"Currently," said Pilate, "I have one division of cavalry and five cohorts of infantry, about three thousand men in all."

"That sounds like a lot," I hazarded.

"Far from it," he replied. "I wouldn't have the forces to quell any

really big rebellion. What occurred just now in Jerusalem was nothing, but if ever those Zealots rally all Judaea to their cause, I'll need heavy reinforcements from Syria. In the meantime, I'm cautious how I treat the Jews."

At this Madame nodded forcefully. "And that childish joke you played on them with the standards wasn't the wisest," she reminded him. "Remember, you don't have Sejanus covering for you any more."

Claudia Procula's apparent willingness to discuss religion and affairs of state *after* dinner encouraged me to ask my main question. After all, it was surely one a pagan Jew might safely ask a pagan Roman. Turning to my host I said, "Why did you order the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth?"

As the words left my lips I had the distinct impression that if Madame's hair hadn't already been trained upward on its lattice, it would have risen on end by itself. Had her cheeks not already been powdered white, they'd have gone as pale as her husband's just had. Obviously I'd blundered into the middle of a deep and festering dispute.

Madame was the first to speak, which she did with some vehemence. "I *told* him not to do it!"

This was followed by a complete cessation of conversation. Finally Pilate broke the silence. "The night before the crucifixion my wife had a dream."

Oh, no, I thought. Not another woman dreaming about Jesus!

"In her dream she saw herself standing naked in the River Jordan being baptized by Jesus."

"*Really!*"

"She wanted me to save his life, but what's a man to do? The Jews felt Jesus was too cozy with our tax collectors, so *they* wanted him dead. Rome heard there was some nut out here trying to start an insurrection, so *they* wanted him dead."

"I didn't want him dead," said Claudia Procula.

I said nothing. After all, hadn't Lucia, Crocchus, and I gone to Jerusalem because *we* wanted Jesus dead?

"And now," said Pilate, "my wife wants both of us to be baptized." Leaning toward me he whispered rather loudly, "Well, I guess it's better than a *circumcision*."

Somehow I managed to keep a straight face in deference to Madame, who was glowering.

Despite a conversation that could not have pleased her, Claudia Procula sat with us a while longer before getting up and excusing herself. The governor then returned to my earlier question about Jesus.

"It was a pretty ordinary crucifixion," he said, "except for a joke some of my men played, crowning him 'king of the Jews' with a wreath of thorns. I didn't tell Claudia about that. My wife has no sense of humor."

"They say he died quickly, after only six hours."

“Well, I hear they used nails, and maybe the way he was suspended caused some suffocation. Personally, I’d have preferred to let him go free, to keep spreading the word that the Jews should pay their taxes to Caesar.”

With a chuckle Pilate got to his feet, a signal that brought servants out of the shadows to accompany us to the house. I was given a comfortable bed and went to sleep hoping some god – *any* god – would send me sweet dreams of Sarah.

XXIII

The next morning when I arose neither Pilate nor Claudia Procula was about – he having left for the garrison, she undergoing her toilette – so I breakfasted alone in the garden. Then, wanting to explore Herod’s other great city, I found my way to Caesarea’s busy center.

Here was a city unabashedly filled with Roman buildings showing a strong Greek influence. Still standing, and enjoyed by the mostly Greek populace, were a 20,000-seat hippodrome, an aqueduct, and an amphitheater. Everything was built of white stone. Everything was magnificent.

The harbor of Caesarea, which I’d passed through on my first visit to Palestine, I could now appreciate at my leisure. What an engineering marvel! With no natural bay or jutting peninsula, Herod had built his harbor in open water, forcing Neptune’s waves to break upon a sea wall made of concrete blocks filled with boulders. Looking out at the vessels safely moored there, I wondered how the hell mortal men had done it.

For the next few weeks I trod the roads of Galilee, visiting both Capernaum and the village of Nazareth. Sarah had been right – the locals were friendlier than the Judaeans, and I twice accepted invitations to share a Sabbath meal. How, one might ask, could I do this without feeling like a complete hypocrite, for after all didn’t I intend to destroy the very heart and soul of my hosts’ religion? It was my love for Sarah that guided me; I felt it would have made her happy to know I’d eaten some kosher meals in a warm, family atmosphere.

One night I sat down on the shore of the Lake and had a conversation with Chance. My message was that I couldn’t go on like this; I had to find a way to fulfill my vows to Sarah and to myself. The goals were clear, but the way obscure.

Chance was up to the task. That very night a band of brigands found me sleeping there alone and unprotected. I was seized, bound, and thrown into a cart. Three days later I was put up for auction. On the block I was stripped and my circumcision was discovered; I spoke and my fluency in tongues was noted. Soon I was informed that I’d been bought by a scout from the Court of Gaius Caligula.

“Gaius Caligula?” I recall asking.

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“Why, haven’t you heard? Old Tiberius Caesar is dead and young Gaius is emperor.”

“Young, you say?”

“Twenty-four, and as wildly popular as Tiberius was not. Caligula’s father was Germanicus, the great general – which is why the son is nicknamed after an army boot.”

I must admit, the idea of returning to Rome to work in the Court of a popular young emperor did intrigue me. Powerless myself, the best and perhaps only way to achieve my goal might be in the service of the world’s most powerful man.

Part III

INSIDE THE COURT OF CALIGULA

I [37 CE]

My new keepers transported me, along with selected others, to a place where our shackles were removed. Then we were led up the gangplank of an imperial trireme and allowed a peek inside.

Who could imagine that a ship – something of hull, oar, and sail, threatened almost daily by Neptune’s fickle furies – would be outfitted with such perishable splendors? Did such luxuries – the gold and silver ornaments, the mosaics and wall hangings, the carved and inlaid woods – exist even on dry land? The very pipes, we were told, leading from the cisterns to the baths and cooking galleys, were made entirely of lead and engraved with the emperor’s name.

Next, I was turned into an article of luxury myself. New clothing was issued me. I was given over to a barber who, undeterred by the ship’s occasional rolls and plunges, trimmed my hair and shaved my beard. At the same time a slave, crouched at my extremities, filed my twenty nails and rubbed my feet and palms with pumice.

I wondered what kind of fop this emperor was to order that his slaves be outfitted, trimmed, shaved, filed, and buffed, when he himself was nicknamed after a child’s boot.

“No one dares call him Caligula to his face,” the barber cautioned me. “He takes it badly.”

“Gaius then?”

“Some can, some can’t. If ever you meet him you’ll call him ‘Lord Caesar’ or ‘Master,’ unless he instructs you differently. It isn’t easy for a fellow of twenty-four, who’s suddenly been granted every power known to man or god, to be casual about how he’s addressed.”

Then I, at twenty-seven or eight, was older than the emperor, yet had to call him ‘Master’?

“And another thing – you mustn’t comment on his hair.”

“He has rules about his hair?”

“It’s very thin. He’s balding on top.”

“Balding at twenty-four?” I laughed. “Like an old goat?”

“And more sensitive about it than a man of fifty. He’ll not hear the word ‘goat.’”

“Then why doesn’t he wear a laurel crown to hide his bald pate, like Julius Caesar did?”

“It amuses him more to threaten with execution any who dare look upon him from above.”

“Execution for looking down on his baldness? Would he really?”

“It’s within his power, and all know it.”

“Then I suppose his barber’s very careful when he shaves him.”

“We’re very careful, of course,” nodded the man, “and because we work near his throat with a sharp blade, our emperor is very careful with us.”

II

When we arrived at Ostia, Caligula had been installed as emperor one month. The first time I saw him he was standing on the dock guarded by Praetorians and Batavians, about to board a trireme. A tall, awkward-looking fellow, Caligula’s broad brow overarched eyes set in dark sockets. His feet were large, his legs thin; no wonder he objected to a name that called attention to his lower extremities. At his side an angry-looking official was shaking his head.

“That’s Macro,” said a voice at my ear, “prefect of the Praetorian Guard.” The voice belonged to Mericles, one of the Greek prisoners I’d met in the past days. He too had been shaved and manicured. “At the end, when I assisted Charicles, Macro hung around the sick room often enough. A bad piece of work, that fellow.”

“Who’s Charicles?”

“He was Tiberius Caesar’s doctor.”

Hearing that Mericles had attended the dying emperor, I was intrigued. It was awkward to ask, but having heard the question whispered around I couldn’t resist the opportunity: “Were you present when Tiberius died?”

Mericles rolled his eyes. “I assure you, the Emperor’s death was natural. Neither Caligula nor Macro hastened it. Although he didn’t want to go, Caesar had no more choice than a ripe pear falling from a tree.”

Just then I saw Caligula glance my way. As our eyes met, blood rushed into my cheeks at this imperial attention. The emperor leaned toward Macro and said something in his ear, after which the prefect turned and walked over to me. “Your name?” he demanded.

“Melius. You can call me Mel.”

“I’ve been told your Latin is excellent for a Jew. Can you read and write, *Melius?*”

I told him I was Roman-born, could read, write, and speak Latin, Greek, and Aramaic, and was fluent in Hebrew.

Macro turned without a word and went back to Caligula. The two had a brief conversation after which I was signaled to join them. I recall how my knees trembled as I walked in their direction, and that my mouth was completely dry.

“Do you ever suffer from seasickness?” Caligula asked me in a soft but riveting voice.

“Never, Lord Caesar.”

“Good. I invited my former father-in-law, Silanus, to accompany me on this trip, thinking to push him overboard if he kept on giving me unwanted advice. But he declined to come, saying he feared seasickness. Still, I will always wonder.”

“Wonder what, Master?”

“Whether he really does suffer from seasickness or only wanted to remain ashore. Then, were I to die at sea, he’d be in a position to give unwanted advice to my successor.”

“I’m never seasick,” I told him. “How can I serve you, Master?”

“I need a scribe,” he told me, “a secretary who doesn’t vomit as soon as he puts his foot on a ship. I require him to record events and write down what I say and do, and what others say and do to me. Up to a point.”

“A point?”

“I’ll tell you before the point is reached so that you’ll not be brutally tortured for passing it. We sail within the hour for the island of Pandateria, then on to Pontia. We’ve been promised a stormy crossing, but the omens are excellent for my survival.”

Spoken softly but with authority, his words tumbled into my ears. I didn’t fully comprehend what was to happen next, nor did I care; Chance had placed me conveniently near the seat of power.

“I’ll call you Mel, or Jew, and you’ll call me Princeps. No, wait. You’ll call me *Princeps Legibus Solutus*. Can you remember that?”

“First citizen not bound by any laws? Yes, I can remember that.”

“Good,” said Caligula. “Make a note of it.”

I was about to say that I had no writing materials on me, when a wax tablet and stylus were put into my hands. Immediately I jotted down *Princeps Legibus Solutus*.

Caligula took the tablet and pretended to study it carefully from all angles, even backwards and upside-down. “Very good, Mel,” he said at last, returning it to me. “You can call me Princeps for short.” Then, laughing, he turned and walked onto the ship, accompanied front and rear by his guards. I followed.

III

The islands of Pandateria and Pontia lie off the coast near Naples – not a long trip in an emperor’s trireme. But, as predicted, a storm arose and the tossing we got made it impossible for me to take notes or even sit in one place.

Caligula seemed not to mind the terrible swings and shakings. “This is Jupiter’s punishment,” he told me gravely. “I should have tried harder to save them.”

What was he talking about? Save whom from what?

Without prompting he then explained that Tiberius had exiled his mother Agrippina and his brother Nero to those islands. His brother had killed himself on Pontia; his mother had starved herself to death in the imperial villa on Pandateria. In the same year, Caligula’s other brother, Drusus, was starved to death in the emperor’s dungeon.

“And you could have saved them from those awful deaths?” I asked in astonishment.

“Could have, should have, didn’t, is what I often tell myself, though only the last is certain. Of course, had I intervened, Drusus or Nero might be emperor today and this little boot devouring his own leather in some dungeon. The least I can do now is bring their ashes back to Rome.”

“That’s a fine gesture,” I said respectfully.

Caligula sighed. “This whole bringing-home-the-ashes business was Macro’s idea, to increase my popularity with the plebs. He thinks it’ll have the same effect as when my mother and I brought my father’s ashes home from Syria. But you know, Mel, I wish I’d thought of it myself. It reminds me that I did love them when I was little, before the fight over the succession turned my mother into Scylla and my brothers into Charybdis.”

Having no family of my own, and with no prospects of becoming even an ordinary Roman citizen, much less first citizen, I couldn’t comment on Caligula’s behavior, though I had the feeling he was seeking my sympathy and approbation.

“Some say my mother brought her exile on herself,” he continued, as I listened with a sympathetic expression. “They say she pushed Tiberius too hard, trying to get the succession for Drusus or Nero. Mel, if you survive in my Court another day – I can’t guarantee you longevity, only room and board – you’ll learn what life has already taught me: that to attain and keep power an emperor must *himself* be both Scylla and Charybdis. Like Charybdis he must suck ambitious men and women down to the bottom of the sea, and like Scylla with her six heads of Black Death, grab those who evade the whirlpool and devour them as they scream. That done, the best thing to do is go hide your ass on Capri.”

He laughed and I laughed too. I liked this emperor; he understood irony. My job – to write down what he said and did – would be an honor

and a pleasure. I only hoped I'd never see a side of him that repelled or disappointed me.

IV

We sailed first to the island of Pandateria. There, while holding off-shore during a violent storm, a bizarre incident occurred. Caligula had insisted that he and I prove our courage by riding out the storm on deck without restraints or bodyguards, even though neither of us knew how to swim. Suddenly a huge wave washed over the ship, taking the princeps with it. Somehow I managed to grab and hold onto him until two large Bavarians appeared and lifted us to safety.

Later, fearing to have a *Princeps Legibus Solutus* in my debt, I suggested that a way be found for him to save *my* life and wipe the account clean.

"Done and done," he replied, "for had I died you'd have met death the next instant. Because I live, your life is saved. We're even."

Pandateria, which had no harbor, was a gigantic rock rising steeply out of the sea for hundreds of feet, furnished with only an imperial villa, some small temples, and a few dwellings. Its vegetation was a kind of dwarf tree crowned with sword-like leaves. I wondered if Agrippina had spent even one day on this bleak isle before deciding to kill herself.

When at last we were able to land, a local priest took Caligula to see the urn containing his mother's ashes. Deeply moved, he himself transferred these to an urn he'd brought for the purpose. With this gesture all his conflicted thoughts of her seemed suddenly to give way to his true feelings.

He sent the rest of us away so that he might stay alone with her remains. After a time he asked to see the rooms where she'd suffered and died, visiting them only with the priest and one bodyguard. I was glad not to be invited. Some moments should be unobserved and unrecorded, left only to men's imaginations.

The next day, en route to Pontia, Caligula told me of his marriage a few years earlier to Junia Claudia, whose father Silanus had been held in high esteem by Tiberius. "The old man actually left Capri and came to Antium for our wedding. I was so proud when she became pregnant."

"So you have a wife and child!" I blurted in delight, before noticing his sorrowful expression.

"No," he said. "They both died, during the birth."

I was about to offer my sympathy when suddenly, bitterly, he said, "Macro sent his wife Ennia to 'comfort' me."

"And did she?" I exclaimed. "Could she?"

"Of course not, Mel," he said. "I saw right away that Macro was only

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trying to flatter me to advance his ambitions. I *pretended* to be flattered because *I* needed *him*.” He laughed. “Mel, welcome to the Imperial Court. Now tell me how *you’re* hoping to use me. You have a past, after all. You’re not as simple as you pretend to be. There must be some reason you’re here, some plot you’re hatching.”

Words stuck in my throat. How could I be as candid as he? How could I say I hoped by manipulating him to fulfill my Temple prophecy? Then the answer came. “I’m not here by choice,” I told him truthfully. “You *bought* me. I’m your slave.”

“Perhaps it was it all part of a plot to get near enough to assassinate me.”

“No!” I cried, hearing my righteousness ring strangely hollow. It was true, of course, but even as I said it I realized that a man suspected of conspiracy – no matter how innocent of the charge – might never be able to deny it convincingly.

“Well,” said Caligula, “I may be popular with the plebs, but enemies are all around. Tiberius told me that in Rome he’d hear the plotters whispering behind him as he passed, like the whispering of white water following a ship. That’s why he lived on Capri the last ten years of his principate. That’s why he – and I – never learned to swim.”

The non sequitur surprised me. “Why was that?”

“A man in water can be easily drowned.”

For a moment we were silent, our eyes searching each other’s face. What was I to think of this strange personage? Were all emperors this full of doom? Feeling I should say something, I chose to ask a question I’d wondered about a long time.

“Tell me,” I said, “did Tiberius really throw people off the Caprian cliffs and engage in wild sexual orgies?”

“Only when the moon was full,” Caligula chuckled dryly. Then he sighed. “Mel, tell me what you’re plotting. Are you angling to become a freedman? A Roman citizen? Marry my sisters? Assassinate me? Succeed me?”

“I’d like to be the governor of Judaea,” I replied, “even for one day.”

“Is that all?” He looked surprised. “An unimportant job like that? It’s not even fit for a senator. In fact, I was about to send Marullus out there to replace Marcellus.”

“Who? Isn’t Pilate the governor?”

“No. Tiberius recalled him and replaced him with Marcellus. Luckily for Pilate, Tiberius died while he was en route back to Rome. Mel, forget Judaea. Ask for something worthwhile, like *Praefectus Aegypti*.” Then he laughed at his own suggestion. “You know, we don’t name senators to that job either; they can’t be trusted to rule such a wealthy province. I could make you a knight, though, and the job would be yours.”

Then, perhaps having sensed the seriousness behind my request, he

said, "Sorry, Melius, Judaea's out, even for a day; I need you with me. But I'll tell you what – when we get back to Rome I'll change your civil status. Remind me."

I smiled. "Does a slave dare remind a *Princeps Legibus Solutus* of anything at all, much less to change his civil status?"

Caligula considered this a moment, then another. "*Minime vero*," he said finally, and the two of us burst out laughing like a couple of old conspirators.

V

Our next stop was Pontia, also a small island but larger than Pandateria, and with a decent harbor. The populace of Pontia, thrilled by the visit of their new emperor, followed him everywhere and numerous sacrifices were made.

Finding Nero's ashes proved problematic. The urn was empty and it took a while to learn that its former contents had been scattered to the winds. Still, something had to be brought back to Rome, so twigs and soil from the area where his brother's remains had been scattered were burned and reduced to ash. This, along with ash from the sacrificial animals, was placed in an urn brought for the occasion.

With this duty accomplished, Caligula was eager to return to Rome. The plan was to transfer the imperial party to a bireme decorated with banners, but because of the weather the banners wouldn't be put up until Ostia. The sky was charged with lightning and the air echoed thunder, but the princeps insisted we set out immediately without waiting for the oncoming storm to pass.

"Are you afraid of lightning, Mel?" he asked as we boarded, feeling the wind whip our clothes and the ship yank at its moorings.

"Not very. Are you?"

"Tiberius was so afraid of lightning he'd hide under a bed, but I'm the son of a great general so I normally hide under a bunk."

I started to laugh, but then, recalling the flash that had struck Paul near Damascus, I decided to hide under furniture myself rather than risk an unwanted conversion. "What's a good place to hide on a ship?" I asked.

"Come." He led me to a room amidships luxuriously furnished with couches and tables. These were bolted to a floor covered with mosaics depicting wild animals and jungle vegetation. As the ship cast off we got under one of the tables. Staring up at us was the face of a tiger.

"Boo!" shouted Caligula.

I chuckled. How different Romans were from Jews with their horror of graven images. "Have you ever been to Jerusalem to see the Temple?"

"Better than that," Caligula replied. "My best friend, Marcus Julius

Agrippa, is the grandson of King Herod who *built* it.”

“Really? You know Herod’s grandson?”

“I met him on Capri. One of the servants there accused him and me of plotting against Tiberius. Macro looked out for me, but Agrippa was imprisoned. After Tiberius died he was let out. I like him a lot. In fact, I’m making him a king.”

“A *king*? Of what?”

“Of a tetrarchy east of Galilee.”

I couldn’t have been more impressed. “You meet such interesting people, and after meeting them you make them even *more* interesting.”

“Mel, I’m the emperor. Everyone knows me and I know everyone. Anyway, Agrippa and I have a lot in common. For one thing we’re both orphans of assassination. His father was executed by his grandfather. They think my father was murdered too.”

I decided not to mention that I also was an orphan; being orphaned by a lion was no match for being orphaned by a murderous king, or being the son of a murdered general.

“Do you like spending money?” Caligula asked me then.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had much to spend.”

The princeps laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ll change that. Agrippa loves to spend money and he’s teaching me all his secrets. On his way to Rome last year he stopped in Alexandria and borrowed a half million drachmas from a Jew so rich he supplied the gold plate they used on the doors of the Temple.”

“I’ve heard of him. That rich Jew was Alexander, the brother of Philo the Exegete. What a small empire!”

“Hey,” cried Caligula indignantly, “it’s a *large* empire and I’m its emperor. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t. Sorry.”

“Anyway, I’m richer than anyone. I have all the treasure Tiberius hoarded in the imperial treasury to spend on anything I want. *And* I’m not bound by any laws. Right?”

“Right.”

“*And* I’m twenty-four. It can’t get any better than that.”

“So what will you spend it on, besides war, women, and aqueducts?”

Caligula beamed. “Chariot races. I’m building my own track and stables. And I love gladiatorial games even more than Tiberius hated them, so I’ll be going all out in that department. Mel, you won’t *believe* what I bought at auction the other day.”

“What?”

“They opened the bidding high, but my bid tripled it because I wanted to pay what they were really worth. Since no one could hope to outbid the imperial treasury, no one bid against me.”

“*What?*”

“Listen to this: my prize was the six victory wreaths won by the great Crocchus Africanus.”

“The . . . the great . . .” So many emotions flooded through me that I was unable to speak. Tears filled my eyes and I tipped over from my side to my back.

“Mel! What’s wrong?”

“I was . . . I was . . . Crocchus’s handler.”

Caligula stared at me. “You’re not lying,” he said after a moment, his voice filled with interest. “I saw you with him in the arena carrying the bowl of gold coins. I absolutely remember your nose. That really was you!”

“It was.”

“You know, Mel, when I heard Crocchus’s contract was for sale I wanted it so badly, but I’d almost no money of my own just then. I talked to the *munerarius*, but he said he’d sold the contract to a rich divorcée who wanted to retire Crocchus from the arena. He told me that this woman, Lucia, had paid top *denarius* for it and certainly had no intention of letting it go. So I made sure the lady lost her divorce case by arranging that the judge was her husband’s brother. I pauperized her, hoping to force her to sell the contract, but suddenly she and Crocchus vanished. I couldn’t find them. Do you know where they went and what became of Crocchus?”

“The three of us left for Palestine. The last time I saw Lucia she was living at Delphi. Crocchus was murdered.”

“Murdered!”

“In Greece. Near Patrai. Martyred by Christian bigots.”

Caligula turned pale; a moment passed before he found his voice. “I can’t believe it. I did everything I could to locate him. I even offered a large reward to anyone who could find him.”

His words were chilling; indirectly he’d been the cause of Crocchus’s death, but I knew I could never tell him that.

“By the way,” he said, “I don’t know if you know it, but Lucia’s husband died right after she disappeared – don’t ask me how – and the ownership of her properties reverted back to her.”

This news caught me completely by surprise. Had Lucia heard it? Surely she hadn’t when I saw her in Delphi.

“You know, Mel,” Caligula said then, “Macro wanted to come on this trip, but I didn’t let him.”

“Why not?”

“Because he always gets seasick and vomits everywhere.”

“Then why did he want to come?”

“Because he was afraid that if he *didn’t* ask to come, I’d think he was part of a conspiracy.”

“Like you suspected Silanus of being when he told you he didn’t *want* to come.”

“Exactly. Mel, very few people who live near the seat of power expect to live long lives unless they’re very careful. Remember that.”

I told him I would. Then the princeps lay back on the lion’s mosaic face while waves like giant claws tore at the ship, and thunder roared.

VI

The imperial party, joined in Ostia by Macro and more Praetorians, arrived in Rome at the noon hour when the streets were crowded. My own emotions at finding myself in Rome after years of absence were nothing compared to the delirium of the citizens greeting the return of their “little boot.”

What a triumphal homecoming the Praetorian Prefect had arranged. Amid great acclamation the remains of mother and son were carried on biers to the mausoleum of Augustus, where the ashes of Germanicus, their husband and father, already reposed.

In the days and weeks to come, under the tutelage of Macro, Caligula followed this success with other acts calculated to increase his popularity. He had coins of precious metal minted that bore the images of his father and mother. Also minted were *dupondii* whose obverse showed his brothers Nero and Drusus on horseback. Then followed *sesterces* with Caligula’s image on one side and his three sisters on the reverse.

Macro wasn’t above doing himself some service as well. He feared the power of Antonia – Caligula’s redoubtable grandmother who’d brought down Sejanus, the last Praetorian Prefect – so he found ways to honor her. But the old woman died only a month after our return from Pontia, so the honors didn’t do her – or Macro – any good.

Another popular act was Caligula’s annulment of the legal charge of *maiestas* – treason – which had the effect, among others, of voiding the sentences passed on his mother and brothers, and allowing back from exile those who’d sided with them. This amnesty disarmed many who’d previously thought ill of Caligula and who blamed him for what had happened to his family members and their supporters. His lifting of the ban on certain writers and their works was also popular.

On 1 July, Caligula selected his uncle Claudius – forty-six years old and not considered the brightest wick in the lamp – to enter into a two-month joint consulship with him, made him a senator, and allowed him to preside over the games in his absence.

“It makes him happy,” the princeps told me, “and as co-consul I can veto any decision he makes that I don’t like.”

“Is that why there are always two chief magistrates at a time?”

“That’s the best reason *I* know for it,” he nodded. “In the empire, the consulship is anyway just a show. The senate has no important functions

either. Only the senators I make provincial governors have anything interesting to do.”

Still, in his inaugural address before the senate, the new princeps repeated the promises of constitutional government he’d made to them at his accession. The senators were delighted, voting to hear the address read aloud every year so that no one – including the emperor himself – would forget his promises and grand vision.

At the end of the two months of consulship, Caligula dedicated the temple of the divine Augustus – constructed but never completed by Tiberius. On 31 August he celebrated his own birthday with feasts for the populace, banquets for the senators and their wives, and two days of theater performances, chariot races, and the slaughter of hundreds of bears and lions.

During this time the true son of Tiberius – Gemellus – wasn’t overlooked either. Too young to rule, Gemellus was a lad many felt had been cheated of both his inheritance and succession by his adoptive brother. Now Caligula granted him the *toga virilis* and his first shave, adopted him as a son, and gave him the title *Princeps Inventutis*, which seemed to imply that Gemellus would one day be his successor.

With Caligula now available to his other friends, and surrounded constantly by guards and flatterers, I struggled to keep current on court happenings and take what notes I could. To insure I wasn’t denied access to him or interfered with in my duties, Caligula gave me a Batavian bodyguard of my own. The fellow spoke no Latin or Greek, only a German dialect. I decided to learn of it what I could, thinking it might prove useful if my princeps ever asked me to join him in a conquest of the North.

The games Caligula prized most were theater performances, chariot racing, and gladiatorial contests. It was at these events an emperor interacted with the greatest number of his people, sharing the experience with them, offering an ear to their petitions, receiving their acclaim. Unlike his unpopular predecessor, who’d never attended gladiatorial contests or wild animal hunts even when in Rome, Caligula was always there – seen, seeing, and hearing – vicariously sharing with the plebs those glorious moments of victory and death. And the people adored him for it.

The princeps particularly enjoyed being in the company of great actors and gladiators. Sometimes he’d dress himself in outrageous costumes and give impromptu private performances to show off his own skills, especially his command of oratory.

“Oratory is a lot like what happens on the stage and in the arena,” he explained to me one day. “You’re communicating to an audience, just like a gladiator is when he tries to make people believe he’s not afraid to die. Oratory is talking to the people, talking to the senate, teaching and convincing them through words and gestures. I speak to them and they, by their acclaim, reply. It’s our conversation back and forth.

“Mel, I gave my first speech in Assos when I was six, touring southwest Asia Minor with my father. Years later when I returned, they still remembered what I’d said. When I was sixteen I gave the oration at my grandmother’s funeral. Tiberius didn’t allow me much instruction about how to govern, but I certainly studied oratory on Capri. I may even write a book on the subject, so exercise your shorthand.”

Caligula would show me gestures used by both actors and orators: the clenched fist denoting sorrow, the pointing finger, the way they’d gesture with their right hand and control their toga with their left. “You see? Actors and I have so much in common, but an orator can’t let himself go like an actor can. An orator needs to practice restraint, show *gravitas*. An actor may be as silly as he wants, as silly as the audience wants him to be, but an orator mustn’t.”

I’d sometimes observe Caligula with his actor and gladiator friends deep in a kind of wordless communication, posturing, gesturing, besting each other silently in endless play, always learning, testing, bettering their art. The many speeches he gave before the senate or in the Forum he’d practice in front of a mirror, and sometimes he’d practice them on me.

Caligula also enjoyed wild animal hunts. I was much less keen on these, but he’d often insist I accompany him. That’s why one day I was at his side when a remarkable event took place.

A runaway slave, caught the day before, was thrown into the lion-filled arena along with some prisoners of war. The crowd screamed approval as the lions were goaded to attack their prey. Then a miracle occurred. One of the lions, instead of tearing limb from limb the slave cowering before him, began caressing the fellow with his tongue. Just as strange, the slave hugged and petted him back, as if the two were greatest friends.

Everyone wanted to know how this could be, and Caligula had the slave brought before him. We listened in amazement as the fellow, whose name was Androcles, related how he’d earlier worked at the *vivarium*, the holding place for wild animals outside the *Porta Praenestina*. One day he noticed that one of the lions suffered from a painfully swollen paw. The beast made no move to harm him as Androcles examined the paw and removed a thorn.

Not long after this Androcles escaped, but was quickly caught and condemned to die in the arena. Today he’d met the lion again, and we’d all witnessed the result.

I don’t know which of us was more amazed by the story, but I was surely the one more moved. Hadn’t my own father been killed when he tried to remove a thorn from a lion’s paw?

“Where do you come from?” Caligula asked Androcles. Hearing it was a village in Macedonia, the princeps gave orders for the man to be freed, given 100,000 *sesterces*, and transported to his home. The lion would be returned to Africa and freed into the wild. It was a better fate

than that meted out to the other lions that day; after killing the condemned they were shot by archers, to the great satisfaction of the crowd.

“Mel,” Caligula said to me one afternoon as we walked on the palace grounds, “your origins are humble, and perhaps that’s why I feel I can trust you more than my ‘well-born’ friends. I know you don’t covet my throne, and feel you’d never plot against me.”

“All this is true,” I replied.

“I need a man, a confidant, who’s not afraid of me and whom I don’t fear. I think you’re this one. If you are, then I want you to know that no matter how stupidly or arrogantly you council me, no matter how against my grain your opinions rub, even should I shout and berate you, I’ll never torture or kill you for saying what’s truly in your thoughts. If I ask you a question I’ll expect an honest answer, not a politic one. And everything that passes between us on this level must be kept in absolute confidence, not even confided to your notes. Agreed?”

“Yes,” I said, replying instantly for fear that to give even a fleeting moment’s thought to his offer might alarm him, resulting in its reversal and even my death. Nor did I imitate him by repeating his word “agreed,” fearing he might think I was mocking or challenging him. Thus does *legibus solutus* make cowards of us all, even a princeps and his scribe.

“Good,” said Caligula. “Now here’s my first question. I think I’m going mad. What should I do?”

His words astonished me. “A madman doesn’t know he’s mad,” I told him, “so rest assured that isn’t your problem.”

“Listen to me, Mel,” he said then, “and listen well. I want to be someone else for a while. I want to leave this life of princeps, leave my Court and these fawning senators who are starting to disgust me, and go about like a simple fellow – like you – and talk to ordinary people. I want to talk to shoemakers and shopkeepers without them knowing who I really am. But how can I disappear, even for a day, without someone making a grab for my throne?”

It was an interesting question and a difficult one. I could tell he wanted an answer immediately, and suddenly one came to me.

“You must pretend to be very ill,” I told him, “so ill that no one can enter your apartments except one trusted man.”

“But Mel, you’re the only man I trust and I’m counting on you to come *with* me.”

“There may be another. Do you remember on Capri the physician that attended Tiberius?”

Caligula frowned. “Tiberius didn’t consult physicians.”

“Even at the end?”

“Oh, you mean Charicles. We were in Campania, not on Capri. Yes, go on.”

“Well, recently I met a man who told me he assisted Charicles. I don’t

recall his name, but . . . ”

“Mericles,” said Caligula immediately. “A fine fellow. I just bought him. Is he the one you’re suggesting?”

“Yes. Perhaps both him and Charicles. The last time I saw Mericles was on the dock where I first met you, Princeps.”

“Don’t keep calling me Princeps,” Caligula said suddenly. “Call me Gaius. No, wait.” He frowned. “Call me Caesar.”

“Caesar, these two medical men could keep your apartments off limits to everyone until you’d ‘recovered,’ and no one but they would know that you weren’t really sick and not even there at all.”

The idea seemed to please him, particularly since having two men involved might lessen the danger. “I’ll have them found and brought here,” he said, “and I’ll need a really good disguise. After that, there’s one other important detail to attend to.”

“What’s that?”

“If we’re to travel together it must be as master and slave.”

“Of course.”

“Only the difference is, we’ll imitate the Saturnalia: *you’ll* be the master and *I’ll* be the slave.”

“But why?” I cried, alarmed at the resentments this arrangement might provoke.

“First of all,” he said, “because the servant is always the cleverest character in a play, and therefore has the best role.”

“But I’m not an actor like you,” I objected. “No one will take me for anyone’s master.”

“Of course they won’t – not with a nose like yours and a name like Mel, or even Melius. So, to confound the lot of them, I’ll enfranchise you. This means you’ll have to choose a real Roman name with *praenomen*, *nomen*, and *cognomen*, and buy a toga. Then I’ll have you registered as a Roman citizen with *immunitas* so that you’re not bothered with taxes or any other obligations of citizenship.”

His meaning overwhelmed me; heaven didn’t open, but my own world seemed to expand with possibilities. Having Roman citizenship would surely help me succeed in my cause. “Caesar!” I cried, my voice choked with gratitude. “Caesar . . . I . . . ”

Bowing before me, Caligula replied, “Whom are you calling Caesar, Milord?”

VII

The next day we began putting our plan into action. First, my names. Normally men took their names from the military commanders under which they served, from their father’s or mother’s family, their clan, or the

emperor who'd enfranchised them. I wanted my Roman name to honor Sarah, Crocchus, and Lucia, but this was impossible. Enfranchised by Caligula, my *praenomen* would be Gaius and my *nomen* Julius. Melius would be my *cognomen*. So my name became C. Julius Melius.

Strangely, it was more difficult for my "slave" to choose his single name, and I had to bite my tongue not to suggest "Baldy" or "Goat." But Caligula quickly decided on his disguise; just as actors may use black dye to create a stage persona, so would he blacken himself to hide his imperial identity. For reasons of his own, instead of a black wig he chose a brightly pigmented auburn one, a color that finally suggested his slave name, Red. To hide his skinny legs, Red wore trousers beneath his tunic in the Spanish fashion, and to further alter his appearance began growing a beard and moustache, albeit not of a reddish hue. Still, in streets crowded with visitors from the world over, it was unlikely that the appearance of a red-headed black man would attract much notice.

When I suggested that I too disguise myself with a beard, moustache, and sideburns, Caligula rejected that idea outright. He assured me that to play my role convincingly I had to be as clean-shaven as a proper Roman citizen, talk like one, and wear a toga. Of course, I was most worried about wearing the right-handed toga.

"Pretend you're a great actor playing a role," Caligula advised me, "and you'll see how easily you'll manage both your speech and your toga."

So I tried that, and it seemed to work.

Soon everything was ready for our excursion; both Charicles and Mericles were in attendance and well briefed. The first had been promised one million *sesterces*, the other, manumission. Failure, they'd been told, would result in their being thrown down the Gemonian stairs, cut into pieces by a butcher – not by a surgeon – and tossed into the Tiber.

Our disguises complete, we next invented little games, or plays, in which we practiced our new "relationship." I'd give orders and Red would obey them. Caligula threw himself into his role with enthusiasm. It was clear that he wanted to play his part to perfection not because he feared discovery, but out of his pride as an artist. He spared no pains with me either, teaching me how to walk and speak with *gravitas*, and even to gesticulate effectively with my right arm. Such a good instructor was he that I soon began to feel myself his real master in everything but reality.

"My main difficulty with playing the servant's role," Caligula admitted at one point, "will be acting manipulatively while biding my time, as a proper slave would. My natural instinct is to get my way immediately, using death threats."

I asked him how he might react if I bid him carry a lantern to light my path, or shoulder a burden so that I might walk unencumbered.

"We'll find that out when the time comes," he replied ominously.

The evening we put together our disguises and stood side by side in

front of a mirror I was sure Agrippina wouldn't have known her own son. The next morning the princeps' residence was closed to all and Charicles put out his first grim medical bulletin. Orders were given to the Praetorians and the Batavians to keep everyone from entering the palace, for fear of contagion.

We waited breathlessly for a day to see if our plan would work, or whether some glitch might necessitate the princeps' quick "recovery." But all went smoothly. Concerned crowds gathered on the Palatine where prayers and sacrifices were offered, even as fast couriers carried the unhappy news from Rome to the farthest provinces.

Certainly my own fortunes had changed; the weight of the gold coins now hidden about my body would have pulled me under had I fallen into the Tiber, even had I known how to swim. For our week away I'd taken rooms in the house of one Tullia Porcia, a Roman divorcée. This good woman, pauperized like Lucia by greedy relatives and lawyers, was obliged to take in lodgers, so to afford the slaves and other luxuries to which she was accustomed.

It was late one evening that we descended through a secret tunnel leading from the imperial bedchamber into the courtyard of a building near the Forum. From there, with my emperor carrying a lantern and a pack on his shoulder, we exited into the bustling Roman streets.

VIII

It seemed surreal that two such ersatz individuals as we could step outside and not immediately be overwhelmed with attention. In fact, no one gave us a second glance. Neither the dark, redheaded figure lighting the way, nor the left-handed toga-wearer following him, made a ripple in the pedestrian parade.

After walking a while we found ourselves in a quarter of the city famous for its taverns. Entering one, I ordered wine for both of us. It didn't take long to realize that our fellow customers were very glum, so I asked a man standing next to me why this was.

"Haven't you heard?" he asked in amazement. "Caligula has been felled by a foul disease and even now lies near death."

"Is that so?" I cried in horror, at the same time exchanging a fleeting glance of triumph, amusement, and relief with the princeps. "Is he expected to recover?"

"I know not what's expected," said the fellow, "only what's feared."

"You fear then for your princeps' life?"

"Of course, as does everyone, including I'm sure, your black friend from the provinces."

"Oh, yes," I assured him. "Red fears for the emperor's life more than

anyone.”

When he turned away to talk with his companions, I breathed a sigh of relief; Caligula could only be content with what he'd just heard. In fact, beneath his black paint the princeps looked so pleased I feared he might order me then and there to shower the man with gold. But what if he were to hear something that *didn't* please him, and marked some poor fellow for death?

Just then a familiar figure sitting alone in a corner caught my eye. About to exclaim, “Small empire!” I caught myself in time. Turning to Caligula I said in a low voice, “Don't look now, but did you ever meet Pontius Pilate?”

Caligula looked. “No, and I never learned what became of him after he was recalled. Is he here?”

“Yes, and he seems to be alone. I want to talk to him.”

“I want to listen. Don't forget to ask him what he thinks of me.”

Dismayed by what he might hear, and not wanting to get Pilate into trouble, I told Caligula that I personally liked and vouched for the former prefect. Caligula's eyes searched my face. “But you're a Jew. He insulted your people.”

“It was only done as a joke,” I told him. “You make jokes about Jews all the time.”

Caligula accepted this reluctantly. “Well, go speak to him and I'll listen silently. I promise that the worst that could happen to him is exile to Jerusalem.”

“See what a joker you are?” I laughed. “Pandateria would be less cruel.”

Followed by my dark shadow I made my way through the crowd of wine drinkers to where Pilate sat. When I reintroduced myself, this time as a Roman citizen, he seemed genuinely pleased to see me, moving over so that I could join him. My “slave” stood gravely beside us, remaining silent as Pont and I reminisced about life back in Palestine.

“How's Madame,” I asked.

“You won't believe this, Mel, but she finally got me baptized.”

“So you're a follower of Jesus,” I cried with a great laugh. “Wonderful! Claudia Procula must be delighted.”

“Well, not really; after my recall to Rome she divorced me. She preferred to go to Damascus and involve herself in the Eastern Church, rather than be exiled to some rock with me.” He sighed. “I tell you, Mel, it's a good thing Tiberius died before I got here. Since then I've been living in Rome, trying not to draw attention to myself. I especially don't want to run afoul of Caligula.”

“You know, Pont,” I interjected hurriedly, “if I may still call you Pont.”

“You may.”

“Just the other day I was recalling the great jokes you played on the Jews. I hear Caligula’s a true wit. I’m sure he loved what you did with the standards.” Glancing up at the princeps, I saw he didn’t look amused at all.

“The Judaeans are a testy bunch,” Pilate reminded me. “I even read the Septuagint to find out what made them tick. Reading that made it clear why they are like they are. I’ll say this, I never treated them as badly as their own god did.”

“No one could,” I assured him. “Not even an emperor with *legibus solutus*.”

At this I felt a sharp pinch. It was time to put poor Pilate to the test. “I suppose you’ve heard that Caligula is ill,” I said. “What do you think of our first citizen?”

I held my breath while Pilate framed his answer. “He’s very young to be given so much power,” he replied. “It’s as much as Tiberius and Augustus accumulated throughout their entire principates. If he’s anything like his father, he could live to be a great man.” Pilate rubbed his beard thoughtfully. “I wonder how long Macro will last as Caligula’s handler.”

At this the dark figure beside me exploded with a cough, beneath which I heard the half-stifled exclamation, “*Handler?*”

“Um,” I said to Pilate, “one can’t really say the prefect is Caligula’s *handler*.”

“Believe me, Mel, Macro looks more and more like another Sejanus, and you know what happened to *that* prefect of the Praetorian Guard.”

Eager to change the subject, I quickly admitted that I *had* heard a few rumors, but this only made Pilate want to set the matter straight.

“Well,” he said, “it seems Sejanus was plotting to succeed Tiberius. While the emperor hid from conspirators on Capri, Sejanus – his most trusted man *and*, it seems, the main conspirator – was telling him and the senate what to do. Sejanus got me *my* job, by the way. Also, he was involved in a battle royal with Agrippina, Caligula’s mother, who wanted her son Nero to succeed Tiberius. It was Sejanus who had Tiberius send Agrippina and Nero into exile. Caligula just brought their ashes back to Rome, as you surely know. I’m certain Macro himself was behind that bit of public relations.”

Hoping again to change the subject, and to my advantage, I said, “Tell me, Pont, if you were Caligula, with all his power, what might you do to *really* stick it to the Jews?”

“Why would Caligula do that?”

“I mean if he wanted to.”

Pilate thought a moment. “Well, I guess the worst thing anyone could do, short of torching the Temple, would be to erect a statue inside it, like the Greeks sometimes do to defile Jewish synagogues.”

“You mean erect some awful horror?”

“Yes. I’d say that the most awful horror would be a huge statue of Caligula himself, tall, bald, and maybe garbed like Jupiter, placed smack in the Holy of Holies. That would be the greatest blasphemy possible.”

At the word “bald” I’d felt another pinch. “What a fantastic idea!” I cried, trying to hide my dismay at his ill-chosen adjective. “What a terrific joke to play on the Jews. I’m sure Caligula would find it hilarious.”

“Well, it won’t be *me* who suggests it to him,” Pilate chuckled. “I’d prefer he forgot about me entirely.”

Unlikely as that prospect now was, I said truthfully that I couldn’t agree with him more.

IX

Our late arrival at the widow Tullia Porcia’s house had been anticipated. Madame and her consort greeted us, then we were led to our apartments.

Both Caligula and I smelled of the evening, of crowds, wine, and tavern snacks that fouled the breath and fingers. The dark dye covering the emperor’s body stank royally. Dismissing the slaves, we cleansed ourselves with hot baths and oil, and refreshed our mouths with sweet-smelling herbs. Caligula emerged from his efforts less African than before, and had to replenish his hue the next morning.

After breakfast we walked to the Palatine. Since the announcement of the emperor’s illness, all Rome was in despair. Caligula seemed deeply moved when he saw the crowds outside his residence, waiting for reports on his health.

But he found it not at all gratifying to learn that all the city’s entertainments – chariot races, plays, everything – had been cancelled by Macro until further notice.

“Mel,” Caligula said, “before visiting Rome again we must ascertain that the emperor is in good health. Without entertainment this city’s a bore. Even the whores and faggots look too sad to fuck.”

“Well, we could travel to Lyons and study French, or to Mainz and practice German.”

Rather than resort to such desperate measures, we agreed I should use the secret passageway and return briefly to the palace. There I’d instruct Charicles to give out optimistic medical bulletins from time to time, starting the next morning.

Later, appearing suddenly through the wall of the imperial bedchamber, I startled the doctor who was reading a book, a small monkey perched on his shoulder. “How are things going?” I asked.

He was delighted to see me. “Very well,” he replied. “No one has intruded upon us and our food is the most tender and tasty since Capri. Of

course, since they think it will be eaten by Caesar, we keep this small monkey to taste everything before we do, but what else is new?"

I laughed. "And are you managing to keep yourselves otherwise amused?"

"Absolutely. There's a fine library here with many excellent medical books, several of which I wrote myself. With no duties to perform and no master present, we're living the greatest luxury we've ever known."

When I gave him Caligula's message, Charicles confessed that even he and Mericles had grown depressed over the poor state of their "patient's" health. He agreed that the following morning he'd announce that it had greatly improved. "In fact, I'd wager my reputation on Caesar's full recovery."

"Then let the empire rejoice," I cried, "and let the games begin!"

X

Walking through Rome that afternoon, draped in my toga, I was glad to have someone else being, as it were, my right hand. Caligula himself was becoming less charmed with our current situation. "Tell me, master," he said, "have you any idea how you wish to spend the day now that this fine idea of yours has cancelled every entertainment in Rome and thrown the entire city into depression, at least until tomorrow's bulletin?"

How to spend the day? "Why not visit my old amphitheater?" I asked Caligula. "Is Marcus Publius still the *munerarius* there?"

"He is, and since my accession he's been at least ten times busier than before. But not today, of course."

"Then let's drop in on him. Wait'll he sees me in a toga, accompanied by my slave!"

As we approached the office I could hear a familiar voice shouting orders. When Caligula and I appeared before him, my former boss's mouth dropped open in amazement. "Mel!" he cried. "Crocchus!"

The latter was an error of significant proportions, so absurd and unexpected that it caught both Caligula and me by surprise.

"*Minime vero*," I exclaimed. "This is . . . uh . . ." Somehow I caught myself from blurting the truth. "This is Red. I'm a citizen now and he's my slave."

Marcus Publius was amazed, but had the presence of mind to have a chair brought for me. I sat down while Caligula towered silently over us, making an awkward situation even worse. How surreal that my emperor had again to stand while I and another sat, much less that he be mistaken for his hero. To change the subject I quickly related the story of Crocchus's demise.

The man seemed hardly to listen. "You know, Mel," he said, looking

with interest at Caligula's tall, black figure, "he'd have to lose the wig of course, but dressed in a crocodile skin . . . hmm. Tell you what. Tomorrow I'll speak to that *lanista* who trained your friend. Red could be a second *Crocchus*."

A second Crocchus? What a bizarre idea. From my chest burst forth the harsh laughter of the thoroughly unamused. "No!" I cried. "Never!"

I was quickly silenced by a sharp kick to the ankle. Turning, I saw that Caligula had suddenly metamorphosed. There he stood, rotating his upper torso as if whirling a net, then twisting and leaping as if to evade an invisible javelin. How well he must have observed his hero!

"Think it over," Marcus Publius told me. "Red seems to have the will, not to mention the agility and intelligence. With the right training, this fellow could go far."

Getting to my feet I thanked him. "I'll give it some thought," I said rather dismissively. "Come, Red."

With a low growl Caligula followed me out, kicking his feet and shaking his shoulders back and forth like a spoiled child.

XI

Because we knew that tomorrow the princeps' health would "improve," I suggested that before returning to Tullia Porcia's house we go by the betting booths at the Forum. There we were able to wager, at excellent odds, on what the next medical bulletin would say. Later, after a bath and the renewal of Caligula's disguise, he studied his reflection in a large silver mirror.

"Master," he said, "I want you to consider manumission."

His request took me aback. "Being my slave isn't enough?" I asked haughtily. "Now you want to be a freedman? May I ask why?"

"I want to join you at the table tonight."

Stroking my chin reflectively, I replied, "Well, I might agree to that, as long as you still show me the respect of a son toward his father and do everything I demand of you."

"Obsequium and operae? Done and done."

"Then consider yourself free. Remind me to register your new status tomorrow."

It wasn't a propitious time for a dinner party, given the poor state of the emperor's health. There were nine of us at table. I was on one couch, with my "freedman" reclining behind me. Behind Caligula was an actor, but not a famous one. On another couch a book publisher reclined in front, with a poet known less for his talent than his beauty behind him. Tullia Porcia's consort, whom I understood to be a highly respected construction engineer, took up the rear. The ladies – our hostess, her sister, and a

cousin – filled the third couch.

This wasn't the sort of glamorous group Caligula was accustomed to, but I knew he'd find them useful in learning what the lower classes – meaning all Romans who were not emperor – really thought of him.

Because of the general gloom, we guests felt an obligation to make the occasion gay and festive by heightening and lightening our conversation and demeanor. Should we appear melancholy, it might give our hostess the impression we found her food and hospitality wanting.

I declined the first appetizer – sow's udder stuffed with crab – for I'd not yet overcome my ridiculous aversion to pork. It was a dish that the others – including Red – enjoyed greatly. Meanwhile, I exhorted them not to fear for our princeps' health. "The omens for his recovery are excellent," I told them. "In fact, I just wagered 100,000 *sesterces* that the next medical bulletin will be most favorable."

My optimism raised the spirits of one and all. As wine flowed, others bragged of past winnings on boxing matches and chariot races. This was followed by a lofty if irreverent discussion on whether wagering should be guided by chance and hunches, or by astrology, soothsaying, chicken entrails, and prayer.

After this, to my utter dismay, the conversation turned to the politics of imperial succession.

"I devoutly wish our princeps a quick recovery," said the publisher, reaching for a tender morsel of flamingo breast boiled with figs, "but were the worst to occur, the obvious heir would be Gemellus. It wouldn't surprise me to learn a conspiracy is already in the works."

As he popped the piece into his mouth I felt a tremendous pinch on my right buttock. The shock of this assault caused me to cry out in what I hoped sounded like dismissive laughter. "But Gemellus is still a child," I cried, "hardly a youth. How could a boy like that have designs on the throne? Besides, he and Gaius lived like brothers on Capri. They surely love one another. As you know, the princeps has even adopted Gemellus as his own son."

"And granted him the *toga virilis*, don't forget," smiled the engineer, "so the boy's a man now. I'll say only this: even a child or a halfwit could play princeps with a Macro telling him what to do. If Gemellus and his supporters *do* decide to make a move, they'd better begin plotting early, before someone else grabs the succession."

Pinch!

"I'm sure," I cried with a grin that tried to mask both my dismay and my grimace of pain, "that no plotting is afoot. As we know, tomorrow Caesar's health will markedly improve. And by the way, did you hear the story about the senator's wife and the chicken?"

But try as I might to change the subject, the others persisted in their talk, gaily considering all sorts of treasonable possibilities. It wasn't be-

cause they didn't love their emperor, but with the wine flowing – wine we'd voted earlier should contain only one part of water to three of wine – they said anything that entered their heads.

One spoke of how Macro micro-managed everything Caligula did, even nudging him awake when he dozed off at public gatherings. Also discussed were the rumors about the emperor's intimate relationship with Macro's wife. All were aware that Macro had offered his wife Ennia's favors to Caligula after the death of Junia Claudia, and all had opinions on what had or hadn't occurred between them.

Equally, all were of the opinion that Silanus, Junia Claudia's father, was still treating the emperor like a son-in-law, offering him unwelcome advice on matters that were none of his business. It was finally agreed that if a conspiracy was being hatched, surely Macro, Gemellus, and Silanus were involved.

At each of these conversational sallies I suffered a painful pinch. And each time I'd cry, "*Minime vero!*" both to reassure Caligula of my loyalty and hide my involuntary lurch. Once I rolled onto my back to get a glimpse of the princeps' face – only to discover that he and the actor behind him were clasped in a tight embrace.

Not long after the dessert, as the odor from the oil lamps settled over us, I heard Caligula's urgent whisper, "Let's leave. Now!"

I assumed he needed to relieve himself quickly, and while his blackened skin could show no distress, I did see, on the faces of the others, a greenish pallor and beads of sweat.

Why had I alone been spared? The sow's udders, I thought immediately, or the crab.

Without pausing to take our leave, Caligula and I arose and hurried to his rooms. There he was ill, then ill again, then ill from another gate. Although emptied, he seemed little improved; both his head and hands were hot and dry.

"Take me to Charicles," he said, and I went quickly to ask our hostess for a litter. Tullia Porcia, herself unwell, was apologetic.

"It was probably the sow's udders," I told her.

"Of course! You didn't eat them, did you." Then she added, "Perhaps you could tell me why Jews don't eat pork."

"Or it could have been the crab," I said hastily.

"You people don't eat crab either?"

Luckily, at that moment Caligula announced he was ready to leave.

A short time later, with the princeps leaning on my shoulder, I walked up the secret passageway to the imperial bedchamber. There the doctor and Mericles helped him into bed and gave him medicine.

Despite their efforts the fever persisted all night, causing visions and visitations. Toward dawn Caligula suffered a seizure. The report Charicles put out that morning was not good: the emperor was still gravely ill.

That wasn't the only bad news, of course. I'd lost 100,000 *sesterces* and Caligula five times that amount. Had this been the fault of Chance? The gods? The pork? The crab? No matter; the money was gone, the emperor was truly ill, the reasons were academic.

XII [September, 37 CE]

The next afternoon Caligula was no better. When I learned that Tullia Porcia and the other guests had already recovered, I suspected Caligula had been doubly poisoned – not just by the food, but by the black stain covering his body. Removing every trace of the dye, using oil, hot baths, scrubbing, and bleaches, took nearly a week. By then Caligula's bowels were firmer, but fever still clouded his mind and he was subject to hallucinations and seizures. At that point we decided to admit Macro and others to the sickroom.

During Caligula's illness, which lasted two months, I went each day to the Forum to hear the latest news and gossip. It was soon on every tongue that Macro, young Gemellus, and Silanus must be running the affairs of state during Caesar's indisposition. With Caligula tortured even in his dreams by fears about conspiracies, it didn't seem wise to mention these speculations to him. Once, believing himself at death's door, he named his beloved sister Drusilla his heir. He also named Marcus Lepidus – a close friend to whom he'd married Drusilla after taking her away from her elderly first husband – as his successor.

Then one day, while Caligula slept, Charicles told me the truth about the death of Tiberius. "He died peacefully, but no sooner had his death been announced than the old man suddenly awakened and returned to life. When Macro saw this he sent everyone out of the room, but from behind a curtain I saw him order a Praetorian to hold a pillow over the emperor's face. To have intervened would have meant my death as well as Caesar's."

"Did anyone else witness this?" I asked in amazement.

"No one, and I told no one. But I wonder now whether Lord Gaius should be warned. He himself may be in danger from Macro."

"Caesar's too weak to think clearly," I told Charicles. "Earlier he assigned a Batavian to guard me. I'll post that fellow by the princeps' bed. I wouldn't trust his life to a Praetorian – not after what you just told me – but they say the Germans are fierce fighters and very loyal."

"A good plan," he nodded. "This matter has been bothering me but I didn't know with whom to share it. You appear to be a discrete, kindly man for a Jew."

His words made me chuckle. Discrete yes, but kindly? "Just don't get me started on the Law of Moses," I told him.

XIII

Caligula's illness continued through October. During his lucid moments he spoke of the spirits that had visited him. Regulars were his mother Agrippina and his brothers Drusus and Nero. Bringing back their ashes hadn't eased his guilt about having failed to protect them.

Other spirit visitors were Macro, Ennia, Gemellus, and Silanus. They came to him pretending friendship, but he knew they were plotting against him.

As his illness receded, Caligula's concern about the conspirators didn't lessen. "They'll not succeed," he told me the day he got up from his bed. "I have *ius arbitriumque omnium rerum*."

"Power and authority over all things? Yes, that's true."

"And don't you forget it. You know, Mel, I can have all of them killed any time I want. And you too. I could take a sword and cut your head off right now if I wanted to."

"You could, Princeps," I replied, "but then who would laugh at your jokes?"

At this Caligula put back his head and roared with laughter. "Mel," he said, "I swear, I'd kill every Jew in Judaea before I'd so much as plunge a fork into your hand."

"Great. When do you start?"

Before his illness Caligula had lavished money on the public games that Tiberius had starved financially. This generosity had made the young princeps popular, but after his illness his profligacy grew. He gave away thousands of *sesterces* on a whim to any actor or gladiator who caught his fancy. It was rumored he spent millions on one dinner. Some feared that the imperial coffers, once filled with the revenues hoarded by Tiberius, would soon be empty. Still, no one except Macro and Silanus dared suggest he control his appetites and excesses. I often heard Caligula rail against their unwanted advice.

"What should I do with them?" he asked me. "Throw them to the beasts? I don't need advice from anyone."

"Of course not." I assured him. "Only approbation. Whatever you do to them, I promise to approve."

At this he regarded me squarely. "I could throw you to the beasts too, you know."

"If you do," I said, "then I beseech you to let the beasts be crocodiles, among whom I might have the same lucky break as Androcles with his lion."

Caligula laughed, but then, to revenge himself for my slippery reply, made me wear two of Crocchus's wreaths at dinner.

If there was one thing I'd learned about this princeps, it was that he hated the smug, the arrogant, and the self-righteous. When Governor

140 *The Acts of a Pagan Jew*

Lucius Vitellius returned from the East and prostrated himself before Caligula, as he was used to doing before the Parthian king, Caligula decided that this was a fine way to humble senators and others. And so he introduced the protocol of prostration into his court, thereby earning himself a reputation as smug, arrogant, and self-righteous.

By the end of the year Caligula became convinced that the conspiracy against him was real and had to be put down immediately. He decided to settle first with Silanus. Everything galled him about his former father-in-law. For him he chose the ultimate humiliation: Silanus was ordered to put a dagger into his own breast.

The next day Caligula sent soldiers to execute Gemellus. I was shocked when I heard of it.

“Well, actually, it *is* forbidden to kill a possible successor,” Caligula told me. “Normally one orders them to commit suicide. But the kid was too young to know where to put the dagger, so I told the military to give him a hand.”

Caligula’s joking and odd behavior, bad enough before his illness, seemed now to grow even more bizarre. Shortly after the death of Gemellus, while attending the sumptuous wedding of C. Calpurnius Piso, a senatorial aristocrat whom he found particularly arrogant, Caligula stole the bride away, married her, and a few days later divorced her.

“Livia Orestilla absolutely wanted to marry an emperor,” he shrugged when I asked him about it. “Since I was the only choice she had, I felt obligated do the right thing by her. So don’t give me those looks.”

Then, on 15 December, Caligula’s sister Agrippina gave birth to a son she named Nero. As time would show, it was a fitting end to a strange year.

XIV [38 CE]

Caligula’s popularity remained very high. No one could fault him for executing the two conspirators, and his abolishment of the sales tax at this time was very well liked. But even with two of the plotters gone, Caligula wasn’t satisfied.

“Macro’s driving me nuts,” he told me one day. “It’s bad enough that he, Silanus, and Gemellus took over the affairs of state when I was ill, but he’s a bigger pain than Silanus used to be. I can’t stand him telling me what to do all the time.”

“Is he giving you bad advice?”

“No. That’s the trouble. It’s good advice. In fact, what he tells me to do is exactly what I myself decided to do a minute before he told me. So naturally he thinks I’m following his advice and takes credit for my wise decisions. It’s incredibly frustrating.”

I found this a good moment to say nothing. After a brief pause Caligula continued, "The problem is, now that Silanus and Gemellus are gone, Macro's certainly suspicious of what I might do to him, and he does command the Praetorians after all. That's a lot of power. Mel, I swear, a divided command is the only way to go. The next time I'll designate *two* prefects of the Guard; it's the only safe way. I don't want to make the same mistake Tiberius made with Sejanus. My mother and brother would be alive today . . ." Breaking off, he stared at me.

"And Drusus or Nero would be emperor, and the little boot would be devouring his leather . . ."

". . . in some dungeon." Caligula sighed. "I can't believe that after what happened with Sejanus, Tiberius gave command of the Guard to Macro alone, and I let it stand. Mel, what should I do?"

"Dare I give you advice?" I smiled.

"Dare you not?"

"Ah. Then I suggest you give Macro a job in the provinces."

"Like what?"

"Make him prefect of Egypt. He and Ennia would love living in Alexandria."

"I sure would," confessed the princeps. "It would be great to get out of Rome. Avillius Flaccus has the job now, but I'm getting reports that he's beginning to rile the local Jews. Maybe I *will* offer it to Macro. Maybe . . . I . . . will."

In the spring Caligula did indeed reward Macro for his "many services" by appointing him *Praefectus Aegypti* to replace Flaccus. Too wise to boast, I said nothing, inwardly delighted that the princeps had followed my advice and I was still alive. But before the ex-Praetorian Prefect could sail to Alexandria and assume his new position, Caligula ordered him and Ennia to take their lives. Then he appointed two prefects to replace him at the head of the Guard.

Realizing now that Caligula had made the Egyptian offer only to distract Macro from the blow about to fall, I swore to myself that this was the last time I'd give the little boot any suggestions at all.

The populace didn't blame Caligula for the death of the third conspirator either. Then, in June, shortly after Macro's death, there was another death. This time it was Caligula's most beloved sister, Drusilla.

Now began a terrible time. The princeps took her death very hard, ordering many honors including a parade by the Guard, the cancellation of all games and festivities, and a public funeral. So plunged in grief was he that he was unable to attend the funeral. Few were allowed to approach him, King Agrippa and myself being two exceptions. But even we hesitated to intrude upon his grief, which seemed to consume him entirely.

Unable to bear being in Rome, Caligula traveled to Naples and Sicily. Agrippa and I went with him, watching in dismay as the beard Caligula

had shaved off after his recovery grew long and disheveled as he lost all interest in his appearance. On the birthday of Augustus he had Drusilla deified, and ordered gold coins minted to celebrate the event.

During this time I spoke often with Agrippa who was waiting to travel east to claim the kingdom granted him by Caligula. A charming and interesting man twice the age of the princeps, he'd wanted to begin his journey at the start of the sailing season along the northern route through Greece, but Caligula had told him to wait for the Etesian winds. These blew from mid July through August and would route him south to Alexandria. The princeps wanted Agrippa to tell the Jews of Alexandria, who felt governor Flaccus favored the Greeks over them, that they had a friend in Rome.

"I plan to keep a low profile in Alexandria," Agrippa confided to me. "I'll enter the city by night, talk to Philo and the other Jewish leaders, and leave the next day."

"Why the secrecy?"

"Well, I'm eager to get home as soon as possible, and anyhow I'm afraid some Alexandrians think of me only as a spendthrift and debtor because of the money I borrowed from Alexander. Of course I paid him back long ago."

I smiled, not mentioning I knew he'd paid back that loan with another loan – from Caligula's grandmother. Gossip about Agrippa's spendthrift ways and the borrowings that got him in trouble with tetrarch, alabarch, governor, prefect, and emperor alike, followed him all over the empire.

"I'd suggest a different approach to the Alexandrians," I told him. "Your message isn't just to the Jews, after all. You have to make Governor Flaccus and the Greeks understand that Caesar has given the Jews a *king* – a grandson of Herod the Great, no less – not just an equestrian prefect."

"How would you suggest I do it?"

"By being yourself. Strut around the city with your attendants and bodyguards the same as you do here. Wear your richest clothing. It'll make the Greeks think twice about how they treat the Jews."

But Agrippa wouldn't commit himself. "I'll see," he told me. "I'll enter the city unannounced and then take it from there."

"You're the king," I said with a deferential bow that was almost a shrug, hoping at least to have planted a seed.

XV

In July Agrippa sailed for Alexandria and I waited with great curiosity for news of his visit there. Would he act on my advice? And if he did, would his behavior insult and enrage the Greek populace to such a degree that they'd turn on the Jews? Would civil unrest be the result?

Some might ask why I plotted this way against these Jews. After all, the Law-abiding, stone-wielding citizens of Jerusalem were my real targets, not the Hellenized Jews of Alexandria. But if the Temple, that linchpin of Judaism, was ever to fall, a spreading, growing civil unrest begun by Greek and Jewish proxies might prepare the way.

It wasn't long before reports started coming back from Alexandria – reports by Agrippa, Flaccus, Philo, and others – describing what had transpired after the king's arrival. As planned, Agrippa entered Alexandria after dark and right away sought out the Jewish leaders, who welcomed him warmly. Together they discussed the grave situation in that city, where Governor Flaccus and the courts often sided against the Jews and denied them Alexandrian citizenship.

Agrippa was given a copy of the declaration of congratulations and loyalty the Alexandrian Jews had tried to send to Caligula upon his accession, but which Flaccus had either purposely held back or was warned by the Greeks to overlook. Agrippa immediately sent this to Caligula by fast courier, deciding not to leave Alexandria until the princeps' reply came and the situation was more settled.

Talking with the Jewish leaders, Agrippa learned of the tension growing between the Greeks and Jews, something that hadn't been evident on his last visit. To leave no doubt on whose side he and Rome were aligned, he decided to parade through the city in his royal robes surrounded by his bodyguards and retinue. In that way he would show the Greek populace that while Rome had given them a prefect, the Jews had been given a king.

"Ita vero!" I cried aloud as I read this.

Agrippa saw his mistake too late. Instead of steadying the situation, his manner and actions infuriated the Greeks and Egyptians, whose own loss of sovereignty to Rome still rankled. Spurred on by the anti-Semites Isidorus, Apion, and Lampon, the Greeks took their revenge. They mocked Agrippa by creating their own "royal" procession headed by a local idiot they crowned Cabbage King, and at whom they hurled insults. Soon Greeks and Jews began to clash. Deciding his presence was hurting his people more than helping them, Agrippa slipped away under cover of darkness and headed for his kingdom.

"Yes!"

Philo, in his lengthy report, explained how the city of Alexandria had originally been divided into five parts, each designated by a letter of the alphabet. The Jews lived in *Delta*, but as their numbers grew they took over another section of the city, and spread to other areas too.

Now, Philo complained, Flaccus had forced all the Jews to move back into *Delta*. The district soon became so crowded that many were obliged to sleep in graveyards and on the beaches. Even worse, the Greeks erected statues in the synagogues and forced some Jews to eat pork. Finally, Philo asked Caligula to let him bring a legion to Rome to plead the cause of the

Alexandrian Jews.

Governor Flaccus, in his report, explained that concentrating the Jews in one section of Alexandria wasn't meant as a restriction, but was a public safety measure to protect them from attacks. It was also to protect the Greeks, for the Jews were throwing stones at their Greek neighbors, toppling statues of their gods, and creating weapons caches in their homes.

The reports from Alexandria infuriated Caligula. He was angry with Flaccus whom he'd threatened earlier to replace with Macro; knowing he was a lame duck, the prefect should have behaved more cautiously. The princeps was also angry with the three anti-Semitic Greek firebrands who, it was said, had threatened and blackmailed Flaccus until he turned against the Jews. And he was furious too with the Jews, especially Philo, who in his report castigated Agrippa for having fomented racial strife. To Caligula, finding fault with his royal envoy was tantamount to criticizing the princeps himself. Strangely, the outcome of all this was very favorable to Agrippa, who was later given credit by the Jews for Flaccus's recall.

"Why not let Philo bring his legation to Rome?" I asked Caligula. "It could be fun."

That idea, which at first he'd vehemently rejected, suddenly appealed to the princeps. "I'll have him come in the wintertime," he chuckled, "to test his old bones at sea." Then he paused to reflect. "Not *this* winter, of course; I have to invade Germany and Britain." He paused again. "No, wait. Yes! I'll have him come in January, to cool his heels and his rhetoric until my return from the North. And since he's a rabid Jew who hates Greeks and Egyptians, I'll invite another delegation at the same time, one that includes Apion, Isidorus, and Lampon. *That* should liven things up." Then he paused, grinning. "Do you think the Greeks erected statues of the divine *me* in those synagogues?"

I grinned back. "I'm sure they wouldn't have had it any other way."

XVI

The attacks against the Alexandrian Jews continued unabated until October, when Caligula sent troops to arrest Flaccus and installed a new prefect, G. Vitrasius Pollio. Things calmed down under Pollio and the Jews were allowed back into their former homes and businesses. Caligula was going to have Flaccus executed, but when his old friend Lepidus, the husband of his late sister Drusilla, interceded on his behalf, Caligula agreed to banish him instead, choosing Gyarus, the bleakest isle in the Aegean. However, after further intercession by Lepidus, Caligula relented and exiled Flaccus to the more comfortable Andros where, some time later, he sent agents to kill him.

During this time Caligula's dealings with the senate reached a crucial

point. Sure that the endless honors the senate voted him were only to hide their conspiracies against him, in a vitriolic speech he attacked them as hypocrites and reintroduced the charge of *maiestas*. The senators voted their approval and continued to praise, fawn on, and prostrate themselves before the emperor, thankful to have once again escaped punishment.

It was around this time that Caligula married his third wife, the fabulously wealthy Lollia Paulina, who was already married to a provincial governor, P. Memmius Regulus. Memmius himself gave the bride away. A few months later the princeps divorced her.

“My marriage to Lollia Paulina was so that I could have an *heir*,” he told me when he noticed I was avoiding the subject, “but she was *barren*. Mel, I didn’t *steal* her; Memmius *gave* her to me. In return I got him into the Arval Brotherhood. Both of us saw the whole thing as a friendly arrangement, a *joke*. So *laugh*, dammit.” But because his new wife had been barren, the joke had really been on him.

Politics and marriage were only part of the princeps’ busy schedule. He was also occupied with having the world searched for art objects to decorate the palatial houses he was building. He revived the idea of digging a canal across the Isthmus of Corinth and sent engineers there to study the situation, then began the construction of a lighthouse in Boulogne to facilitate the passage of supply ships for his invasion of Britain. He had roads built across the Alps and in Spain, and constructed a circus on the Ager Vaticanus where he could practice chariot racing. Desiring to put a 300-ton, 82-foot high Egyptian obelisk in the median of the race track, he ordered built the largest ship ever put upon the seas, requiring 900 tons of ballast, to bring the obelisk from Alexandria to Ostia.

More spectacular even than that, Caligula’s dream of building a bridge between Puteoli and Baiae he finally made come true. The pontoon bridge – nearly three miles long – was to be used for a two-day festival before being taken down. It was constructed of merchant ships anchored side by side over which a road was laid. To attain the necessary length, several grain ships were taken out of service on the Alexandria/Rome run, and more ships were built.

The weather was fine on both days of the Bridge of Baiae festival, with not a ripple on the sea. “Neptune recognizes his master,” joked Caligula.

On the first day, after sacrificing to Neptune and Envy, Caligula rode back and forth across the bridge fully armed, leading a procession of cavalry and infantry. He was dressed in the breastplate of Alexander the Great, brought from Alexandria for the occasion, wore a cloak of purple and gold, and was decked out in massive jewels from India. On his head was the crown of oak.

The next day he rode back and forth in a chariot drawn by two famous racehorses, followed by what he called the “spoils of Parthia.” These in-

cluded Darius, a son of the Parthian king, sent to Gaius by his father as a hostage to confirm his good faith in their negotiations. Following him was the entire Praetorian Guard. I was touched to see that on his head the princes wore one of Crocchus's wreaths.

For two days and nights feasting and celebrations were held on the bridge, with many private boats alongside joining in. Flares on the hillsides turned night into day.

"Why do you think I held this celebration?" Caligula asked me after the event. "Some think I built the bridge to impress the Germans and British with my power, and strike fear into their hearts."

I told him I didn't think he needed a reason, that the event itself was reason enough. But he obviously had something else in mind, for later he reopened the question, saying, "I've heard that a certain Jew in Palestine, who called himself a god, walked on water, and that men still fall to their knees and worship him for it." Then he laughed a great laugh. "Well, Melius," he shouted, "let them now fall down and worship *me* – because *I* bloody *rode!*"

In June of that year Caligula had married Caesonia, a woman who already had three children. Their child, Drusilla, was born a month later. Caligula swore to me that even when she was old enough to wear shoes, he would never allow her to wear little boots.

In fact, she never reached the age of booties.

XVII

In early September Caligula traveled to Mevania. His personal party on the hundred-mile trip from Rome included his wife and baby, his sisters Agrippina and Julia Livilla – but not their elderly husbands – his old friend and late sister's husband Lepidus, and me.

As we started out I had no idea at all about the real purpose of the trip, or why Caligula's sisters and Lepidus had been included. Only later did I learn Caligula's secret: Mevania was the first stop on his long-awaited invasion of Germany. Stopping there was part of a ruse to allay any suspicions of the commander of the legions of Upper Germany, Lentulus Gaetulicus, who Caligula had learned was planning to assassinate him. Included in the assassination conspiracy were Caligula's sisters and Lepidus. Their plan was that Lepidus, freed by the death of Drusilla, would marry Agrippina and succeed Caligula.

It would have been foolhardy for Caligula to proceed directly to Germany while Gaetulicus was plotting his assassination. A powerful leader, he was in command of four legions on the Rhine, with indirect command over six others. Nor would it have been possible for Caligula simply to dismiss this popular commander without causing an insurrection among

the troops. So, from Mevania Caligula dispatched a professional soldier, Servius Sulpicius Galba, to execute Gaetulicus.

When he heard that Galba's mission was accomplished, Caligula ordered a tribune of the Guard to cut Lepidus's throat. That done, the princeps exhibited private letters proving that Lepidus had been sleeping with his sisters Agrippina and Julia Livilla. This made me suspect that it wasn't the conspiracy alone that had so infuriated Caligula; after all, he himself had taken Drusilla from her first husband to marry Lepidus, and now his false friend had insulted her divine memory.

His anger also manifested itself in a macabre way. This was when Caligula charged his sister Agrippina – a woman as ambitious for her infant son Nero as their mother, Agrippina the Elder, had been for *her* son Nero – with the gruesome task of carrying an urn containing her former lover's ashes back to Rome in her arms. There they were thrown away unburied, following a motion to that effect in the senate. Then Caligula sent to Rome three daggers taken from the conspirators to be dedicated at the Temple of Mars Ultor.

That done, Caligula banished his sisters to the Pontian islands. Their jewelry, slaves, furnishings, and everything else of value not already brought to Mevania, he ordered sent from Rome to Lyons, where he had plans to dispose of them.

After leaving Mevania, the trip north through the Alps was rapid, taking us a little over five weeks to reach Mainz. The Praetorians who accompanied our party were city troops, unaccustomed to such hardships. So exhausted were they that they let the pack animals carry their standards, while Caesonia, little Drusilla, and occasionally Caligula and I, rode in comfortable litters.

In Mainz, Caligula met Galba and the troops. After the death of Gaetulicus, Galba had taken charge, put the troops through training exercises, and generally raised their morale through hard work and by praising the emperor. Caligula was thrilled to be there, as were the troops to see the son of Germanicus. "I'm not my father, Mel," he told me later, "but I love and respect my men and want them to respect me too."

Caligula enjoyed his stay on the Rhine where he participated in a brief excursion across the river to the enemy side. His loyal troops kept him out of harm's way, while appreciating his sharing of their military burden. All returned from the adventure as excited and enthused as if the son of Germanicus had made a great military conquest that day, which in a way he had. Indeed, it was victory enough for the princeps to send word to Rome that he'd vanquished Germany.

Caligula was satisfied at least that his German flank was covered and that preparations for his invasion of Britain were well underway. With a replenished Batavian bodyguard officered by two Thracian gladiators, Caligula set out for Lyons.

“They give poetry and oratory contests in Lyons at this time every year,” the princeps told me. “I wouldn’t miss that for the rest of the world!”

It was on the road between Mainz and Lyons that a letter arrived from Philo accepting Caligula’s invitation to come to Rome with a legation. The legation, Philo’s letter made clear, wished to petition the emperor to give back to the Alexandrian Jews the rights granted them by the Ptolemies, a civil status that had been confirmed by Augustus.

I wrote out Caligula’s reply in which he said he’d be happy to meet with them. He also mentioned that another legation would be arriving that winter which would include Apion, Isidorus, and Lampon.

“They’ll knock themselves out bribing everyone in sight, trying to be the first to get my ear,” the princeps chuckled. “Tell Philo to be sure to arrive in Rome in January, no earlier than the *nones* and no later than the *ides*. Then write the Greeks and tell them the same thing.”

Not that anyone, himself included, thought Caligula could spend some months in France, vanquish the English, and be back in Rome by January, or even before May, at the very earliest.

XVIII

It was a long but fast trip down to Lyons. During the time we spent on the road, special couriers hurried back and forth to Rome, allowing the princeps to carry on the work of empire. Visitors also used the roads. One day a senatorial delegation met us. They’d come to congratulate the princeps on having escaped the assassination plot of Lepidus, and to tell him that his victory over the Germans had earned him a Triumph.

“Hmm,” said the princeps. “If I’m to have a triumphal procession I’ll have to pull out all the stops. Mel, see if you can spot some well-built Frenchmen. We’ll dye their hair red, teach them a little German, and they’ll be our prisoners of war.”

Despite the good news they’d brought, Caligula wasn’t pleased to see the senatorial delegation and refused to meet with some of them, fearing a conspiracy. His denunciation of the senate before leaving Rome, when he called them hypocrites and fawning sycophants, telling them that their honors to him were as spurious as those they’d given to Tiberius, had surely hit home. He was certain they wanted him dead. Nor was he pleased to see among the delegates his uncle Claudius, whom he greeted without enthusiasm. Since discovering the perfidy of his sisters, Caligula was distrustful of his entire family.

“What has he come here for?” he railed to me. “Does Claudius think I need an old man to tell me what to do?”

After we arrived at Lyons a different spirit filled the princeps. The

first thing he did was take charge of the oratorical contests, reorganizing them in Greek and Latin and insisting we all compete. Those of us who lost – oratory had never been my forte – were obliged to write poems praising the winners. Then we losers were given the “choice” of rubbing our poems off our near-frozen wax tablets with our tongues, being beaten with rods, or thrown into the river. The last wasn’t the preferred option at that time of year, but certainly the most uproarious for those watching from the bank.

“You know, Mel,” Caligula confided to me another time, “there are people who say that my extravagances are depleting the treasury. Well, there are two solutions for adding to state funds. One is to reinstate the sales tax, not a popular measure. The other,” he continued grimly, “would be to do some very serious gambling. Which do you suggest?”

“Gambling,” I replied immediately.

Pleased with my answer, Caligula threw himself into the rescue of the imperial treasury with great enthusiasm. Then, hearing that the French were so eager to dine with him that they’d pay huge sums for the privilege, he obliged them by giving splendid banquets, happily accepting the money they pressed upon him in exchange for invitations. The locals also eagerly attended the auctions of imperial memorabilia that the princeps organized – items that included the erstwhile possessions of his sisters. Himself the auctioneer, Caligula got the bidding up to astronomical levels, so well did he present each item to provincials hungry to own something of the empire.

“By the time we get home the treasury will be overflowing,” he assured me.

But life in Lyons wasn’t all fun and games for the princeps. There were tender moments too. It was clear to anyone who saw them together that Caligula was very much in love with Caesonia and adored their baby.

One day Caesonia and I found ourselves together in a park where we sat near one another, watching Drusilla at her nurse’s breast. Caligula’s wife and I had already developed a kind of rapport, consisting mostly of smiles and nods, but this was the first occasion we’d had to converse.

“You know,” she told me, replying to some rather personal question I’d blurted, “men are such children. *All* men, from what I hear. Even the princeps, even you.”

“*Me?*” I exclaimed, scandalized.

“Of course you. How can you escape the fate of being like all men? Men have mothers and when they choose a wife they look for someone to be another mother, so that they can be children again. Moreover, when a boy child is separated from his mother at an early age, as the princeps often was when his mother stayed in Germany with his father, he may remain a child all his days.

“You see, Mel, a child wants praise, he wants to be safe, he’s jealous

concerning all other men, and he wants loving arms around him. Gaius is such a one. See his jokes and pranks? I'm sure the whole world can see the child behind those pranks. Perhaps that's why so many think it would be easy to kill the child and seize his throne."

I didn't know what to think of Caesonia's words. It was true I sometimes felt like someone who hadn't grown up completely, but sometimes I felt like a very old man. And Caligula? He wasn't an ordinary mortal, or a god or demigod either. His special category was emperor. I couldn't begin to imagine what that was like, or compare him to ordinary men.

"Being princeps can be a lonely and frightening life," Caesonia told me. "There's only one of them on earth, but many pretenders and would-be assassins."

"The emperor can't be lonely or frightened with you by his side," I told her earnestly. "You're his Sarah."

"His Sarah?"

But tears suddenly filled my eyes and I turned quickly to another subject.

XIX

Now that his German flank had been secured, and troops and ships assembled for the invasion of Britain, Caligula sent Caesonia and the baby back to Rome, heavily guarded by Praetorians and Batavians. We turned toward Boulogne.

"You'll be my commander for the British invasion," the princeps told me as we headed northwest across a landscape mercifully flatter than the Alps. "I want to bring home spoils of war so magnificent they'll make Caesar's spoils of war look like worthless pebbles."

"You're the princeps," I told him. "Something worthier than pebbles? How about seashells?"

"Seashells would be perfect," he nodded, climbing into his litter. "Wake me up when we get there."

Arriving on the coast of France we found Caligula's army already assembled, complete with siege towers and ballistae. Nearby stood the lighthouse he'd built for the invasion. Other than that it was not an auspicious scene. Standing beside a beached trireme, we watched fierce winds whip the water into white-crested waves. Dark clouds held back any rays of sunlight. To my surprise, Caligula didn't seem perturbed.

"The Channel isn't navigable until March or April, which is just as well," he told me. "It'll give the troops a chance to rest before returning to Germany. More mopping-up is needed to secure my northern flank before I can invade Britain."

I was silent but he must have read the unspoken question on my face:

Then why the hell have we come to this cold, miserable place if we can't attack Britain?

"Mel," he said, "all my life I've wanted to visit this coast, see the white cliffs of England, smell the sea air, and listen to the cries of northern water birds. I've always wanted to experience what the man whose name I bear – and so many others – saw, heard, and smelled here. Most of all, I wanted to bring back something from this place to give to my people. It would have been a shame not to come when we were in the neighborhood."

Lyons? In the neighborhood of Boulogne? I could hardly believe my ears. Had he known all along then that his invasion of Britain would be cancelled or postponed? I took a deep breath. "Sir, as commander of the British invasion I would say it's time for the seashells. Shall I tell the men or will you?"

"Oh, I will," said Caligula quickly. "I'll announce it tomorrow from that convenient lighthouse."

He was as good as his word. The next day, climbing partway up the tower, he shouted his orders to the troops. They were to collect seashells along the shore, filling their helmets, shirts, and cloaks with them, and load them into his personal trireme. His plan was that the ship, filled with these spoils of the sea, would be carried overland to Rome, paraded in his Triumph, and docked on the Capitoline where he personally would throw seashells to the people.

After the soldiers had collected the shells, Caligula sent a letter to the senate informing them of his victory over Oceanus. Then he distributed money to the troops – not enough to reward them for a great victory, but enough to keep them from mutiny.

Before many days we started home, a journey of some thousand miles, requiring months. Along the way Caligula received a message from Philo saying that he and his legation had reached Rome, and so had the Greeks.

"Good," said Caligula. "Perhaps by the time we arrive they'll have killed each other off."

On another day we were met by a second senatorial delegation, this one conveying the message that the princeps was eagerly awaited in Rome where honors and celebrations awaited him for both his victories.

"What hypocrites," Caligula sighed when the delegation finally left. "They pretend to revere me like a god when their true feelings are far different. Well, if they want a god I'll give them one, an angry god with *legibus solutus*."

"As cruel as the Hebrew god?" I asked, feigning disinterest. But Caligula sent me a sharp glance, indicating he saw through my attempt at manipulation.

Not many days later a courier arrived with a letter from Capito, the Roman procurator at Jamnia, a town of Jews and Greeks in Palestine.

Capito reported that the gentiles of the town had erected an altar for the worship of Gaius Caesar and the imperial cult, but that the Jews had rioted and torn it down.

Caligula was incredulous. The Jews had done that to him after all he'd done for them? Hadn't he recalled Flaccus? Hadn't he given a kingdom to his Jewish friend Agrippa and sent him to Alexandria on their behalf? Hadn't he agreed to give an audience to Philo? Didn't Jews live in dignity and safety all over the empire? *And this was the thanks they gave Caesar?*

I didn't ordinarily pen letters of state for Caligula, but he made this an exception. The letter was addressed to Publius Petronius, the governor of Syria. In it the princeps instructed Petronius to order the construction of a huge statue of himself, the Emperor Gaius, dressed as Jupiter. This colossus was to be carried to Jerusalem guarded by two legions – half his force on the Euphrates – and placed in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary of the Temple. And it should be done without delay.

I watched Caligula sign and seal the letter with his ring. Then, as if overcome with joy and gratitude, I prostrated myself before him. “An image of Caesar will soon take its rightful place in the Hebrew Temple,” I cried. “Welcome to my people, Lord Gaius!”

“Put a sandal in it,” was the princeps' dry response.

XX

We returned to the vicinity of Rome in May, but Caligula didn't enter the city. For one thing, it was an unusually torrid spring, the heat so oppressive that awnings had already been stretched over the Forum. The princeps seemed to have changed his mind about celebrating his Triumph, at least in part because the trireme he'd sent overland with the seashells had not yet arrived. But more than the heat and seashells, what kept him out of Rome was his fear of assassination based on rumors of senatorial conspiracies. These would have to be investigated and rooted out, preferably before he entered the city.

One thing Caligula desired more than anything was to see Caesonia and Drusilla. He met them in his mother's gardens on the Tiber outside Rome. It surely wasn't difficult for him to persuade his little family to accompany him to Campania on the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea. His plan was to supervise the construction and furnishing of several luxury villas, and attend the games held there in the spring and early summer.

Philo, hearing that Caligula would be at the Gardens of Agrippina, had arranged to see him there. It was a brief, cordial meeting; Philo had obviously not yet heard of Caligula's letter to Petronius concerning the Temple statue. The princeps told Philo he'd meet with the Jewish delegation when he returned to Rome from Campania. In the meantime, they and the

Greeks would have a preliminary hearing with Obulus, his secretary in charge of arrived embassies, and his friend and personal secretary Melicon, meaning me.

"I'm afraid Melicon is Egyptian," he apologized to Philo with a perfectly straight face.

Philo stared at me. "Really? He doesn't look it."

Later Caligula told the Greek legation that I was Jewish and my name was Melchizedek. It was his way of further stirring the pot.

Philo hoped for a preliminary meeting with Obulus and me as soon as possible, but my departure for Campania with the imperial party caused more delay. This didn't sit well with the impatient man who'd been away from Alexandria over five months and was only thankful his brother Alexander had decided not to come.

As May turned into June, Philo brought his legation to the coast. The Greeks, not to be outmaneuvered, also came down to Campania where both legations hung about waiting for the preliminary interview. I was available, but Obulus was still in Rome. There seemed to be no end in sight to the matter.

It was while waiting and fretting in Campania that Philo first heard about Caligula's letter to the governor of Syria. The news threw him into a fit and he demanded an immediate audience with the emperor. This was not to be. He was told that instead, Obulus would come to Campania right away, and he and I would listen to the two legations. We'd then relate all that was said to the emperor, who'd decide when and where to meet with them.

Philo could do nothing but agree to this. "I will, however, write letters to Petronius and King Agrippa," he told me, "asking that they do everything possible to intercede with the emperor and stop the Temple's desecration. Jews will fight to the last man to prevent it happening. Surely when Lord Gaius understands this he'll not go through with his plan."

I wished him luck.

At last Obulus came down from Rome and the day of our preliminary meeting arrived. In attendance were Obulus and I, and the legations of Greeks and Jews. Also present were scribes to record what was said and guards to keep order. To avoid any hint of favoritism, it was decided that the speakers would proceed alphabetically. Apion (*alpha*) would be followed by Isidorus (*iota*), by Lampon (*lambda*), and finally by Philo (*phi*). *Phi* said that he alone would speak for the Jewish legation.

The Jews sat in one row facing the Greeks who sat opposite them. The first to speak, Apion, left his seat to stand at one end of the aisle opposite Obulus and me, who sat rather royally at the other end. No sooner had *alpha* risen when *phi* began muttering to himself, sighing loudly, and crossing and uncrossing his legs. I wondered whether he'd collapse before we even got to *lambda*.

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“Let’s first define our terms,” began Apion the grammarian, a tall man with bright, dark eyes and clean-shaven cheeks. “The term ‘Jew’ didn’t come into use until five hundred years ago. Before that, those who now call themselves Jews were Egyptians. Is not Moses an Egyptian name?”

These unexpected words so surprised and tickled me that I had to clap a hand over my mouth and pretend to cough to keep my laughter to myself. I hardly dared glance toward the Jewish legation, so sure was I of their predictable ire.

Indeed, Philo was unable to contain himself. Before the guards could stop him he leapt to his feet. “Jews are not related to Egyptians,” he cried angrily. “We are not related to those wicked, worthless men whose souls are filled with the filth and venom of their native asps and crocodiles. We Jews are a people apart, the holy ones. We worship the one God – the Existent – not cats and crocodiles.”

There was now a pause while Obulus attempted to convince Philo he’d have his turn to speak when we reached *phi*. “Things are arranged,” he assured him, “to give you the last word.” Then he begged Apion to continue.

It was Apion’s contention that, contrary to the disgusting Passover charade celebrated by Jews each year, the “exodus” occurred when Pharaoh expelled one-hundred-ten-thousand leprous, lame, and blind Egyptians who were led away by an Egyptian named Moses.

“They traveled for six days, suffering from buboes in their groins,” Apion related. “On the seventh day they reached a land that today is known as Judaea. There they rested. It’s clear that they spoke the Egyptian language, for they called their day of rest the Sabbath. As any Egyptian child can tell you, that word in their language, *sabbatosis*, refers to the malady of buboes in the groin.”

Again I had to clap my hand over my mouth and pretend to cough. Again Philo leapt to his feet. “Those are entirely different words,” he cried as Obulus begged him to sit him down. “You’re only familiar with the word *sabbatosis*, Apion, because you yourself are Egyptian, not Greek. You may try to pretend, but everyone knows you were born in Oasis, Egypt, and later granted citizenship in Alexandria.”

How I wished the princeps were listening behind a curtain. He’d have loved this show.

Once Philo was seated, Apion began to describe what had happened after the Jews had rested on the seventh day.

“*All one hundred ten thousand still suffering from buboes?*” shouted Philo.

Apion ignored the outburst, continuing, “Moses climbed Mount Sinai where he remained concealed for forty days.”

“*And how, liar, did the hundred and ten thousand survive in the burning, waterless desert during those forty days?*”

Then Apion described how later the Jews had come from Syria, pushing their way into that part of Alexandria where waves of the wild sea dashed upon the shore, this being the most attractive part of the entire city.

“That land was given to us by the great Alexander,” cried Philo. *“Do you think we Jews seized and held it three centuries by force?”*

When Apion was done, Isidorus stood up. He argued that Philo was a Janus-faced hypocrite since his only interest in the troubles of the Alexandrian Jews was his fear he'd lose his posh residence in Alexandria. Philo, he went on, was a wealthy Jew from a wealthy Jewish family. His brother, who collected customs fees for the Roman authorities, was not only the wealthiest Hellenized Jew in the world, but probably the wealthiest man in Alexandria because he pocketed most of what he collected.

“Have you, Philo Judaeus,” demanded Isidorus, *“ever read your Bible in Hebrew? Have you ever undertaken a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at its Temple, that Temple to which your brother donated the gold to clad its doors? Has your brother ever visited Jerusalem to see the splendor of his gift?”*

At these words Philo squirmed and made no answer, seeming to admit that indeed he'd not read anything but the Septuagint, and that he and his brother had never been to Jerusalem in their lives.

“It's my opinion then,” continued Isidorus, *“that you, Philo, and your brother Alexander are Jews who prefer to pay to your god, not pray to him, and that your only interest in Alexandria is customs fraud and real estate.”*

Again Philo leapt to his feet. *“It was you Isidorus, and you, Apion and Lampon, who stirred up Flaccus and the Greek population against the Jews. You low-life, anti-Semitic demagogues bribed the populace, blackmailed and falsely accused Flaccus until you forced him to do your bidding. The Jews had suffered no evil under Governor Flaccus until you, Apion and Lampon, and you, Isidorus, raised a disorderly mob from the dregs of the city and organized it into an army to carry out atrocities and pogroms.”*

“Oh, the innocent Jews,” laughed Apion at this. *“What hypocrites you are, pretending to pity the Roman governor, as if you were not disloyal to Rome from your teeth to your toes. Look how the Jews treated Caesar in Jamnia, tearing down the rich altars built for his worship. You know well that every Jewish house in Alexandria – yours included – contains caches of weapons ready to use against Caesar.”*

I signaled Obulus to let Philo answer this charge of disloyalty, for I was curious to hear what he'd say. But Philo didn't rise to the bait, replying that he'd bide his time and prove the loyalty of the Jews when he spoke before Gaius Caesar, not waste any more of his breath on these venomous accusers. But then, unable all the same to leave the charge dangling, Philo said that in fact Capito had contrived the whole situation in Jamnia to discredit the Jews living there, and had written to Gaius exaggerating the en-

tire affair in order to enflame him against the Jewish populace.

“We’ll prove to Caesar how loyal to him we Jews are and have been,” added Philo, “nor will we return home before personally delivering this message, no matter how long Lord Gaius makes us wait.”

The meeting ended with *phi* summarizing the points he’d made, hurling words of invective at the Greeks, words unspoken as yet that day, causing them to laugh derisively and nudge each other with their elbows. Nor were the crocodiles spared his barbs, or the Egyptian asps.

So far, no one in either delegation had mentioned Caligula’s letter to Petronius concerning the Temple statue. This indicated that while today’s show was good, the best was yet to come – when Caligula himself would be present.

XXI

In the days following the meeting with the legations, I had occasion to speak privately and informally with Apion. This scholarly anti-Semite – historian, lecturer, and expert on Homer – perhaps felt it politic to be cordial to the emperor’s Jewish representative, and conversed easily with me on a range of topics. He assured me that he and his companions were amusing themselves during their long wait by attending the Roman and Campanian games, including the boxing matches.

“We saw Philo and his legation there too. Philo seemed particularly taken by the pancratiasts.”

“Really?” His words surprised me. “I thought religious Jews condemned those amusements.”

“Not Philo. To justify his presence at such events he embroiders his Biblical exegeses with the examples of human cruelty that he witnesses there. Likewise, he attends great banquets to remind himself of the horrors of excessive drink and gluttony, so that later he might condemn them. Have you read any of his exegetical works?”

“No.”

“Well, he *pretends* to be religious, but I’m not so sure. For instance, he explains the Hebrew Bible – which he admits he read in Greek – not as holy truth and divine revelation, but as allegory. For example, he explains the miracle of the plague of darkness as an eclipse of the sun, and circumcision as the cutting off of passions and ungodly thoughts. This use of allegory is very Greek, of course, very Sophist, very in the Stoic method. And then . . . by the way, Melchizedek, may I call you Mel?”

“Of course.”

“Well, Mel, Philo *did* make a journey to Jerusalem once.”

This surprised me. “Then why didn’t he say so?”

“Because for some reason he stopped, turned back, and never got

there. Normally he and his brother send their yearly Temple tax to Jerusalem with a commercial tax transporter, as do most Alexandrian Jews. Perhaps he was worried about bathing there, ritually or otherwise. No one has ever seen the man naked; some say this is because he's not circumcised. Or perhaps he once was, but somehow lost it. In that case it's possible he isn't even a Jew."

"Really? If a Jew loses his circumcision he's no longer a Jew?"

"That's something the rabbis love to debate. It seems the general consensus is no; if he can no longer prove his covenant with God, he's out of the faith. But even *with* a circumcision, if a Jew doesn't follow or believe in the Law of Moses, like Philo doesn't, he's broken his covenant."

How interesting! If what Apion said was true – and that was a very big "if" – perhaps I'd underestimated Philo. I might actually like the man.

Then Apion continued, "They say he talks a lot about some ascetic sect – similar to the Essenes at Qumran – who supposedly live at Mareotic Lake. There the men and women he calls Therapeutae and Therapeutrides feast on bread and water, contemplate the unutterable, and don't shit on the *Sabbatosis*. But I've never heard anyone say he'd actually seen the place. I surely haven't."

I couldn't help chuckling at the man's relentless anti-Semitism. Then his voice, which had been bitterly ironic, suddenly changed. "Have you been to the amphitheater here?" he asked pleasantly.

I hadn't, but his question gave me the opportunity to tell Apion about my last visit to one, when Caligula and I had witnessed the strange event involving Androcles and the lion.

Apion appeared moved by what I described and vowed to write the story down. "I have a sentimental side," he confessed. "Not everything I say and write praises Homer or denigrates Jews." He told me he might write the Androcles story while in Campania, depending on how long they were stuck there awaiting an audience. I told him I'd be interested in reading it.

"I'm sure the princeps will be back in Rome by the end of August for his birthday ovation," I said, "but probably not sooner. I saw him yesterday with Caesonia and Drusilla. They looked relaxed and happy."

"He's learned from his predecessor to avoid Rome as much as possible," nodded Apion. "Tiberius died in his later years, but Gaius Caesar is young. He'll live a long life only if he's very careful."

I noticed that Apion spoke not jokingly or ominously, but matter-of-factly. Given what was in store for him, it's clear he failed to follow his own advice.

XXII

Caligula returned to Rome in time for an ovation celebrating both his birthday and his victory over Gaetulicus and the other conspirators. It wasn't the Triumph originally planned to celebrate his conquest of Germany and Oceanus, but by then the trireme had arrived from Boulogne and he was able to shower the crowds with seashells mixed with gold and silver coins. There was much scrambling for prizes and it was said that the crunching of shells could be heard as far away as Baiae. From what I saw, the populace looked as satisfied as if Caligula's spoils had included red-haired, German-speaking Frenchmen.

While still in Campania, Caligula had received a letter from Petronius in reply to his. The Syrian governor said he'd asked several Jewish leaders to allow him to place the statue in the Temple, but they were adamantly opposed to the idea. Furthermore, they warned that if the plan was carried out, the Jewish people would refuse to harvest their autumn crops in protest. If the crops rotted in the fields, Petronius cautioned, it would cause famine and possibly precipitate a revolt throughout the land.

Caligula wrote back that he wanted the statue completed as soon as possible, transported to Jerusalem, and erected in the Temple. As he dictated his letter to me, the princeps was alternately frowning, smiling, and even laughing aloud.

"You *are* serious about this statue thing, aren't you?" I inquired a tad testily.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you really *do* intend forcing Petronius to carry out your commands, no?"

"Of course. That's what provincial governors are for. They carry out the cruel, capricious, self-serving whims commanded by their emperors. If I didn't follow through on this, what governor throughout the rest of time would hesitate to mock Caesar?"

"Good. I was afraid this was just another of your jokes."

Caligula laughed. "I think you're spending too much time with Apion," he chided. "Poor fellow; you might turn him into an anti-Semite." Then, when I looked away, refusing to react to his words, he added, "Mel, why don't you find yourself a nice Jewish girl and settle down?"

"I will, mother," I told him, "but I've some business to settle first."

King Agrippa arrived in Rome in late September, looking much older than when I'd last seen him. He told me that his hair had turned white when he heard the horrific news about the Temple statue. "My stupidities in Alexandria that precipitated the pogroms were nothing compared to this," he told me.

Agrippa said he was determined to make Caligula abandon his crazy plan. Thinking I too would be against the project, he confided to me that

Petronius was having the statue built in Sidon, but that the Syrian governor was doing everything possible to delay its completion in hopes that Caligula would change his mind.

“As you know,” Agrippa said, “the princeps and I have been close since we first met on Capri. I can appeal to him as a friend. To put this statue in the Temple would mean the destruction of the Jewish people. Have you any idea where Gaius got this idea?”

“It came to him when he got a letter from Capito telling how the Jews in Jamnia had torn down the altars to the imperial cult that the Greeks had put up. But Philo says Capito planned the whole thing and exaggerated the role of the Jews.”

Agrippa shook his head sadly. “I know what happened in Jamnia, and I’m sure no exaggeration was necessary. I hate to say it of my own – *our* – people, Mel, but we Jews are an angry, intolerant race. Nor should you think the Greeks alone were guilty of atrocities in Alexandria. Tell me, when will Philo’s audience with Gaius take place? Soon?”

“Not soon. Soon is a word never wasted by the princeps.”

“Still, I think he’ll listen to a friend concerned about the statue, especially if this friend wails, whines, and tears out his white hairs as I’m prepared to do. Or I may hold my breath until I turn blue and lose consciousness. The question is, why is he pursuing this now? Hasn’t he enough problems with all the conspiracies swirling around him? Heads will be rolling, I’m sure of that. Hopefully not his.”

“Nor ours. But maybe we should stop meeting this way or he’ll think we’re conspiring against him. If he does, the Temple statue may have the last laugh.”

“Don’t say that,” said Agrippa. “Some believe a laughing statue is an omen – a very bad omen.”

XXIII

I preferred not to be present – nor was I invited – when Agrippa discussed the Temple statue with Caligula, but I listened from behind a curtain. The king began by describing in detail, and with some obsequiousness, the history of his friendship with Gaius, then went on to praise the peace that had long existed between Rome and the Jews.

The mood and context set, he told the princeps that what had happened in Jamnia wasn’t typical at all. Jews in general were in total disagreement with the actions of the Jamnian Jews, just as they’d be devastated if their own Temple were desecrated. He pointed out that in the revolt following the introduction of a Temple statue, Agrippa’s own kingdom would be threatened. Indeed, the Roman army might have to crush Jewish insurrections throughout Palestine and all over the empire, even in Rome itself.

Agrippa rested his case and I waited eagerly to hear the princeps stand fast and turn down his plea. But, having listened with few interruptions to Agrippa's impassioned words, Caligula replied that if he *did* consent to do this favor for the Jews, they must do a favor for him in return. They must promise not to stop the establishment of the imperial cult in all areas *outside* Jerusalem. There must be no more "Jamnias."

Agrippa thanked Caligula and said he was hopeful the Jewish leaders would agree to his plan. I was called in to pen Caligula's letter to Petronius, while Agrippa listened thoughtfully. I personally felt, and probably he and Caligula did too, that there was little chance the Jewish leaders would accept this compromise. While Caligula's offer looked harmless enough on the surface, it opened the way for statues of Roman deities to be set up in Jewish synagogues in cities that were *not* Jerusalem.

As far as my own secret plans were concerned, I was optimistic. Forces were at play that one way or another would push Jews to insurrection. These small wars against Rome would grow and spread until Jerusalem itself was crushed by the Roman army – and on that day my prophecy would be fulfilled.

The remaining item on Caligula's calendar concerning the Jews was his meeting with the Alexandrian legations. Well briefed on the preliminary hearing chaired by Obulus and me, he wished to make his own encounter with them at least as entertaining as ours had been.

"We must give them a show," he said. "How shall I do it, Mel? Give me an idea."

"Well, princeps," I began, "tomorrow you're planning to inspect the renovations of your buildings at . . ."

"At my gardens!" he cried. "Of course. While these fellows blab on in my ear about the woes of life in Alexandria, I'll be able to go about my own business without wasting time. Mel, tell both legations to be at the Lamian Gardens tomorrow at the third hour. And tell the engineers and architects to open up all my sites for inspection. I'll get there as soon I can."

XXIV

The next day at the fifth hour Caligula received the legations on the ground floor of one of the buildings under renovation. The room was bare of furnishings and smelled of fresh construction, but the Greeks and Jews, deciding to ignore the slight, were ready to outdo one another in the subtle art of ingratiating.

First, the princeps addressed the Jewish legation. "You bow to me as if to a god," he told them, "as does the entire world. And yet you alone of all peoples refuse to say that I am a god."

His words stunned the Jews, but the Greeks applauded and nearly

danced with joy, praising Caligula with words usually reserved for deities.

Then Isidorus spoke. "O master," he said, "you would hate these Jews even more – and by 'these Jews' I refer not to just these few but to their entire race – if you knew the truth about their 'loyalty' to Caesar. For while the entire world offered sacrifices during your illness, and more sacrifices while you were away in the North, they alone refused to offer any at all."

"He lies!" cried the Jews indignantly.

"Lord Gaius," said Philo, "we've been falsely accused. Our people offered up entire hecatombs – *hecatombs* – and poured every drop of blood upon the altar. Nor did we carry home the flesh to cook and eat, but made burnt offerings of the entire carcasses of all those hundreds of cattle. We did this three times: once when you became emperor, once when you recovered from your terrible illness, and again for your victory over the Germans."

I could see Caligula was in his element, his responses almost visibly inventing themselves behind his eyes. "Even if this is true," he replied in a most cordial tone of voice, "tell me to which god you made your sacrifices? I doubt you made them to the divine me, and if not, then the sacrifices could not have been made for *my* sake, but for *yours*."

That said, Caligula signaled to the architects, then turned and hurried from the room, his staff and the two delegations scurrying after him. It was clear that the Greeks were as delighted with his words as the Jews were filled with foreboding.

Caligula then went from building to building, examining all the rooms on the ground floors as well as the apartments above, finding some defects, ordering changes, and suggesting alterations in the design. During this time the Jews were afraid to say one word in their defense, sensing that the judge had become their accuser, while the Greeks had a good time directing outrageous comments at them.

"You only desire citizenship," cried Isidorus, "so that you won't have to pay the provincial poll tax. Tell *that* to Caesar!"

Suddenly Caligula stopped and turned toward the Jewish legation, asking very solemnly, "I've always wondered, why don't you people eat pork?" This question was greeted by loud laughter and applause from the Greeks.

"Different nations have different laws," said one of the Jews. "There are people who don't eat lamb, which everyone knows is very tender."

"But which everyone knows tastes awful!" cried Caligula. "Anyone who doesn't eat lamb is right to avoid it." Then, suddenly changing his demeanor, he asked in quick, clipped tones, "Tell me the principles of justice that you would regard as fair concerning your civil status."

This was the opening the Jewish delegation had been waiting for, and Philo and the others hastened to reply. But no sooner had they started to

put forth their vision of justice for the Alexandrian Jews, than Caligula was off again. With architects, managers, attendants, bodyguards, and legations at his heels, he ran into the main building. After looking carefully all around he ordered that the windows be filled with transparent pebbles. These, he said, would keep out the heat and wind, but let in light.

Meanwhile, the Jews were trying to reconnect their discourse concerning justice. Suddenly Caligula stopped and turned toward them. “What are you trying to say?” he demanded.

At a loss as to how to put together their fragmented argument, the Jewish legation could only stare mutely at him.

I think that at this moment Caligula was moved to pity. “You’re not evil men,” he told them rather kindly. “You’re only foolish for not seeing that I’m filled with the nature of god.”

Then he dismissed them and commanded them to depart for their homes.

A few days later Obulus and I accompanied the Jewish legation to Ostia, where they and the Greeks were to sail to Alexandria on separate ships. “We’ve endured this treatment,” Philo told me, “because we were not interceding for ourselves but for the whole Jewish nation. What happens next is in the hands of God.”

I watched him move slowly up the gangplank, never dreaming that one day we’d meet again.

XXV

As autumn became winter, whisperings of conspiracy were everywhere. Accusations, some real, some fantastic, were all investigated by Caligula. Julius Canus, one of the many Stoic philosophers in opposition to all monarchs, whom they considered unenlightened, was tried by the senate at Caligula’s request, convicted of conspiracy, and executed. Other Stoic philosophers suspected of promoting civil disobedience – Rectus and Julius Graecinus – were linked to the same conspiracy and also killed.

Caligula’s investigations uncovered plots by senators too. He fought them by playing one against the other, resulting in Proculus being hacked to death by a number of senators on the senate floor. Sycophancy was rife as the politicians attempted to preserve their lives by distancing themselves from any possible plotters, but scheming was rife among them too.

Callistus, the princeps’ wealthy and influential freedman, was named as a conspirator, as were the two prefects of the Guard. But the informant made a mistake when he named Caesonia and me. Of course Caligula knew better, so the accuser was discredited, which saved from suspicion the others he’d named.

Caligula’s flagrant sense of humor played against him now as it often

had before. It inspired those who didn't know him well, or who needed a weapon against him, to circulate his jocular, offhand remarks, making him appear not just insensitive, but irrational and cruel. Still, it was true that his humiliating barbs often caused pain and anger, while the greatest humiliation in his quiver was forced suicide.

One tribune of the Praetorian Guard, Cassius Chaerea, formerly a tough and fearless soldier who had courageously stood up against a mutiny of the Lower German armies under Germanicus, was particularly angered by Caligula's joking. The man, now in middle age, was still a tribune and a brute in every way except one: he had a voice as high and sweet as a girl's. Caligula loved to remind him of this. Each day at the eighth hour, when Chaerea asked for the new watchword, Caligula would give him words of sexual innuendo, humiliating him in front of his comrades. Aside from such insults, Chaerea was annoyed at being criticized by Caligula and others for laxity in his job of collecting a highly unpopular new tax.

Despite the ominous mood of the day, Caligula planned for the future. "When the sailing season returns in the spring," he told me, "I'll go to Alexandria and see about this question of Jewish rights. If they behave themselves as they did under the Ptolemies, there should be no need for this endless cycle of rebellion and repression." Then he paused and looked at me. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you that."

"You think I'll join the conspirators and plant a dagger in your back?"

He frowned. "Joke all you want, but remember that if the day ever comes, it's not just me they'll kill; Caesonia and Drusilla will be next."

"Princes," I said, "you know I'd not hesitate to protect all of you with my life. I can't even imagine life without the three of you."

Caligula sighed. "Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this now, but I've put a house next to my gardens on the Esquiline in your name, and have made a gift to you of ten million *sesterces*. I didn't bequeath them to you, for I can't count on any will I leave being honored. You may claim them at any time, but I hope you'll remain in my household at least until spring. If not, you're a dead man."

We both laughed. I was somehow able to comprehend his joke, but not his fateful words about his will, or his incredibly generous gifts. "Of course I'll stay," I assured him. But surely both of us were wondering whether the princes would survive this winter's burgeoning storms of senatorial and military discontent. The people loved him still, but the vision of what had happened to the first Caesar, and the more recent sight of Proculus lying stabbed to death on the senate floor, were often in our minds.

"Shall I show my gratitude by prostrating myself," I asked.

"I've seen enough bowing and scraping," he told me. "Just promise to sacrifice a hecatomb to the divine me every 31 August for the rest of your life."

“Is that what the ten million is for?”

“No. It’s for the 300-ton, 82-foot-high laughing statue of me dressed as Venus that you’ll put in your garden on the Esquiline. Deal?”

“Deal,” I said, “as long as you don’t insist I wear a toga at your funeral.”

The two of us chuckled, but the times were not auspicious and our laughter rang hollow.

XXVI [24 January, 41 CE]

The senators made provisions to insure Caligula’s safety. With the bloody death of Proculus still fresh in their minds, they allowed the princeps to bring his German bodyguards to senate meetings and stand surrounded by them on a special platform.

But even with the senate a zone of safety, I worried about more crowded venues. The temporary theater erected for the celebration of the Palatine Games was one of these. Caligula began the festival by sacrificing a flamingo to Augustus, after which the imperial party entered the theater. Inside were no reserved seats, resulting in a confusion of classes and sexes. Caligula was in his element, but it posed challenges for those charged with overseeing his safety.

During the few days the plays were staged it was the princeps’ custom to leave his seat at noon and return to the palace for lunch and bathing before the afternoon performances. But on the last day, 24 January, much food and drink had been brought into the theater by his friends, so Caligula had no need to leave for lunch and decided to postpone his bath. The play that day was “Cinyras.” This same piece had been performed at the games when Philip of Macedon was assassinated – a bad omen.

Caligula didn’t leave the theater until the seventh hour, an hour before the changing of the Praetorian Guard. This was when Chaerea would ask him for the watchword of the day.

As he climbed into his litter I couldn’t help saying, “Princeps, beware of pushing Chaerea too far. The man can’t stand many more insults without breaking.”

“A brute that strong won’t break on a word,” he told me. Then, bending down, he whispered in my ear, “The watchword of the day is ‘cunt.’ Let him tell *that* to his buddies.” And he roared with laughter.

The imperial party, including Claudius and other family members and friends, as well as myself, went ahead to lead the way. In a narrow corridor between the theater and the palace Caligula planned to visit with a group of Asian dancers who had come to be part of the day’s events. Behind his litter the crowds were held back, but this also held back his guards. I don’t know whom Caligula was following or how his litter bear-

ers happened to take one corridor and his bodyguards another.

It was then that Chaerea appeared and asked Caligula for the watchword. A moment later, when the tribune's dagger stabbed into the princeps' neck, the only ones near enough to resist the assassins were the litter bearers, who struck at them with their poles. By the time his bodyguards rushed upon the scene, Caligula had been stabbed many times and several of the conspirators had fled. The Batavians were able to find and kill only a few of the bloodied participants, and some innocents.

When I heard the commotion and shouting, I realized immediately what had happened. There wasn't a moment to lose. With my German guard forcing a path for me, I ran to the palace. Too late; moments before, a tribune had run Caesonia through with his sword and Drusilla's brains had been dashed out against a wall. Recoiling from these horrors I started to flee, when I saw a familiar figure run into an alcove. Claudius! Did he fear for his life? I started toward the curtained doorway when a Praetorian came through looking right and left, perhaps seeking plunder. Pulling aside the curtain he looked inside.

"Princeps!" I heard him cry as he went in.

Princeps? Had I been hallucinating? In my confusion had I mistaken Gaius for his uncle? Unable to move or breathe, hoping against hope that Caligula was still alive, I watched the alcove entrance. A moment later Claudius and the Praetorian came out. It was indeed the uncle, not the nephew. But if I was amazed before, I was stunned now. For just then other Praetorians arrived and as they led Claudius away they spoke to him in deferential tones, calling him imperator. *And this before Caligula was laid in his grave!*

I fled the palace, not knowing where to go. Outside was an unruly, hysterical crowd. The body of Caligula was being borne away and next to his chariot rode Agrippa. I made my way through the crowd to get as close to him as I could. "They murdered Caesonia and Drusilla too," I shouted.

"Bring them to the Lamian Gardens," he called back, and signaled some soldiers to aid me in the task.

Later that afternoon on the Esquiline, the mangled bodies of Caligula, his wife, and his daughter were hastily cremated and their remains laid to temporary rest beneath a blanket of sod. It was here that Caligula's sisters, upon their release from exile, would find their brother's remains, have them exhumed, and given a proper burial.

Besides Agrippa and myself, the mourners that day were mostly humble people, artisans and shopkeepers. All appeared deeply moved. The nobility who showed up – a few senators and others who had or had not been involved in conspiracies – went through the motions of grieving. Any feelings of elation that a return to a Republican form of government was now within their grasp, they kept to themselves.

The Praetorians had taken Claudius to their barracks at the *Porta*

Viminalis, and it was there that Agrippa and I headed next, riding in his royal carriage. “Mel,” he said, “Claudius seems slow, but his mind isn’t slow, only his body. No one takes him seriously, but perhaps he felt safer considered a fool than a conspirator. I sense he has talent for governance and that his accession will help the Jews as much as Caligula tried to hurt them.”

We arrived at the camp to find that the Praetorians had already acclaimed Claudius emperor. Agrippa saw at once that with the Guard on his side, Claudius had the necessary power to become emperor and any dream the senate had to restore the Republic was just that, a dream. He also realized that for the accession to go smoothly, a mediator would be needed between Claudius and the senate. “I have to speak with Claudius,” Agrippa told me.

“Will you need a scribe to record what’s said?”

“Have you something to write on?”

“Always.” And so I accompanied the king to his first mediation.

Claudius told Agrippa he’d hidden himself out of fear that he, too, was marked for assassination. He also said he was surprised to be hailed imperator by the Guard. Later, however, it was rumored that Claudius, not unaware of the assassination plot, had at least looked the other way. Agrippa, cognizant of what Claudius could do for him as well as for the Jewish people, counseled him to keep a stiff spine and accept the support of the Guard. It didn’t take much persuasion.

After leaving the camp, Agrippa and I went to a place where a number of senators were meeting informally to discuss the happenings of the day. Some feared that the reason Chaerea and the other officers of the Guard were still alive and unpunished was that Claudius planned to have them massacre the entire senate. These senators were anxious to hail Claudius as imperator right away, so as not to bring his ire down on them. Others wanted to oppose his accession by any means.

Agrippa told them he would help Claudius find a way to execute the assassins without endangering himself, but he saw no way that the senate could oppose the accession. He arranged that the next day the senators would meet with Claudius in the Forum. He didn’t tell them that Claudius, wary of conspiracies, had no intention of entering the senate for some time to come, and that when he did he’d be surrounded by guards.

“It’s a new world,” Agrippa said to me as we left. “Whatever our feelings, we must stand on the side of history.” Then he paused. “Do you have a safe place to sleep tonight?”

I told him that Caligula had given me a house on the Esquiline next to the Lamian Gardens. “It’s not furnished yet, but I’ll surely find some straw to sleep on. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Don’t sleep *too* soundly,” he warned. “As you just heard, the senate will be in session tomorrow before dawn. The Praetorians will be there

too, as shall I, and I'd appreciate your help."

We parted and I went to the house I could now call home. Arriving there I was amazed to find how much had changed since my last inspection. The inside was completely furnished, down to the marble mosaics on the floors. There were transparent pebbles in some windows, art treasures standing about, and tapestries on the walls. A staff of servants was busy preparing dinner, which included a roasted calf. I learned that all this was to have been a surprise for me, a kind of house warming. Caligula himself had arranged it, for he'd planned to dine there that night with the imperial party and no one had countermanded his orders.

But could anyone have an appetite after what had occurred? The roasting meat itself was a perverse reminder of the cremations I'd witnessed just hours before. The servants looked no happier than I felt. I told them that they could eat what they wished and give away the rest to friends and relatives. Suddenly it struck me that *these were my own slaves!* So, for the first time in my life I handed around money – a hundred-*sesterce* gold piece to every one of them.

Then, wanting to be by myself, I went upstairs to find an apartment where I'd be quiet and alone. In such a large house this wasn't difficult. I found a room with a bath and soon was in warm water up to my chin, my eyes closed. It reminded me of the time after Nolia's death when I'd soak for hours in the public baths, warming my very soul as if held in the arms of my mother. So much had changed since then. Now they were *my* baths in *my* house with *my* attendants ready to dry me with towels when I emerged, rub my body with oil, and bring me fresh garments.

And one thing more had changed: the phantom warmth surrounding me, and nurturing my soul, was Sarah.

Part IV

INTO THE MILLENNIUM

I [25 January, 41 CE]

I awoke the next morning with my mind in a muddle. How my world had changed! The world inside me – my empirical world – *that* hadn't changed. But the surrounding *imperial* world, through which I was perceived as a man, had changed a lot.

In the hours following Caligula's death I had no more idea of my location in the new scheme of things than might a chip of wood afloat on a sea. My first reaction was sorrow for a man who'd been good to me. My second was a kind of personal despair that Caligula's death had mooted his plans for the Temple statue; prophetically speaking, I was back at square one.

Then something auspicious happened. Agrippa told me he'd be leaving for his kingdom as soon as the sailing season began, but first would recommend me to the emperor.

"Sulpicius Flavius, who worked with Claudius on his histories of Carthage and the Etruscans, will certainly keep his job as secretary," he told me, "but there's always a need for an honest Jew at Court."

"Won't my friendship with Caligula be held against me?"

"Not necessarily. Claudius has no reason to fear you, and Caligula was his nephew, after all. Besides, being on good terms with the new emperor will assure that you don't lose the property Gaius gave you."

I thanked Agrippa without even knowing whether I *wanted* a place at Court, much less the role of wealthy Roman citizen so recently thrust upon me. Still, aligning myself with the new emperor might prove advantageous in ways more meaningful to me.

The morning of 25 January I accompanied Agrippa as he went back and forth between Claudius, who'd spent the night safely at the barracks, and the senate. Agrippa worked ceaselessly, mediating, persuading the senators to abandon their opposition to the succession which anyone could

see was a done deal. At the same time he was busy persuading the Praetorians to protect Claudius from assassination by conspirators higher in the command. Finally, the Guard agreed to demonstrate their good intentions toward the senators by putting to death Chaerea and some lower-level conspirators. In return, the senators wouldn't insist that they also kill the higher-up officials implicated in the assassination.

Claudius, who had indeed seriously considered sending the Praetorians to massacre the senate, relented. Persuaded by Agrippa, he even went so far as to amnesty any and all senators who might have been involved in any conspiracies against Caligula, including the events of 24 January.

In the end, with fears and feelings assuaged on all sides, the senate confirmed Claudius emperor. To thank the Praetorians, Claudius distributed bonuses of 20,000 *sesterces* to each man. To honor them, he had gold and silver coins struck, one picturing the barracks door with a military standard in front of it.

Agrippa could also expect to receive an ample reward for his services to the new emperor. Thinking this might help his people, he decided not to return to his kingdom right away. By remaining in Rome, he also hoped to help Claudius settle the question of the Alexandrian Jews and other Jews of the empire, an effort in which he expected me to play a role.

So, very suddenly, and not completely by Chance, this chip of wood found itself riding the crest of a great wave rushing across history toward the future.

II

The ten million *sesterces* Caligula had given me came in the form of interest on loans of that amount, which bankers meted out to me. It provided a comfortable income. At auction I was able to purchase the late princeps' favorite horse, Incitatus, which he'd earlier retired from racing, and took this spirited animal for my personal use. Also at auction I acquired Crocchus's victory wreaths. What a pity, I thought, that Caligula himself hadn't been there to bid against me; he'd so loved an auction.

While I now possessed the means and trappings of wealth and influence, I had no intention of engaging in politics. I'd have no retinue of clients waiting in my courtyard each morning, or clearing the way as I went to the public baths (for anyway I preferred to bathe non-politically at home), or following me about in dirty togas while begging favors. My life wouldn't be a social one. I'd divide my energies between two endeavors: fulfilling my promise to Sarah, and – a new project I'd been considering – writing a History of the time in which I lived.

Meanwhile, it was clear that King Agrippa was still very concerned with the fate of the Jews in cities throughout the empire. In Alexandria

and other eastern cities, Jews were in constant conflict with the Greeks.

“Why don’t you suggest to Claudius that he invite the legations to return to Rome and plead their causes before him?” I asked Agrippa one day.

The idea appealed to him. “They wouldn’t be obliged to make the journey in winter this time,” he smiled, “or be forced to cool their heels while the emperor gathered seashells at Boulogne and sunbathed in Campania.” After thinking a moment, he exclaimed, “I’ll do it!”

Three weeks after Claudius’s accession, his third wife, Valeria Messalina, whom he’d married when she was fourteen, gave birth to a son, Tiberius Claudius Caesar Germanicus, later named Britannicus. Messalina was determined that young Britannicus would eventually become his father’s successor.

During this time, Caligula’s sister Livilla had returned from exile. Messalina, fearing that Livilla’s restored husband, old Marcus Vinicius, had some claim to the succession himself, convinced Claudius that his niece was a threat to both of them. So Claudius exiled Livilla to Pandateria, where later he ordered her execution, and exiled her lover, the Stoic philosopher Seneca, to Corsica.

Despite involvement in heavy palace intrigue, and much rolling of heads as his new principate sorted itself out, Claudius eagerly took Agrippa’s suggestion to invite the Alexandrians to return in the spring. That is, he invited the Greek delegation including Apion, Isidorus, and Lampon. They came readily, feeling they’d have at least as much success with Claudius as they’d had with Caligula. In this they erred, for Claudius had his own plans in their regard.

The imperial audience took place in the Servilian Gardens on the first day of May. In attendance, along with King Agrippa, the emperor’s wife Messalina, and me (taking notes for the king), was Caligula’s sister Agrippina, who’d also recently returned from exile. Also present were twenty senators, sixteen men of consular rank, and several women of the Court.

The mood was far different from when Caligula had met this delegation the previous year. From the beginning it was clear that Claudius already blamed Isidorus for causing the deaths of two of his friends. One of these was Naevius, who’d earlier been prefect of Egypt and prefect of the Praetorian Guard. As a result, the imperial “audience” quickly became a trial, and the three citizens of Alexandria found themselves making their arguments with little expectation of returning home alive.

The Greeks were led by Isidorus who, when asked his age, said he was fifty-six. Besides Isidorus, Lampon, and Apion was another Greek leader, C. Julius Dionysius, plus a friend of both Claudius and Isidorus named Tiberius Claudius Balbillus. Balbillus was not, however, any friend of the Jewish king.

King Agrippa, the first to speak, brought the first charges against the

Greeks. These concerned the heavy poll tax put upon Jews, the refusal to grant Jews Alexandrian citizenship, and their cruel treatment by the Greeks. Although Philo had voiced these same concerns to Caligula, the difference now was that the accusations were being made by a king, heard by a different imperial ear, and witnessed by a weightier audience than architects, stone masons and plasterers.

Then Balbillus, a military man and government official in Alexandria, spoke against the Jewish demands and in defense of Isidorus and the Greeks. To this Isidorus responded: “My Lord Augustus, listen to this man. Balbillus speaks very well in regard to your interests. But you, King Agrippa, here’s what *I* have to say concerning your statements: I, Isidorus, accuse the Jews of attempting to stir up the entire world. I don’t speak of any individual Jew or group of Jews, but of the entire mass of them, whether they live in Alexandria or Palestine. Jews don’t have the same temperament as the Alexandrians. No, Jews are nothing like Greeks, but they’re very similar to Egyptians. This means that they’re on the same level as those others who pay the poll tax of Alexandria, and should also therefore pay it.”

To which Agrippa replied angrily but earnestly, “Egyptians have taxes levied on them by their rulers; that’s the way it’s always done. But no state has levied taxes on the Jews, so why should they be forced to pay any?”

His words enraged Balbillus. “Look to what extremes of insolence Agrippa’s belief in his Jewish god has brought him!” he cried. “What has religion to do with the rights and needs of the state? Let the Alexandrian Jews pay their Temple tax to Caesar, for they live on Caesar’s land and should worship him and pay taxes to him, not worship and pay taxes to some foreign god.”

Then Isidorus spoke. “My Lord Caesar,” he began, “I beg you to hear what I have to say concerning the sufferings of my native city.”

Claudius agreed to listen, only warning Isidorus to make no false accusations against his friend King Agrippa. “Your calumnies have already killed many of my friends,” he told him, “including Theon the exegete and Naevius. You’ll speak against another of my friends at your peril.”

At this Lampon turned toward Isidorus with a grin, saying in a low voice, “Tell the idiot you’ve looked upon death before and never flinched.”

Claudius, who didn’t hear the remark but caught the grin, now said, “Say nothing, Lampon. You yourself are responsible for so many deaths by manipulating the public records that men call you the ‘pen-slayer’.” Then Claudius repeated in harsher tones, “Isidorus, answer to me: By your lies and false accusations you have caused the deaths of many of my friends.”

To which Isidorus replied with a smirk and a shrug, “I was just following the orders of the emperor of the day. Tell me, Lord Caesar, whom

you'd like me to denounce, and I'll happily obey. Meanwhile, I'm sure you're interested in learning of one who *right now, this very moment*, endangers the state with his treasonable acts.

"If you'd like to know who it is, I'll denounce him to you. For why shouldn't I denounce a man who aids and abets the criminal and subversive behavior of the Alexandrian Jews? These Jews right now are amassing and storing great caches of weapons in their homes. They invite their brethren from the farthest corners of Egypt and Syria to join them in attacking the Greek majority.

"Does not such insurrection alarm you, Lord Caesar? It should. I wonder if you currently have in your laws the charge of *maiestas*, or is the charge of treason too formidable a weapon to use against a conniving, good-for-nothing Jew like Agrippa?"

These words naturally infuriated Claudius who cried out, "How dare you speak such calumny against my good friend, you . . . you *son of an actress!*"

At this, Isidorus laughed aloud. "I'm no son of any actress ever born," he chuckled, sending an amused glance toward Lampon, "but I've heard it said that you . . . *you* Lord Caesar, are the bastard son of the Jewess Salome!"

Hearing this, Claudius announced that no charges need be filed against the two since they were not Roman citizens, and that their execution could take place immediately. Then, with the assent of all gathered there, he called out, "Executioner!" That man came immediately and Isidorus and Lampon, still laughing and smirking, were led away.

Apion's trial was held after lunch and it was clear that Claudius already knew what its outcome would be and was watching for any opening. One came when Apion spoke concerning payments for shipments of grain that were later sold in Rome at four times the original price, this being necessary, so the sellers said, in order that they might recover their expenses.

"And who profits from this?" inquired Claudius.

"You do," replied Apion.

"Are you sure?"

"No," said Apion, "but that's what I've heard."

"Then," said the emperor, "you admit to spreading this story without being certain it's true? Executioner!"

As Apion was being led away, he saw Dionysius looking on silently. "Have you no protest to make, my friend," Apion said, "seeing me led away to execution?"

To which Dionysius replied, "To whom can I protest if there's no one to speak to? Go bravely to your death, my boy, and don't be unhappy; you'll have the glory of a martyr's death because you're dying for your beloved native city."

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Then Apion noticed me busy scribbling. “Mel,” he said, “I know you stand on the side of Claudius and Agrippa and the Jews of Alexandria, but in your report I ask you to say that I went to my death gladly and honorably. I request this of you, for there’s none other to whom I can speak.”

I nodded, promising in that way to write down everything exactly as it had happened.

Claudius then called out to Apion to return. “If you wish to speak, then speak. But I warn you to be careful, for I’m sure you know to *whom* you speak.”

“Yes,” replied Apion. “I speak to a tyrant.”

“No. You speak to an emperor.”

“You? An emperor? No, no. The man you call your father, the divine Mark Anthony, was fit to have been emperor. Anthony was a philosopher, he was not greedy, and he was a good man. But you are the *anti*-Anthony, his exact opposite; you are rapacious and vulgar!”

Hearing this, Claudius ordered that Apion be taken immediately to his execution, but as he was being led away again, the Greek said, “Grant me one last request, Lord Caesar.”

“What is it?”

“Grant that I may be executed in my noble insignia.”

“Granted.”

Apion then tied his headband on his head and put his white shoes on his feet. I followed as he was led away. When he reached the city streets he cried out, “Come, Romans, come see something never seen before: an Alexandrian gymnasiarch and ambassador led to execution!”

It was an hour of the day when many were going about their affairs. Soon a crowd of curious spectators surrounded the prisoner and the execution party. Some began protesting loudly that a nobleman like Apion, who’d been charged with no crime, was being cruelly murdered. Word was sent back to Claudius that Romans were complaining, and immediately the emperor sent a message to have Apion returned to his presence.

Apion entered looking haughty and displeased, crying, “Who is it this time that has called me back just as I was about to greet Death and meet again those who went before me, my good friends, Isidorus and Lampon. Was it the senate? Or was it *you*, brigand-in-chief?”

At this Claudius replied, as if weary but infinitely patient, “Apion, I’m accustomed to dealing with those who rave nonsense and have lost all sense of shame. You may speak, but for only as long as I permit you to.”

“Well, I’m neither mad, nor have I lost any sense of shame. I appeal to you on behalf of my rank and privileges.”

“How so?”

“As a man of noble rank and a gymnasiarch.”

“You are not a gymnasiarch, nor are you of noble rank,” said Claudius.

“There’s no way for you to know,” replied Apion, “because in matters

of nobility and gymnasiarchs, *it takes one to know one.*”

Just as he said this, Apion’s eyes happened to meet mine. “Mel,” he called in a loud whisper, “I wrote the tale of Androcles. It’s now a part of history!”

Turning back to the emperor, Apion continued, “Lord Caesar, since you’re really not informed on these matters, despite that you pretend to be a true descendent of Anthony and something of a historian, let me, a bona fide nobleman, scholar, *and* historian, tell you how it was. To begin with, Caesar saved Cleopatra . . . “

It was then that Claudius, perhaps hoping to avoid boredom even more than to silence the affront, called again for the executioner, who this time successfully escorted Apion to his death.

III

The heroic deaths at Rome of the three Alexandrians gave them the status of martyrs back home and did nothing to cool the conflict in that city. Indeed, it emboldened the Greek faction to demand that a municipal senate be established to deal with Greek affairs, something they’d never possessed before under Roman rule. At the same time the Jews, feeling Rome was firmly on their side, again demanded Alexandrian citizenship.

Claudius replied to these demands in a letter composed with Agrippa’s help. In it he sternly reprimanded both sides for their “ruinous and obstinate mutual enmity,” and told the Alexandrian Greeks to be tolerant and kindly toward the Jews living in that city. As for the Jews, he advised them not to demand more than they’d had before, not to intrude themselves into the games and gymnasiarchies of those in whose city they enjoyed many advantages, and not to bring in foreign Jews to fight in their cause. He added that unless the Jews obeyed these restrictions he’d take action against them as against a plague spreading out to infect the world. Agrippa argued against the offensive wording of this last point, but allowed it to stand when the alternative offered by Claudius was even more disagreeable.

Next, Claudius sent an edict to all the Jewish communities in the empire telling them to respect the gods of others as they’d wish their own to be respected, and to live in mutual tolerance and forbearance with their neighbors.

The effect of these communications was like oil spread on agitated waters: a kind of Greco/Judaean *pax*. To show his pleasure, and as a sign of good will to the Alexandrians, Claudius asked his friend Balbillus to carry east with him a superb copy, totaling thirty scrolls, of his histories of Carthage and the Etruscans. These would be donated on the emperor’s behalf to the library at Alexandria – where, he announced, Balbillus would hence-

forth be the Director – and read aloud in their entirety once each year as a sign of friendship and mutual interest in scholarship.

Then, to reward Agrippa for his many efforts, Claudius not only reaffirmed him king, but added Judaea and Samaria to his kingdom. Agrippa I would thus rule an even larger domain than had his grandfather Herod the Great, and Palestine would cease to be a Roman province.

That done, and with C. Julius Melius standing by in a toga, Claudius Caesar solemnized a treaty with King Agrippa in the Forum.

IV

It was a new world, a new empire. Again. Again a new emperor was carving and hacking a road through a rough wood where senators and others pressed on all sides like evil growths, and assassins hid among the trees. Then, as feasting and a Praetorian parade transformed the solemn affair of state into a general celebration, I turned and saw a familiar face.

“Lucia!” I cried, stepping forward so fast that I tread on my toga and nearly tripped. “How beautiful you are. You haven’t changed at all.”

And so she hadn’t, for while time, wind, and emotion had not ceased to etch their subtle hieroglyphics on her skin, they hadn’t erased her beauty.

She chuckled at my compliment. “Your own perceptions have matured,” she told me, “and mine too, so we appear to each other as unchanged.”

Her wisdom astounded me. Had Plato ever thought of that? Had it crossed the mind of Ovid? Taking her in my arms I enfolded her in my toga. Urges filled my body that I hadn’t felt in a long time. “Let’s leave here,” I said. “Come home with me.” She nodded, telling me with that simple sign that she was still free in both her life and spirit, and still my good friend.

We rode to my house in her carriage. When she saw my residence I couldn’t tell if she was more impressed or amused by my new status. Neither she nor I had ever put on airs, so my “good fortune” could only be regarded by both of us as some ridiculous satire contrived by Chance.

“The arena cleaner *chez lui*,” I said grandly, and we giggled like children. Worlds, years, seemed to drop away.

Inside my walls, beneath my roof, we bathed together, each waited upon by our own personal slaves, all of us trying to keep straight faces. Then, dismissing them, we dined unaided, talking late into the evening. I told her of my love for Sarah and my friendship with Caligula. She told me of her years at Delphi and the unexpected return of her properties. This last had brought her back to Rome where she’d put one of her freedmen in charge of her lands.

That night we lay in each other's arms, weeping and laughing, and found a kind of relief in one another. It was a relief not of the kind called "true love," but a timely and much needed bodily climax.

Over breakfast the next morning I introduced Lucia to my new literary pursuit. "My plan is to write a History," I told her. "The first part will be about the time of Tiberius."

Lucia was thrilled. "Oh, Mel," she cried, "let me be your muse. That time is so clear in my memory. I'm sure I can add something to your story."

"Of course. You'll be especially helpful on the subject of prophecy."

"*Prophecy!*"

The contempt in her voice surprised me. "Don't you practice prophecy any more?"

"Mel," she sighed, "Prophecies aren't worth the parchment they're written on or the breath to utter them. Prophecy doesn't exist *just like that*. The ones that go beyond mere hunches – and I include miracles here too – exist only where there are gods. But there *are* no gods. Do you follow me?"

"I do," I grinned. "Apparently life has made you a complete atheist too."

"Exactly right."

"The book I'm planning will be *built* on prophecy," I told her. Finished eating, we walked around my gardens while I told her about the death of Sarah and the vow I made concerning the Temple. "Writing my History will inform and concentrate my mind, helping me persevere until the day I make my prophecy come true."

"All this to avenge your darling's death?" Her eyes probed mine. "Killing her father wasn't revenge enough?"

"No, but don't ask me why. There's a lot inside me that lies in shadow. I've not yet achieved the Delphic command to know myself, but writing the book should help."

"Mel," Lucia said, "I can't tell you how many times I pondered those two words during my years in Delphi. I thought if I could just solve the riddle of *Gnothi Seauton* I'd be able to solve the riddle of prophecy. Finally I decided that both prophecy *and* the Delphic commandment were shams – nothing more than nonsense thought up by philosophers and mystics to keep the rest of us from getting on with our lives."

Then, before I could even begin to comprehend what she'd meant by that, Lucia said very matter-of-factly, "Does your friend Agrippa know you seek to destroy the most precious jewel in his crown?"

It was only as she said this that the truth dawned: now that Palestine was no longer a Roman province, my tactics would have to change. It was one thing to foment insurgency against a Roman occupation, quite another to incite the Jews to rebel against a Jewish king.

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But – and here was my one hope – like his grandfather Herod, Agrippa was a Hellenized Jew. Hadn't Jerusalem resisted Herod's Hellenism, protesting what they perceived to be his collaboration with pagan Rome? And hadn't Augustus taken back Judaea from Herod's heirs thirty-five years ago, to make it once more a Roman province? Therefore, could I not hope for history to repeat itself in my lifetime?

When I didn't answer her right away, Lucia continued, "Mel, if the Jewish Temple is destroyed, many innocents will suffer – many Sarahs, many Mels. But," she added, "I'll say nothing more about it on one condition."

"Which is?"

"I'd like to think my time at Delphi wasn't a complete waste. In your book would you please allow Lucia to make some Delphic prophecies?"

I told her that I wouldn't allow any lame or dangling prophecies. "Have they been fulfilled?"

"Absolutely. They concern our friend Paul of Tars and what he's been up to lately."

"Then no problem. My own Temple prophecy isn't fulfilled yet," I admitted, "but it will be, and I'll gladly let Jesus take credit for it. As the great Terence once said, 'I don't care a straw.'"

V

I began making notes for my History. One was a list of those matters that seemed to obsess Roman emperors: assassination, succession, marriage with fertile women, the selection of exile islands, and the conquest of Britain. On these subjects Claudius was as absorbed as Caligula had been, and with far weightier results.

The distaste Lucia had for life in Rome kept her at her country villa, where I often visited her. I was astonished to learn that the freedman she'd put in charge of managing her properties was none other than Ari, whom she'd bought at a slave auction a year earlier. Of course we were delighted to meet again, and share stories about our days as slaves.

"By the way, I think you may still owe me one," I cautioned him, laughing.

"Maybe I do," he replied, "but who's counting?"

Another day, while visiting a Roman tavern, I was approached by someone I took at first for a stranger. In fact it was Pontius Pilate sporting a bald pate and a gray beard.

"I'm delighted to see you're alive," I told him, "and in Rome, not Pandateria."

We could still joke as before, but it was clear that underneath his laughter the man was as lonely and fearful as the last time I'd seen him. I

insisted that the next day he join me on a visit to my friends in the countryside, and he instantly agreed.

Lucia's villa soon became a meeting place for the three of us, with Ari making a fourth. There we could speak freely on politics, religion, empire, or anything else, without concern that our opinions would be heard in the world beyond. So every few days I'd set aside my pen and ride Incitatus out to Lucia's villa to share a meal and some good conversation.

At one such meeting of what Lucia labeled our "country coterie," I asked the others whether they thought King Agrippa would rule Judaea more successfully than Rome had.

Pontius Pilate was sure he would. "If Jews are governable, it would take one to govern them."

Ari didn't agree. "Herod Agrippa isn't Jew enough to please the Judaeans," he told us. "He's as Hellenized as his grandfather. The Zealots won't stand for a whiff of idolatry, be it Greek or Roman. The day Agrippa has a coin struck with his image on it, Jerusalem will explode."

"I was always very careful with the coinage," Pilate said, "less so with medallions on the standards." And he chuckled, not altogether ruefully.

"Agrippa will be careful too," said Ari, "for a while, but his vanity will eventually get the better of him. He'd do well to watch his step until his son's old enough to succeed him. I give him three, maybe four years before everything falls apart and Judaea reverts back to being a Roman province."

His words intrigued Lucia. "Is that a prophecy?" she asked.

"I'd call it a premonition," replied Ari.

My moments of intimacy with Lucia had made me jealous of her, but at the same time I knew that friendship and desire are no substitute for love. So when I saw an interest of that sort had been kindled between her and Pontius Pilate, I tamped down my own feelings. We never spoke of it when he took up residence in her villa.

As spring became summer I received a message from Agrippa asking me to travel to Jerusalem with him on an imperial trireme, one of Caligula's ships that Claudius had loaned him. The idea intrigued me. Why *not* get out of Rome for a while? No one would miss me. Claudius was busy planning an invasion of Britain. I wished him well, but wanted no part of it – been there, done that – nor was I offered any.

When I announced my Jerusalem trip to the coterie it brought an unexpected reaction: they all wanted to go too!

"But that's impossible," I cried. "Ari perhaps, if a manager can be found to replace him. Lucia certainly. But how could the king travel to Judaea arm in arm with its former governor? Agrippa has some sense of irony, but it's hardly made of iron." Out of politeness I didn't mention that Agrippa probably wouldn't recognize Pilate. Bald and gray-bearded as he'd become, even Claudia Procula might not know her former husband.

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“No one will recognize me,” Pilate assured us. “The eyesight of the generation of men who knew me well has weakened. With a few tricks of the barber’s blade and tweezers, I can be reborn. But if you think that isn’t enough, I’ll blacken my skin and beard, don an auburn wig, and answer only to the names ‘Red’ and ‘Princes’.”

His words almost made my heart stop for I’d never mentioned Caligula’s ruse to anyone. Had he seen through the disguise at once, or figured it out later? Lucia and Ari were both hiding grins. So *this* is what they talked about when I wasn’t present!

I told them that Pilate could hide his identity however he wished, but I’d certainly not try to make a fool of Agrippa, and would tell him the truth outright if the subject arose.

It was finally decided that I’d ask to bring Ari along on the royal trireme, while Pilate, Lucia, and two or three of their personal slaves would take passage on a merchant vessel. Helped by the same Etesian winds, we might hope to meet again in Alexandria. Agrippa planned a brief layover there so that he could snub the Greeks for their calumnies, and stroke the Jews.

While on one level we looked upon this trip as a fascinating journey back in time, my own feelings about revisiting Sarah’s grave ranged from bliss to apprehension. Would that precious soil have remained inviolate over the years, protected by its olive orchards? If so, would I be able to restrain myself from disinterring my beloved and holding her again in my arms? Or would my beating heart tear my breast to pieces even as I approached that sacred ground? Time would bear witness.

Preparing for the trip, I decided to take little more than I’d carried on my travels with Lucia and Crocchus: a change of tunics – plus a few of my favorite pens. I asked Lucia if she’d also travel light.

“No,” she replied rather sharply, without further explanation.

Her bluntness didn’t offend me. Perhaps she was sensitive to the fact that she’d gained weight recently and had taken to wearing larger, looser garments than before. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were pregnant,” I told her wickedly.

She assured me that wasn’t the case, implying that her brave mount had long ago reached the time in life when even the best stallions become limp and are forced to resort to other measures and devise other pleasures.

Yet, as the days passed, I wondered more and more about her condition. Was it possible for a woman to deny to herself that a child had taken up residence in her womb? This wasn’t a fantasy crocodile, after all; it might be a real child, a child with a real father somewhere.

But if her lover was impotent, who could that father be?

VI

It was the most comfortable and harmonious journey. On board the ship, not just Agrippa's friends and courtiers, but his crew as well, were Greek-speaking Jews. Not one female was an unmarried girl traveling with her mother, and not a morsel served at table was kosher.

Our arrival in Alexandria was very different from Agrippa's last. Arriving in broad daylight, we found a large, enthusiastic crowd of Jews who'd come to greet him and make sacrifices in his honor. Among these were Alexander the Alabarch, his brother Philo, his sons Tiberius and Marcus, and Marcus's wife, Bernice.

The first thing I noted on approaching Alexander's magnificent residence on the sea, was the absence of Greek statuary in the gardens. So it was a surprise to find the house filled with representations of men and beasts, birds and flowers. Was Alexander playing it safe, and if so, from whom?

At table, again nothing was kosher. While we ate, Agrippa regaled the company with descriptions of the trials of Apion and his friends; in return he was given updates on the situation of the Alexandrian Jews. From the moment he set eyes on me, Philo had seemed puzzled, almost agitated. No wonder; the last time he'd met me I was Melicon the Egyptian, and now here I was a member of Agrippa's Court.

Later, hearing Philo say he was going to bathe, I decided to join him. This was less to prove to him that I wasn't an Egyptian, than to check out whether what Apion had said was true: that Philo wasn't circumcised.

My slow descent into the water settled the first issue, but while I waited for the other to be resolved, the two of us began conversing. First we discussed Roman citizenship.

"My brother Alexander was enfranchised by Tiberius," he told me, "and through him my nephews Marcus and Tiberius Julius. I personally had no desire to become a citizen of Rome, and no one suggested it. Judging by your name," he went on, "I assume you too were granted an imperial enfranchisement."

"In fact I was," I replied, slightly embarrassed because I was sure Philo must have hated Caligula. So I was surprised to learn that I was mistaken.

"Despite his peculiar manners and his paganism," Philo said, "the late princeps must have been a religious man, even if the only 'god' he worshiped was himself."

"Then you believe he was serious about his godhead?" I asked in some surprise.

"Don't you?"

I told Philo that I didn't think Caligula had seriously believed in any god, not even in his "divine" self. "He was always joking around, hoping

to expose the hypocrisy of others,” I told him. “He liked to humiliate those he considered pompous and arrogant, especially senators and certain Jews. I think he got his Temple statue idea from Pontius Pilate.”

“Which god or gods do *you* believe in, Mel,” Philo asked me suddenly.

“I don’t believe in *any* deity,” I told him honestly, wondering what his reaction would be. “Not Roman, Greek, Egyptian, or Hebrew. Nor do I believe in the new Christ.”

Philo remained silent for a long moment, contemplating the white hairs of his chest that floated in the water. When he spoke his words surprised me.

“Believing in a deity is a difficult thing,” he said. “For one who wants to believe, it’s more important to connect with the Existent than be able to recite by heart all the tales of Torah.”

I told him that I’d heard of a contemplative society on a hillock overlooking Mareotic Lake. “Does that cult really exist?” I asked. “Could I ride out there and take a look?”

Again Philo examined his floating hairs. There was a long silence, then suddenly he signaled for a towel. Grabbing it, he held it expertly in front of him as he turned and heaved his bulk out of the water. “My mistake,” he said angrily, “was to speak to you in simple language. I did this because you are a simpleton and know nothing of God.” With these words he wrapped the towel around his loins and hurried out.

What was I to think – except that he had hidden his as well as I’d once hidden mine.

VII

The next day the ship carrying Lucia and Pilate arrived in port. I was eager to go with my friends to visit Alexandria’s famous library. Since none of us was a recognized scholar or researcher, our only hope to visit the main library was Claudius Balbillus, now the Director there. Balbillus knew me as a courtier of Claudius and had seen me exchange friendly words with Apion. I hoped he’d overlook my association with the Jewish king.

Lucia and Pilate had also enjoyed a fair crossing, but now had to change vessels for the leg to Caesarea. Pilate was curious to revisit that city where he’d spent ten turbulent years. Certainly his barber had worked magic on his eyebrows, moustache, and beard, entirely altering the proportions of his face and even improving on the original. I was confident no one alive would recognize the former prefect, unless he were to see him for the first time now, and run into him again a week later.

Since none of us had visited Alexandria before, we first toured the city

in an open carriage, then after lunch headed to the main library which was attached to the palace itself. By good fortune, the first person we encountered there was Balbillus. Greeting us graciously, he insisted on showing us around personally, taking us first to a newly constructed part of the library.

“This new addition,” he told us proudly, “was a gift from Claudius Caesar. It’s here that his Histories of Carthage and the Etruscans will be stored and made available to scholars. The two books will be read aloud in their entirety each year, one book in this new annex, the other in the main part of the library. We’re much obliged to him for writing these works in Greek, for as you may know, our library stores only Greek texts. When you return to Rome, please convey our very best regards to Lord Caesar.”

Of course I agreed to do this.

Next, Balbillus pointed out some warehouses on nearby docks. “There,” he informed us, “is where Julius Caesar, to avoid being cut off from his ships by an Alexandrian mob, used fire to save himself. Unfortunately the fire spread, consuming warehouses filled with newly acquired books waiting to be identified, sorted, and alphabetized. Thousands of priceless books were lost, but the main part of the library, attached to the palace, was happily spared.”

The acquisition of books, Balbillus told us then, was from the start the greatest challenge. Money to purchase them was no problem for the Ptolemies, who sent agents across the world to buy every book they could find on any subject, from plays to cookbooks. “The oldest books are always the ones most sought after,” he reminded us. “Not having been copied so often, they’re nearest the original text.”

Then Balbillus took us into the main library. It was a breathtaking place with shelf upon shelf of books, all labeled with identifying tabs. I pulled out one scroll and turned to find a place to open and examine it. It was then that I noticed there was no colonnade. To read in light and comfort one had to go to a colonnade that was not part of the library itself, but part of the palace complex. I pointed out this anomaly to Balbillus.

“Yes,” he replied, “the Library of Alexandria is prized for its acquisitions and is a comfortable home for books, but not for readers of books. For reading in comfort one needn’t leave Rome.”

As the four of us began looking over the magnificent collection, Balbillus motioned me aside. “I received a message about you from Apion,” he said.

“From *Apion*?”

“In letter form,” he chuckled, “and not directly from his tomb.”

“What did he say?”

“First, he told us that while you are a Jew, and close to King Agrippa, you were also a good friend of Gaius Caesar, that hater of Jewry, who enfranchised you not just as a freedman, but as a full Roman citizen. He also

said that you, while at the amphitheater with Caesar, observed the strange behavior of a certain lion and its intended victim, and passed the story on to him. Androcles, as you know, was Macedonian, as was the founder of our beloved city. Before going to Rome, from where he never returned, Apion traveled to Macedonia to meet Androcles and hear the story repeated from the lips of its author. For a man who *lives* a tale is its true author, more so than he who simply relates it or writes it down.”

“Fair enough,” I nodded.

“Indeed, this adventure had already so captured the imagination of the Macedonian people, that Apion found Androcles taking his lion about the streets on a lead like a tame dog, accepting money from admirers.”

“But I thought the lion was returned to Africa, and that Caligula had given Androcles a large gift of money!”

“It seems that at the last moment Androcles had the lion taken off the ship and returned to him. As for the money, it isn’t more wealth he seeks, but evidence of the respect and adoration his adventure earned him and his lion friend. It’s not every man fortunate enough to have a dear friend who was born in the wild.”

“True enough,” I replied. “True enough.”

“After returning from the North,” Balbillus continued, “Apion left in my possession a book containing stories, one of which concerns Androcles and his lion. Not to put too fine a point on it, any story written in Greek that concerns a Macedonian is interesting to our library, most especially when it’s the original script and authored by a scholar like Apion. If you’re interested, I’ll be happy to have it fetched, and a comfortable seat provided so that you may read it at your leisure.”

And so he did, and by the time Lucia, Pilate, and Ari returned from their tour of the stacks, I’d finished reading the story. It was a fine work, albeit somewhat different from the tale I recalled telling him. But then, history is often that way.

After thanking Balbillus for his kindness, we took our leave.

VIII

My qualms about Agrippa and others recognizing Pontius Pilate had faded; the reinvented man seemed perfectly invisible. Finding a name to call him wasn’t difficult, for it seems Lucia had found some fond resemblance between her lover and Incitatus. (“I hope she means the *front* end of the nag,” commented Pilate.) Among the endearing equine names she devised for him, the most popular was “Horsie,” a moniker readily agreed to by Ari and me.

So well was Pilate’s disguise working, and so concerned was I regarding Lucia’s extended belly, that I asked Agrippa whether she and “Horsie”

might accompany us to Caesarea in his comfortable trireme. When the king generously agreed to this, I saw the moment of truth had arrived – I shouldn't trick him any longer.

"I think you should know then, that the man you're letting aboard your ship is none other than the former prefect of Judaea, Pontius Pilate."

Agrippa chuckled. "I knew that," he said. "I thought *you* didn't." My jaw having dropped, he went on, "The question now is whether we should tell 'Horsie' and the others that his identity is no longer a secret, or pretend that I'm fooled and watch how they struggle to keep me deceived."

"I think it would be more fun to keep them in the dark," I replied. And so it was decided.

Meanwhile, the younger members of Alexander's family had begun to intrigue me, especially Bernice. Bernice, who was King Agrippa's eldest daughter, was a plain young woman, but her energy and restlessness reminded me of Sarah. Interesting to talk to, she was well read in the Greek classics and, unlike her husband and his family, fluent in Hebrew and Aramaic. Her lively, independent mind also made me think of Sarah. Certainly she was ill matched; I could more easily have imagined her the wife of Tiberius than his sickly brother Marcus.

Once, when her brother-in-law's name came up in a conversation between us, she prodded me, "Speak to him, Mel. Ask Tiberius what he thinks of Judaism. Ask him what he thinks of Torah."

"Why? What would he tell me?"

"That he doesn't believe in the Law of Moses. Tiberius says he's become an apostate to Judaism, a pagan. That's an awful thing to be."

Her childish urgency made me chuckle. "What does it matter what Tiberius says he is? You're married to Marcus. The views of your brother-in-law needn't concern you."

Her brow darkened. "Mel," she said, "Marcus has been sickly from the day he was born. I want dad to find me a different husband, someone I can love and have children with. If he isn't Jewish, he can be circumcised."

"Tiberius Julius isn't on your wish list, I take it."

"Absolutely not. He takes his Roman name too seriously. In fact, I think he's planning to become *uncircumcised*. His goal in life is to be the governor of Egypt or Judaea. It doesn't seem to enter his head that Judaea isn't a Roman province any more, and that my father is its king. Mel, please tell my father that I want to travel to Palestine with him."

"I hear you. I'll mention it."

Later, when I passed her message on, I learned that Bernice's future had already been decided. "Her cabin awaits her," Agrippa told me. "In fact, the main reason we stopped in Alexandria was to take her aboard. A new husband is already hers." Seeing my surprise, Agrippa continued, "Mel, for some time Alexander and I have known that Marcus is fatally ill.

Not only that, his marriage to my daughter was never consummated.”

“But is this new husband someone she can love?”

“The only person on this earth she loves is one she can’t marry,” Agrippa told me mysteriously. “Anyway, I have other plans for her. Don’t you remember, Mel? Look at your notes. When Claudius granted me the kingdom of Judaea, he gave my brother Herod the land of Chalcis in Lebanon. At the same time it was agreed that my daughter Bernice would become his wife.”

“*This* Bernice? It must have gone right by me! Married to her *uncle*?”

“Absolutely. I’ll inform her of her new duties upon our arrival.”

“But isn’t the marriage of a girl to her uncle considered incest?”

“Perhaps under Roman law, but not under ours.”

Hearing this, I decided not to meddle more.

IX

Pilate was impressed with life aboard Agrippa’s ship. He felt so confident about his anonymity that when I suggested we start calling him Pontius, to avoid inadvertent slips, he agreed immediately, finding it preferable to ‘Horsie’.

“This ship is like a microcosm of my ship of state in Caesarea,” Pilate told me one day as we sat on deck. “I’m just curious how someone as Hellenized as Agrippa will manage in Jerusalem.”

“Why don’t you give him some suggestions,” I said, “like putting a statue of himself in the Holy of Holies?” But even when we’d finished laughing, my words and meaning still hung over us like sea birds riding on the wind – motionless, unchallenging, but impossible to ignore.

The next day Agrippa decided to unveil some plans he had for his new kingdom. I took notes and we all listened with attention, especially when he started on the subject of coinage.

“As you know,” he began, “I owe a great deal to Caesar.”

At this, Pilate, Ari, and I exchanged glances, as if to say: Here it comes!

“Therefore,” Agrippa continued, “I’ll order coins struck at the mint of Caesarea bearing the images of both Claudius Caesar and myself. These coins will be used exclusively for trade *outside* Palestine. Has anyone a suggestion how best I might word the warm feelings I have for the emperor?”

After some reflection we came up with several suggestions in both Latin and Greek. Of these, Agrippa chose Pilate’s contribution, “Philocaesar “ – Lover of the Emperor – a word that would be inscribed by the king’s head.

“Thank you . . . uh . . . *Pontius*,” Agrippa said. Then he continued, “I also want to memorialize with another coin the treaty solemnized in the Forum between Rome and myself.”

This got us thinking again, and again it was a suggestion of Pilate that Agrippa selected. The coin would show the king making sacrifice at an altar, and a pair of clasped hands. It would be inscribed, “The Friendship of King Agrippa with the Senate and Roman People.”

“Of course,” said Agrippa, “the coins I have minted in *Jerusalem* will not bear these images and wordings, for I intend to observe the Jewish Law most strictly, taking into account the customs and sensibilities of my people.”

Oh, well, I sighed to myself, the insurrection may have to be postponed a year or two. But then another suggestion from Pilate grabbed my attention. He proposed that Agrippa should place statues of his three daughters – Bernice, Drusilla, and Miriamme – in the palace at Caesarea. What a bizarre idea! Even I could see that this would be an act so blasphemous as to shatter the first Commandment. But the proud father seized upon the idea with delight.

“What do you think,” I asked the coterie later that day. “How long before the king provokes an insurrection by his chosen people?”

Their reply wasn’t what I expected. The three agreed – as then, begrudgingly, did I – that Agrippa was so charming he could probably place a statue of *himself* in the Temple, dressed like Jupiter or even stark naked, and the priests and Council would fall down and worship *it*.

How I sighed for the less complicated and more auspicious time of *Caigula*.

X

After thirty-five years of Roman rule, the Judaeans heartily welcomed their Jewish king. First to greet him on the dock at Caesarea was Herod, King of Chalcis, come to embrace his monarch brother and claim his bride, Bernice. Also there were Bernice’s sisters and her fifteen-year-old brother, Agrippa II. The youth embraced his younger sister who clung to him affectionately, and they covered each other with kisses. Then, amid the acclamation of the crowd, we made our way to Jerusalem and the royal palace of the Hasmoneans.

I needed time, solitude, and a quiet soul to visit Sarah’s grave, and so was obliged to delay my pilgrimage. The first days and weeks after our arrival were a busy time for the king’s personal scribe, but soon most of my work was given over to Greek-to-Hebrew translators. As a result, I began spending more time with Ari and Pilate, for Lucia had become increasingly dependent on her female attendants.

188 *The Acts of a Pagan Jew*

Beset with problems concerning the high priest, neighboring client kingdoms, and other matters of state, Agrippa delegated some work to Ari, Pilate, and me. This included overseeing the minting of his new coinage in Caesarea, and commissioning the statues of his daughters to be erected in the palace there. Lucia, unable to pass up visiting a place she'd heard so much about, came with us, riding in a litter.

By that time our friend's clothing couldn't hide the fact that something momentous was happening inside her. Still, both she and Pilate seemed oblivious to it. The day the baby arrived, in the palace at Caesarea, witnesses told the three "fathers" that she loosed her burden as easily as she might have relieved her bowels. Then, stepping away, she abandoned the baby boy to her slaves without a backward glance.

When Lucia joined the rest of us at supper that evening, she said nothing of this. Nor did Pilate, Ari, or I. Still, I had to bite my tongue not to make the wry observation that in this city named for Julius Caesar, who they said had been cut from his mother's belly, this birth had transpired so easily.

Earlier, I'd left strict instructions that the child be put to a wet nurse instead of being exposed immediately, curious as I was to see this prodigy alive. When I did, I was surprised to find it a rather ordinary babe, swaddled from top to bottom in the usual way.

The wet nurse and other slaves, loath to let me approach the infant, breathlessly awaited my fatal signal. But as I looked upon the orphaned, helpless child, an unexpected feeling of empathy overcame me. My change of heart must have been palpable to the others, for when I held out my arms the baby was eagerly placed in them. How small and nearly weightless was this wrinkled acorn. My heart went out to it completely and I decided then and there to adopt it.

"Remove the swaddling," I told them. "A child's limbs shouldn't be bound. My son must grow up strong and free."

That night I lay in bed reflecting on what I'd undertaken. As the child's father, nothing could stop me having Sarah inscribed as his birth mother. This decision was followed quickly by others: my infant son's left arm would not be bound in the Roman tradition – if he favored that arm and hand, so be it. Nor would he be circumcised or baptized; his soul was as clean as a freshly quarried stone, and he alone would inscribe thereon his own choices and destiny.

The adoptive son of a Roman, he'd be a Roman citizen and require a Roman name. First, I'd give him the name of our enfranchiser who'd been my friend and ever good to me: Gaius. His *nomen* would be our family name, Melius. To honor his mother, his *cognomen* would be Sarus and he'd be called Mel Sarus.

As his cries pierced the walls and echoed through the corridors of the palace, I dreamed of the day my son would become a man.

XI

Having finished our work for Agrippa, we returned to Jerusalem. Now was my chance to visit my darling's grave. As I'd hoped, the olive orchard had protected the site, nor had any earthquake or manmade tool felled the outcropping of rock that marked and sheltered it.

Taking Mel Sarus from his wet nurse, I asked that woman to wait for us on the road below, with the other attendants. The baby seemed content, at first gurgling happily, then wiggling and stretching out his tiny arms to signal he wanted to be set down. So I spread his blanket on the soft earth and laid him upon it. I'd planned at this point to make some sort of introduction of son to mother, to tell Sarah of my love and longing for her, but found myself speechless. No words, I knew, could have expressed my feelings more eloquently – or lovingly – than the endearing sounds our child made as he lay upon her grave.

We didn't stay long. Contentment gave way to concern as Mel Sarus looked about anxiously for a reassuring breast. So we descended the hill and I returned him to the arms of his nurse.

The days slipped by pleasantly with no hint of what was to come. With Lucia's help I continued making notes for the first part of my History, which encompassed the life and death of Crocchus. The two of us were a pathetic sight, laughing or crying together, sometimes arguing hotly over details or interpretations.

"The story of you and Crocchus is a story of denial," Lucia told me flatly one day. "You refused to believe he was what he really was – a human being, not a crocodile. Until I insisted, you didn't even accept that you were Jewish. Now you write – and expect people to believe – that you thought your circumcision was *the scar of some accidental wound?*"

"Well, I *did* think that, so sue me." Even in my defense I couldn't point out to Lucia her own denial regarding the birth of Mel Sarus. Perhaps some day we'd write *that* story together and she'd be forced to accept what she couldn't now. "So, what prophesies do you want me to credit you with?"

"In the part where you come to see me in Delphi after Crocchus's death, I'd like to make a prophecy about Paul becoming an apostle for Jesus."

"That's fine with me," I said, "given that Paul happens to be proselytizing in Cilicia even as we speak."

I told her I was considering combining other epiphanies with Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. "For instance, in the same flash of light *I* could have a vision. In my vision I'd see some ancient relative who tells me I'm Jewish."

"I thought that was *my* role, but have it your way," sniffed Lucia.

"Also in the flash, Crocchus realizes he has to return to the arena, and

you discover you're clairvoyant. What do you think?"

"I think it would work well both dramatically and structurally," she agreed. "Paul has his Jesus and we have our *deus ex machina*, so to speak. Go with it."

While Lucia took great interest and pleasure in our work and the company of our friends, it seemed strange how little interest she showed in Mel Sarus. As for me, his love seemed to touch feelings I'd long hidden deep inside.

What an innocent time it was. Soon Mel Sarus was in his second year. Sturdy on his legs, he began to take on his adoptive father's facial features. His languages soon numbered three, albeit with a vocabulary limited to the nominative and first-person singular, all indicating his needs and favorites. If he couldn't obtain the object or caress he wanted in Greek, he'd try Latin, then Aramaic, not giving up until he had his prize. His victories were celebrated with Triumphs on the nursery floor where the parade of spoils always included a dried baby crocodile I'd purchased in Caesarea.

But if the times were innocent and easy for us, they were not so for the new king of Judaea, whose struggles I watched with interest.

XII

The Jewish people were happy with their charming monarch, but from the beginning Agrippa had problems pleasing everyone. A Hasmonean, his towering status placed the Sadducee high priesthood in second rank. Attempting to name a new high priest of a different clan, he blundered, had to retract his selection, then finally gave in and named another Sadducee. Seeking to overcome his error by currying favor with the religious hierarchy, the king came down hard on the Jewish worshipers of Jesus: the Nazarenes.

Agrippa had at least as much will, and a great deal more power at his command, than Paul ever had in his attempts to stamp out the Nazarenes. During Passover the following spring, Agrippa had James, the son of Zebedee – one of Jesus' original twelve apostles – arrested on the charge of threatening public order with his blasphemous proselytizing, and beheaded. Later, the king arrested Peter, leader of the Nazarenes. Peter managed to escape death by abdicating his post in favor of Jesus' brother, James the Just, an ascetic with complete faith in his brother's imminent return.

The king's actions against the followers of Jesus were popular with the Jews of Judaea, but he soon managed to provoke the governor of Syria. The governor, Gaius Vibius Marsus, took it as a personal affront when Agrippa – who wished to be remembered, as his grandfather was, for great building projects – began the construction of a fortified wall enclosing the

New City which had grown up on the north side of Jerusalem. After all, the governor wondered, against whom was this defense being erected?

The Syrian governor was also wary of Agrippa's call for a conference of client kings, even though he himself had been invited to attend. But Vibius Marsus feared that some anti-Roman policies might be hatched between the kings, whose first loyalties ought to lie with Rome. And so he found a way to disrupt and bring an early end to the gathering.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the empire, Claudius had achieved a great victory by annexing the entire southern part of Britain. A lavish Triumph was being prepared in Rome to celebrate his victory. To show his loyalty to the emperor, Agrippa announced that he'd arrange a sister Triumph for Claudius, not in Jerusalem of course, but in Caesarea.

For the occasion Agrippa, ever the showman, had robes designed for himself made entirely of silver. As he presided over the festivities it was marvelous to see how he gleamed in the sun. On the second day of the games, seated not far away, Lucia and I were admiring the sight when, to our horror, we saw him sway, attempt to rise, then suddenly collapse. Before I could get to his side, King Agrippa was dead.

The sudden death of the ebullient, fifty-four-year-old monarch stunned everyone. The Jews mourned him deeply. The Greek population, ever maligning him for his behavior toward the Greeks of Alexandria, rioted joyfully. We were still in Caesarea with the king's body when the Greeks of the city stormed the palace and removed the statues of Agrippa's three daughters.

"Why do you do this?" I asked one of the rioters who, in his unfettered jubilation, had bumped up against me. "King Agrippa was very generous to your cities."

The fellow paused, regarding me with hostility. "It pleases Jews to say they're Hellenized," he snapped, "but you'll not find a Greek who says he's in any manner Jewish. We have a more suitable home for the daughters of Agrippa than the palace."

Later I learned that the three statues had been installed in brothels, for the amusement of the guests.

The monarch's death threw our own small household into turmoil. A few weeks earlier, with Agrippa's help, I'd purchased the land and olive orchard of what we'd begun to call "Sarah's Hill." Upon our return to Jerusalem for the king's funeral, I was able to buy a cottage on an adjacent piece of land. It was there that I moved with my friends and son, eschewing the greater safety inside the city walls. And it was in this quiet countryside that we made our plans.

It seems that Lucia and "Horsie" had been thinking for some time of leaving Jerusalem, but not to return to Rome. Instead, Ari would go there to take back the management of Lucia's lands, and perhaps even arrange their sale.

“What we’d really like to do,” she told me, “is travel throughout the East, starting with a visit to Antioch.”

“Antioch?” I asked in surprise. “Why there?”

Lucia admitted that she and Pontius wanted to visit Paul. “They say he’s preaching in Antioch right now. His specialty is converting the uncircumcised.”

“Oh, fine,” I said dryly. “Perhaps he’ll convert Mel Sarus; it’s a bit late for me.”

“His converts are referred to as *Christianoi*. I’d like you to put that word in my Delphic prophecy, by the way.”

“Why not? It’s perfect. *Christianos*: a serendipitous combination of Greek and Latin without a whiff of circumcision. Bravo Paul!”

“I’m sure if you asked him he’d make an exception and convert you too,” smiled Lucia.

“Not a chance, but I’d like to visit his works.”

And so it was decided that Lucia, Pilate, Mel Sarus, and I would travel to Syria, while Ari would return to Rome.

XIII

At the time of Agrippa’s death, his son Agrippa II was only seventeen – too young for the accession. So Claudius appointed an equestrian governor, Cuspius Fadius, to rule the province of Judaea, an area much larger now than it had been before Agrippa’s reign. Once again the appointment of a minor official to such an important and sensitive post created a power vacuum resulting in riots. The protests were not directed at Rome this time, being mainly tribal and religious.

But Claudius wasn’t going to repeat the mistake of giving the power to appoint high priests to a Roman governor. He gave it instead, with other honors, to Herod, King of Chalcis, Agrippa’s brother and the husband of Bernice.

While preparing our departure for Syria I visited Sarah’s grave many times, often with Mel Sarus. After one of these visits, as we got down to the road I saw a familiar figure on horseback. It was a man I’d last seen afoot at nearly the same spot years ago.

“John Mark!” I cried. “Is it really you?”

He slipped to the ground and as we embraced I could hear him chuckling. “Mel, don’t tell me you’re an uncle!”

“*Uncle!*” I exclaimed with mock indignation. “Meet Mel Sarus, my son.”

“Congratulations,” laughed Mark. “I should have guessed. The resemblance is striking.”

“Like father, like adopted son.”

“Adopted? Then the resemblance is *miraculous*.”

Our greetings over, my attention went to the servant who accompanied Mark on a second horse, and the pack animal he led. “Wherever you’re headed,” I told Mark, “come home with us now and break bread with my friends and me.”

“I’m heading north,” he replied. “You caught us in the first mile, but our last meal was before dawn, so Jestus and I can be easily persuaded.”

“Perfect.”

Noticing that Mel Sarus was saying “up” and “horse” in Greek, I placed him in Mark’s saddle.

“Nice leatherwork,” I observed.

“I bought it and our tents in a shop off Tyropoeon Street.”

“Did you really? That takes me back,” I sighed. “How that takes me back.”

Lunch was ready when we reached the cottage. I introduced Mark to Lucia and Pilate, watching Mark turn pale, then bright red. Of course! The reason was obvious: he’d first thought of Pilate the Christ-killer, then of Pilate the source of material for his gospel.

“I hope you’ll afford me a few moments of your time in private,” Mark said to him as we sat down.

“No problem,” replied the former governor, “but I’ve already told Mel everything I know about the crucifixion, so you could learn as much from him.”

“No, no,” I said quickly. “It’s better to get it straight from the Horsie’s mouth.”

These words reduced all of us but Mark to helpless giggles.

“A few years back,” Mark told Pilate, “I traveled to Caesarea hoping to speak to you, but you’d left for Rome. Later I was told that your wife had joined the Eastern Church and that you’d been baptized. I was delighted.”

“They say it’s less intrusive than a circumcision,” growled Pilate, “but I’ve been impotent ever since.” Once again Mark was the only one to miss the humor.

Over lunch we learned that Mark’s journey north was, like ours, to Antioch, where one of his cousins was staying with Paul. “I’m eager to hear Paul’s gospel,” he told us.

“Mark,” Lucia said, “did Mel ever tell you that we were with Paul on the road to Damascus when he had his vision of Jesus and was converted?”

“Indeed he did. What a victory for the Nazarenes that day! I tried to find Paul at that time, but he’d disappeared into Arabia. I’m glad he’s in Antioch now. It’s as beautiful as Alexandria and worth visiting for its own sake.”

Mark’s intention to travel north added impetus to our own preparations; within a week we were ready to join him. Among our attendants

were a man and wife to look after Mel Sarus. Both spoke excellent Greek and Latin and I planned to teach him Aramaic myself. Hebrew he could learn when he grew up, if it was still being spoken.

The day before our departure I climbed the hill alone to say goodbye to Sarah. While there I took a twig of leaves from the tree nearest her grave to carry with me as a totem representing our love. Olive seeds saved from the last harvest I'd plant along the way, to mark a path I hoped would one day reunite us.

XIV

Both Mark and I took with us our notes for the books we were preparing to write. Mark still hoped to get Pilate to reveal what he knew about Jesus' death. "It's fascinating to meet a man who played such a key role in the history of the Church," Mark said as we rode along.

"Have you found anyone who claims to have seen Jesus alive after his death?" I asked him.

"No, but the story persists and I tend to credit it."

"Will you put it in your gospel?"

"I haven't decided. The death of Jesus is surrounded by mystery, but they say that God is *supposed* to be a mystery, not just a character in literature. I'm curious to hear what Paul has to say about bodily resurrection."

Pilate, who'd overheard our conversation, now spoke up. "Mark," he said, "there was no mystery surrounding the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Nor was *I* a character in a story. I'm a real man who did what a man does in life – his job. I listened to arguments on every side and made a decision. If you want to create a mystery around this fellow's death, fine. For me, Jesus was just another man I crucified, and while my wife Claudia Procula and those present at my baptism insist that he still lives, I don't believe a word of it."

"Then why did you accept baptism?" asked Mark.

Pilate glanced at him, then away. "You never met Claudia Procula," he said.

This time all of us shared a hearty laugh.

Added to my longstanding love of travel, adventure, and learning from experience, there was now the fascination of watching my son absorb these same pleasures and lessons. Then one night I had another dream. It was my great grandfather again. He congratulated me on Mel Sarus, then said, "Now you have an heir to carry on our name and nose, if not our covenant with God."

"Exactly as I wanted it," I replied. "My son's a free spirit, born of a virgin pregnancy, and I have no plan to impress my will on him. Should I drop my torch, I won't even insist he snatch it up and ignite the Temple

rafters.”

“You have no idea who his real father might be?”

“*Real father?* I’m his adoptive father and Sarah’s his mother. His birth was registered in Caesarea during the time of a kingdom that no longer exists. It’s nothing now but a dream, just as you’re a dream, so don’t speak to me of reality.” Then I chuckled, to signal that he shouldn’t take offense.

“And should this free, unswaddled spirit decide to worship Jesus, or observe the Law of Moses?”

“No problem,” I assured him. “If he has himself baptized or circumcised I’ll happily kill the little bastard myself.”

My own laughter woke me up, and in the next room I heard Mel Sarus begin to wail.

XV

The way was long but there was much to see, admire, rue, and discuss. We rode and walked through layers of history: history of the Patriarchs, of prophets then and now, of the new churches, and of our own earlier lives.

My conversations with Mark often concerned prophecy. He told me that he’d tried in vain to verify Jesus’ Temple prophecy. “Yet after a time,” he said, “the prophecy seemed to take on a life of its own. I began to hear it whispered everywhere that the fall of the Temple would signal the end of the world and the return of the risen Christ. Still, I’m not sure that this explosion of interest wasn’t prompted by my own efforts in pursuing the subject.”

“You once told me that at the end of the world Christ would redeem the baptized and convert the Jews,” I reminded him, “but what about atheists like me? Will we be saved or left to perish? And when will it happen?”

Mark pondered a moment, then replied, “I think you should surround yourself with the baptized; your best bet for salvation might be in getting scooped up and redeemed along with them. As for when it will happen, why don’t we ask our in-house prophetess?” He turned to Lucia. “Lucia, have you a date certain for the end of the world?”

“Alas, Mark, I don’t do prophecy any more,” she told him. “I leave such matters to the Hebrews and Christians. Remember, I was a protégée of Apollo, and he’s simply not in their league, apocalyptically speaking.”

“Well, then,” said Mark, “I advise you too to stay very close to the baptized.”

“That’s my intention,” replied Lucia, smiling at Pilate.

I didn’t know the secrets of female sexuality, or how an impotent man could keep a woman like Lucia happy, but perhaps Lucia’s pleasure wasn’t

too different from the satisfaction I derived from my memories of Sarah.

Another time our conversation turned to that most unpopular subject: taxes. After listening to their gripes, I couldn't help bragging that Caligula had granted me Roman citizenship with *immunitas*.

Pilate was scandalized. "*You pay no taxes at all to Caesar?*"

"None. Nor do I pay any Temple tax, for obvious reasons."

This discussion of taxes reminded Pilate of a story. "Mark," he said, "I have an anecdote for you. It's about a certain tax collector named Levi."

Mark was of course interested to hear it, as were we all.

"Levi," Pilate began, "was in charge of a toll booth in Galilee – at Capernaum, if I'm not mistaken. I'd heard reports that this fellow and his family were living higher than their means, inviting friends to feast upon expensive, non-kosher foods. Mind you, it's often a problem with tax and customs collectors that they fiddle the records and put some of the money into their own pockets.

"I knew the Jews hated our Jewish tax collectors not for being high-living thieves, but for collaborating with Rome. On our part, we treated our Jewish field agents well and overlooked as much as we could. Still, word got out that we were planning to take action against this fellow Levi.

"Right at this time, along comes Jesus of Nazareth, calling out to Levi to follow him. What happens next? Levi walks right out of his booth, doesn't bother to lock up, doesn't even tell his wife and family what he's up to, just walks off after Jesus in a crowd of disciples. Can you beat that?"

Mark was radiant. "I *heard* Jesus had converted some tax collectors," he said, "but I thought it was just hollow boasting. Wow! So he really did get one of your guys. What a coup!"

"But Mark," objected Pilate, "Levi must have *known* he was headed for prison. He was just trying to escape justice by getting lost in a moving crowd."

"Did you go after him and arrest him?" I asked.

"Why bother? We collected his 'back taxes' – so to speak – from his very worried father. I think his dad's name was Alphaeus."

"Alphaeus?" exclaimed Mark. "If it's the *same* Alphaeus, he was also the father of James, one of the twelve."

"Small province," I commented wryly, wishing Caligula were there to appreciate the joke, then joining in when the others burst out laughing.

"Thank you," said Mark to Pilate. "I can definitely use your story, albeit with some Christian editing. After all, we can't be *sure* he knew he was under suspicion. I prefer to think he was converted on the spot."

So saying, Mark put his fingers to his temples, closed his eyes, and committed the story of Levi-the-tax-collector to memory. I followed suit.

XVI

Mark was right; Antioch was a beautiful city. Having made arrangements in advance, we were met on the road and escorted to a fine villa on the edge of town. There, while the servants sorted out our belongings and went to the market, we relaxed and played with Mel Sarus, who'd earlier lunched and napped in his litter.

The next morning we mounted up again and began our exploration of Antioch – its temples and hippodromes, its famous aqueduct and renowned gymnasium, and its theaters, parks, and public baths – all connected by paved boulevards.

"If I do decide to sell my lands and villa," Lucia announced as our little group stood waiting to cross a busy thoroughfare, "this is where I'd like to live. In fact, Mel, what better place for you to raise Mel Sarus?" She turned to Pilate. "What do you think of living in Antioch, Horsie?"

But before either of us could reply we heard a great shout. "*Pontius!*"

Turning, we saw a rather grand lady being helped from her carriage.

"Claudia Procula!" gasped Pilate. "But how . . .?"

I looked at him to assay his disguise, but it was gone! Slowly, without anyone noticing, his beard, moustache, and eyebrows had resumed their former shapes. Despite his gray beard and bald pate, he looked much as he had years ago in Caesarea.

"You dear man!" said Claudia Procula, hurrying over and embracing him. "You heard I was here and came at once."

"I . . ."

Not waiting for his reply, she looked about, recognizing me. "Mel!" Her gaze then took in Lucia and Mel Sarus. "Mel, you married a beautiful woman and your son looks just like you. How fortunate!"

Now I was at a loss for words. Claudia Procula must surely have seen that Pilate, not I, was Lucia's companion. And even if not, what right did she have speaking to him like that, when they'd been divorced for years?

Luckily, Lucia hadn't been rendered speechless by the attack. "I beg your pardon, madam," she said. "Pontius is my husband. You are his divorced wife."

Claudia Procula turned and stared at Lucia, looking her up and down. "There's no divorce in the Church," she announced. "If you're with my husband, you're an adulteress."

"Then he's an adulterer," Lucia shot back.

"But he's still my husband, whom I can and do forgive."

Seeing the conversation was headed nowhere good, I found my tongue, which unexpectedly turned to silver. "In fact, Madame, while finding you here is a great pleasure and privilege for us all, the reason we came to Antioch was to meet our friend, the evangelist Paul."

She turned. "Did you convert?" she asked, squinting at me as if trying

to detect some sign of Christianity clinging to my skin.

“No,” I said quickly.

“Then he’ll convert you. Paul’s good. I don’t agree with all he says – he’s not my Church – but he’s good. A little shaky in his presentation, but good.”

“I thought his specialty was converting Gentiles, not Jews.”

“He’d never miss the chance to convert a friend,” she assured me. “Paul’s Jewish, you know, but he’s very frank how he feels today concerning the Law of Moses. Is your boy circumcised?”

“No.”

“Good. Baptized?”

“No. How *does* Paul feel about the Law?” I asked her, recalling Paul’s fiery speeches to his gang of Pharisees.

“Hates it. Says it was written by men, not God. Calls it shit. He’s right, of course.” Then Claudia Procula turned back to Pilate.

“You’re looking well, Pontius,” she told him. “I trust your manhood has returned by now. I’ve never heard of a little submergence having quite the result you professed to, but you must have *something* that interests this concubine of yours. It can’t be that equine *je ne sais quoi* around your ears. See you soon.”

And so saying, Claudia Procula embraced each of us, got back into her carriage, and drove off.

“She didn’t ask where you’re staying,” I observed to Pilate as we watched her disappear down the boulevard.

“She’ll find me,” he sighed, “and she’ll surely tell Paul who I am. I can’t help wondering what he’ll think, meeting the killer of Christ.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Mark told him. “You’ve been off the hook for some time. It’s dogma in many Gentile churches that the Jews *demand* that you crucify Jesus. I see it that way too.” He turned to me. “Sorry, Mel. No offense meant.”

“None taken.”

“By ordering Jesus’ execution, Pilate was fulfilling a prophecy,” said Mark. “There was nothing else he could have done.”

“I have to admit that does take a load off my mind,” said Pilate. He turned to Lucia. “Well, my little concubine, shall we head for the baths? Perhaps we can find a way to reverse the ill effects of baptism, then off to the stables to share some oats.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Lucia, turning to include all of us in her happy smile. “Later, guys.”

XVII

A few days after this, Lucia and I met Paul, and his Jewish co-religionist Barnabas, at their house. Pilate hadn't come with us – he wanted us to test the waters for him – and Mark had been delayed. Whatever I thought of Paul's god, his conversion, and his theology, it in no way dampened my pleasure at seeing him again. So it was with some surprise that Lucia and I received a rather cold greeting from our erstwhile friend, whom we'd last seen on the road to Damascus.

When Paul asked after Crocchus, out of politeness I didn't mention that it was Jewish Christians who'd martyred him. Indeed, Paul was now so avidly Christian that it made conversation with him difficult. After an awkward hour Mark arrived. Barnabas, it turned out, was Mark's cousin. Mark and Paul had heard of one another and now met each other's gaze with a kind of fierce respect alloyed with wariness.

"My friends have already told me their recollections of Jesus," said Mark to Paul. "I'm sure you have even more to relate."

"Mark," Barnabas quickly interjected, "Paul's every bit the apostle that the twelve are *without* having known the earthly Jesus. It's Paul's theology that Lord Jesus didn't become divine until the Resurrection."

This information enlivened Mark. "My own interest," he said, "is in Jesus during his lifetime – his parables, exorcisms, healings, and other miracles. I've been talking to eye-witnesses and collecting anecdotes in preparation for writing a gospel."

"That's perfect then," smiled Barnabas, "because Paul hates rehashing hearsay. You then, Mark, will relate the story of Jesus the man, including his baptism, trial, crucifixion, and, if you want, the empty tomb, while Paul will concentrate on the Resurrection, the Ascendance, Faith, and the Second Coming. As for me and the other evangelists, I'm sure we'll find something left over to proselytize about."

This Solomonesque division of the son of god appeared to please both Mark and Paul, and the general mood relaxed. Paul showed us some tents he was working on. "I don't live off the Church," he told us. "I support myself with my own labors. Soon Barnabas and I will leave on a journey to convert the pagans, a journey for which I've been working and saving. Saving *money*, that is," he qualified quickly.

I found his attempt at a joke reassuring.

The next day Lucia announced that she and Pilate had decided not to settle in Antioch. "Claudia Procula is simply too prevalent in this part of the world," she explained. "Horsie has to get away from her. We've considered Alexandria, even Athens and Sarah's Hill. Caesarea is out, of course. But Pontius really does miss speaking Latin on a daily basis, so we'll return to Rome. And of course we'll announce our marriage to settle any claims anyone might have on him."

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Disappointing as I found their intention to leave the East, Lucia's words didn't surprise me. I myself sometimes longed to return to the place of my first cognitive awareness, with even less reason to do so than she and Pilate.

As for Mark, he regretted only that Pilate's baptism hadn't taken root in his soul, and that what seemed to be Lucia's burgeoning interest in Christianity might be interrupted by their return to a pagan land. "On the other hand," Mark said, "had *Jesus* been married to Claudia Procula, who knows what we'd all be doing today?"

"Amen," said the exonerated killer of Christ.

And so it was decided. Disentangling our households wasn't difficult on the goods level, but two slaves had formed a loving alliance and others had family ties in the area, so all were freed. Mark would stay in the East, but as for Mel Sarus and me, I wasn't sure. While I wanted to live and raise my son near the grave of his mother, and keep an eye on events in Judaea, I didn't want the boy growing up in the shadow of the Temple.

"Sarah will wait for you here," Mark counseled me. "Her spirit will be with you wherever you are."

Despite the tug of my feelings, the truth of his words was undeniable. After some reflection, I decided to return to Rome.

We managed to leave Antioch before Claudia Procula came to claim her Pontius. At nearby Seleucia we found a ship to Crete and from there made our way to Puteoli. The trip was mostly uneventful. Mel Sarus soon got used to the motions of the sea and was fascinated by the schools of fish and flocks of birds that accompanied our passage.

Our single shipboard catastrophe cost me dearly; the sea found my most recent notes about the Crocchus years. Then, while I attempted to dry the papyri on deck, an errant gust of wind took them overboard. Only Mel Sarus thought the occasion hilarious.

"That settles it," I told the others. "When we get to Rome I'll lock myself in my house and not move until my History's completed. At the very least I'll make a copy of everything I write to keep at a different location."

Lucia, in whose villa I'd stored my earlier notes, was consoling. "Mel, what you may no longer remember is that which you can later invent. If history were written down exactly as it happened, what lessons would we learn from it? Nothing's less inspiring than a bare fact."

The prophet inside me was pleased to agree.

XVIII [45 CE]

Upon returning to Rome I wasted no time putting my new household in order. After handing out bonuses to my household slaves, I set about furnishing part of the house for Mel Sarus, his attendants, and tutors.

Then I turned to a far different enterprise. It had often been a topic of conversation on shipboard as to whether I should hire readers and scribes and start my own publishing business. Lucia thought the first thing I published should be my History. The problem with this, I felt, was that much of what I was writing – whether in Latin, Greek or Aramaic – might appear blasphemous to Jews, Christians, or pagans. If I offended all those groups, who then would buy my book?

Was there not some language, I wondered, that *no one* could read?

Then another suggestion by Lucia intrigued me. “I think you should seek out and commission works of religious content,” she told me. “I don’t think Paul will travel much beyond Syria and Cilicia – that pain he once described as a thorn in his flesh must still bother him. Did you see how slowly he moves, like a man older than his years?” She felt Paul was more likely to write his beliefs down than travel the empire sermonizing. “You should encourage him to send you copies of what he writes,” Lucia said. “And then there’s Mark’s gospel, if he ever sits down and actually writes it.”

Her words reminded me of other possibilities. “If Philo isn’t still mad at me,” I told her, “I could ask him to write down his thoughts on his legation to Rome, as well as a description of his utopian colony at Mareotic Lake. I could even publish Apion’s story of Androcles and the Lion; it’s a good tale for a child’s reader in either Latin or Greek.”

“Don’t forget Barnabas,” said Lucia. “He might have something for you. And I suppose plenty of others are starting Christian churches and writing religious tracts. Let the word get out that you’re interested. I think books on Jesus and Christianity is where the future in publishing lies. Plato and Euripides have been done to death.”

Her enthusiasm made me chuckle. “I guess you aren’t completely disinterested in the gods after all,” I said.

“Oh, I don’t know. There will always be many more Jews and pagans than there are Christians, but I’ll admit that I’m considering baptism. What about you, Mel? Are you still the atheist you once were?”

“My interest in Christian writings would be purely commercial,” I assured her. “I’m still the non-believer I always was, but as I want to be surrounded by the baptized on the day the world ends, don’t hold back on my account.”

“Spoken like a true atheist,” laughed Lucia, and I had to agree.

XIX

I'd not been in Rome long before invitations arrived from Claudius and the senate. They wanted me to brief them on my sojourn in Palestine and relate my eyewitness account of the death of King Agrippa and its aftermath. Neither of these invitations thrilled me, for I'd already heard the latest Court gossip about the amorous adventures of the emperor's wife and her reign of terror; denounced by Messallina, and with the connivance of the freedmen, many senators were being put to death. She'd already made it clear to Claudius that their son Britannicus would be his successor.

Shortly after our return, Lucia and Pilate announced their marriage at a dinner party. They'd made no sacrifices to celebrate their union, but had visited some Christian congregations in the homes of converted pagans and Jews. Lucia's hope was that Christians would finally decide on one simple message.

"We're shopping around for a church that suits us," she explained, "but it's all so confusing. Must a Christian be circumcised or not? Should Christians obey the Law of Moses or not, keep kosher and observe the Sabbath or not?" She told me that some churches were using the crucifix as a symbol of faith. "Who would have guessed it that awful day on Golgotha?" she sighed.

I told her that I'd taken her advice and had wasted no time writing to both Paul and Philo, asking them to send me the originals or good copies of anything they might want published, or just for safekeeping.

And I'd already made a publishing decision about the Androcles story. Mel Sarus, hearing the story once, had demanded to hear it again and again. As he was beginning to read Latin, I wrote the story down on small sheets of parchment. These were folded up the middle and sewn together, creating a codex that a child could easily hold in his small hands and open from the right side. Another sheet of parchment, sewn on as a protective cover, carried the book's title, *Androcles and the Lion*, the name of its author, Apion, plus a drawing of a man and a lion. Mel Sarus was delighted.

I sent papyrus copies of my first publication to Paul, who replied that he and his friends wanted the codex format adopted for collections of their own writings. Codices, it was clear, were simpler to handle than scrolls. A small space could contain as much material as several scrolls, so that an entire book needn't be carried from place to place in buckets. Codices could be stacked flat on shelves and easily extracted. They could be flipped through to locate some line or section, leaving a reader free to write notes with his other hand, drink wine, or scratch his chin without fearing to let an entire scroll unravel. But what they liked most was that codices were so different from the scrolls used by Jews and pagans.

Paul wrote that he, Barnabas, and Mark were about to depart for Cyprus on the first leg of a missionary journey. Who could have imagined

that Paul would pass four grueling years traveling over land and sea before returning to Antioch? Certainly not one who'd made such a negative assessment of his physical condition: Lucia.

Those first years at Rome my days were busy if not full – for how could life be full without a darling's love? During this time Mel Sarus turned toward Lucia as if drawn by invisible threads. Arriving together at her villa, I sometimes had to restrain the boy from urging his horse ahead of Incitatus II. Indeed, on one occasion both horse and rider landed in the middle of that long pool where Crocchus had once sat reflecting. Lucia, laughing, swore that some day she'd have Mel Sarus baptized in that very font, and perhaps his horse as well!

My publishing business grew as I introduced student textbooks of philosophy and drama. Some of these were done on scrolls to conform to the prevailing practice, some were codices. I also published kosher and non-kosher cookbooks, these on tablets of wood laced together.

As news of my religious publications spread, other evangelists sent letters and tracts describing their teachings and beliefs. Lucia helped by reading through and sorting out those she thought should be published. Meanwhile, churches were springing up in cities with large Jewish populations, like Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch.

Philo, perhaps thinking that exposure to religious matters would serve to educate me – and profit him – set aside any ill feelings and sent me notes on the contemplative life at Mareotic Lake. I urged him to expand on these and he did, enclosing with the new version a description of his audience with Caligula and his thoughts on Governor Flaccus. Of these political pieces I made a small distribution to persons I thought might be particularly interested.

During these years my time was divided between raising my son, writing my History, growing my publishing business, and seeing my friends – including the newly baptized Lucia and Ari's young family. But that was only on one level. Another part of me stayed constantly in touch with Jerusalem and Sarah's Hill, asking questions, keeping watch from afar.

Today, four years after returning to Rome, I find my History has come up against the present moment. It's time to put down my pen and let more time pass before continuing. Mel Sarus, nine years old, has offered to take over writing it when he becomes a man.

This prospect thrills and intrigues me. Of course I told him that "eyesight permitting" I'd have the right to review his spelling and syntax. He agreed to let me do so – "within limits."

Part V

THE SON'S TALE

I [58 CE]

My earliest memory is of the journey I made with my adoptive father Mel, and his friends Lucia and Pontius, between Seleucia and Puteoli. I don't recall the entire voyage, for in the following years I made several more, and this one was marked only by Mel's papyri being blown away by the wind. As I was four or five at the time it's possible I don't remember even that event, but see it through stories told me by the others.

Nor do I recall the first time I saw the grave said to be my mother's. But in the years we resided in Rome, while Mel grew his publishing business in a shop near the Forum, he and I made journeys back to the mount he'd named Sarah's Hill in her honor.

Had he not told me I was adopted, I'd have thought myself his true son, for we were very similar in appearance. He also told me that my mother, dead at the age of fifteen, was killed by an adherent of the Law of Moses.

At her death my mother was one year younger than I am today. I was born in Caesarea, where I now sit to begin writing the History that Mel passed on to me. It's not that he tired of the task, oh, no! But his eyes have grown weak, and mine are clear and strong.

After the death five years ago of "Horsie," I drew close in my affections to Lucia. It was she who introduced me to Christianity, though I rejected baptism just as I rejected the *toga virilis*, having been brought up by Mel to distrust all national and religious rites. Even so, my adoptive father registered me as a citizen of Rome, a civil status no one should reject for any reason – ask my friend Paulus of Tarsus.

Well then, am I secretly a true believer? That's what Paul and the others would like to know. They all think Mel Sarus is an enigma wrapped up inside a Roman citizen.

Mel insists I include in our History not only the major historical events of the intervening years, but some of the Court gossip too. Bear with me, reader, for I'll soon return to my story of the changing fortunes of the Christians and the Jews, and how it happens that today I'm in Caesarea, assisting my imprisoned friend, Paul of Tars.

II

Intrigue was rife in Court circles well before Nero became emperor four years ago. When Claudius heard that his wife Messallina had shamelessly courted and married a handsome young nobleman, Gaius Silius, and that Silius was planning to adopt his son Britannicus, he realized in terror that not only was he divorced, but could lose his empire.

Finally he acted. Messallina was assisted in suicide by a tribune's blow upon her hesitating dagger. Claudius then had the Roman law prohibiting marriage between a man and his niece repealed, and replaced his wife by marrying his niece Agrippina, Caligula's often-exiled sister. This was all the more shocking since she had recently been accused of killing her second husband, and was actively pushing her son Nero, two years older than Britannicus, toward the succession.

Poor Britannicus. He lost his mother, his succession, was deserted by his slaves, and would one day – through the efforts of Agrippina and Nero – lose his life. Who would have imagined that Claudius himself would be fed poisoned mushrooms by this ambitious woman, to clear her son's way to the accession? Probably everyone, except Claudius.

Meanwhile, King Herod of Chalcis died. His widow Bernice celebrated her twentieth birthday with her brother Agrippa II, who acceded to his uncle's throne, and then began living with him in what many believed was an incestuous relationship.

III [59 CE]

Paul had returned from his third missionary journey and would soon be visiting Jerusalem. Hearing this, Lucia begged Mel to take me to Sarah's Hill. She hoped that while in the East I'd get to meet Paul again, this time as an adult.

"I think she wants me converted," I told Mel. "I'd like to meet him, but just out of curiosity."

Mel replied that he'd take me there but would then return to Rome, adding, "You'll be on your own. Make the best of it."

None of us could have anticipated the strange events to follow. Mel and I had just embarked on our voyage east, when Paul arrived in Jerusa-

lem, causing major disturbances there. It seems he'd come with a gift for the Jewish Christians, consisting of donations he'd collected during his journeys. But instead of being welcomed, he was accused of speaking out against the Jews and the Law, and for having earlier defiled the Temple by bringing a Gentile inside it.

Dragged out of the Temple by an angry mob, Paul was rescued by Roman officers and taken before the Sanhedrin. There a great argument arose between the Pharisee and Sadducee factions. The crowd outside was also divided – many of them wanted Paul killed outright. Once again the Roman military saved him, escorting him to Caesarea under the guard of hundreds of soldiers.

Antonius Felix, governor at that time, gave Paul a hearing, but was unable to understand a word of what this Jewish convert to Christianity was saying in his defense. Afraid to take an irrevocable action that would anger either the Romans or the Jews, Felix placed Paul under guard.

It should be mentioned that Felix himself had formidable Roman and Jewish connections. The governor was married to the beautiful Jewess Drusilla, sister of Bernice and King Agrippa II. A freedman himself, Felix was the brother of Pallas, the immensely wealthy, widely influential freedman allied to the emperor's wife Agrippina.

It was at the governor's headquarters in Caesarea that I finally caught up with Paul. The first thing I did was write him a letter of self-introduction containing my bona fides. In my best Greek I wrote that I was Mel's adopted son, that I'd read the first book of the Hebrew Bible, that I'd read all the material he'd sent over the years to Mel, and that I was sixteen and neither circumcised nor baptized. I wrote further that Lucia, mourning the death of her husband Pontius Pilate, wished Paul to convert me, and that my mother Sarah, who'd been stoned to death several years before my birth, was buried outside Jerusalem.

I didn't have to wait long before Paul sent for me.

"Who told you your mother died several years before you were born?" were his first words, spoken in Aramaic.

"Lots of people. Mel plans to avenge her death by taking the Temple down stone by stone."

Paul reflected a moment, then said, "My eyes aren't good. They're often badly inflamed. I need a scribe, someone who can spell and who won't interrupt me at every line to argue theology." He re-examined my bona fides. "This is well penned. Besides good penmanship and accuracy, the perfect scribe for me would be neither Christian nor Jew. And it would be a man whose birth, and therefore whose life, is an impenetrable mystery."

"Papyrus or parchment?" I asked him. "Greek or Aramaic?"

He ignored my impertinence. "I wish to write an epistle," he told me. "Be here tomorrow at the same hour and we'll begin."

And so I took my leave.

Having read the material he'd sent to Mel over the years, and from talking to Lucia, I was already acquainted with Paul's thinking on matters of religion and faith. From my studies I was familiar too with ancient philosophic thought. It was said the Greeks invented logic so that their orators might win competitions. They didn't ask the judges to *believe* they'd won their arguments – logic was their proof. But Paul offered no *proof* that Jesus was the risen Christ and the savior of mankind. He expected – indeed *wanted* – people only to *believe* he was, to *have faith* he was. Apparently Greeks in Cilicia, Syria, and other places had bought into this illogic and had been converted. This indicated to me that Greeks were no longer great thinkers, but had become Arabs and Egyptians.

The next day at the appointed hour I went to see Paul. He greeted me in a perfunctory manner and motioned me to take a seat at the writing table where reed pens, lampblack, and sheets of papyrus awaited me.

"Before we begin," he said, "have you any questions that I can answer *now*?"

"One or two," I replied. "Do you think you'd be awarded a prize in an oratorical contest debating whether some rabbi was the true Messiah?"

If my question surprised him, it didn't give him pause. "I don't seek worldly prizes," he replied immediately. "God will give me my prize in heaven."

"What I mean is, do you see any *logic* in the message you're spreading?"

"Only a logic that transcends the earthly kind. Verbal sparring with men is a waste of time. My prize will be God's call through the Christ Jesus to the life above."

"Some say a believer waiting for the return of Jesus is like a dog who waits for his dead master to return from the wars. What would you say to them?"

"I'd tell them that the master is not dead and will return. Now, if you've no further questions, please take up a pen and write what I dictate."

And so I did, and he began to dictate in Aramaic.

IV

My dear father,

May God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ bring you grace and peace.

I give thanks to God and Jesus Christ that word of your illness reached me before it was too late. Alas, I'm unable to visit you at present and may be detained for some time; the Roman authority in Caesarea has imprisoned me. But fear not for my life for they protect me too, as your son – the son of a Roman citizen. And you may be interested to know that some

Pharisees on the Council in Jerusalem recently took my side against the Sadducees in a bitter dispute.

I'm sure you've heard reports, false and otherwise, about my missionary activities, beliefs, and acts. It's true that I am not today what I was when last we met. Everything changed in me one day on the road to Damascus when I had a vision of Jesus Christ and became a true believer. At that moment I realized that everything that had happened to me from the day I was born had led me to that awakening.

You surely gnash your teeth whenever you hear it said of your son that he preaches against the Law – the Law you so dearly love and which I also once loved and obeyed. What happened to me? I tell you father that Jesus Christ happened. Faith happened. Grace happened.

Father, men sinned *before* the Law was given to them. Did the Law stop men from sinning? No. It turned their sins into transgressions *against* the Law, into personal guilt. The Law *provoked* men into transgressing against it. It did not stop their sinning.

Remember the schoolmaster I had as a child, that furious disciplinarian? That's what the Law is like: a disciplinarian for a child. But when Jesus appeared to me in that vision I became a man, and I became his disciple. The Law is holy, righteous, and good, yes, but what does it then become? It becomes a dispenser of condemnations and death. The Law killed Jesus Christ, but in his dying he redeemed mankind. The Law is the opposite of grace. Grace is forgiveness bestowed by God.

I, your son, write to you in Aramaic, not Greek – to your heart and soul, not to your head. Because I don't write Aramaic as well as once I did, I've asked a young man to pen this letter for me. He's neither Jew nor Christian, nor does he know his father or his mother. But he writes Aramaic well for one who is so accursed, don't you think?

Father, you and I had many disagreements during my early years, and I write this letter most belatedly, to be sure. I should have sent such a letter long ago, for love is my message – love of the Lord Jesus Christ and love of men for their fellow man. I write now to speak of love and to say thank you. Thank you for insisting I be an artisan, a maker of tents and saddles. You told me it was a good thing for a man to have a skill in case all else failed to support him and his family.

My family now is the universal congregation of worshipers of our Lord Jesus Christ, which has been increased and multiplied by my missionary activities in many lands. My family is the Church itself, which is the invisible body of Christ.

Not wanting to live off contributions of the faithful I've supported myself as an artisan. This allowed me to give the donations I collected – donations mainly from converted Gentiles – to the Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem. That would not have been possible had I not known a trade. For this I again thank you and the Lord God who guided you in guiding me

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so that his work might be done. I hope we'll meet again in heaven – and therefore I pray there's still time for you to convert, and after that to bequeath your money to the Church.

Your loving son in Christ,
[signed] Saul

* * * * *

Then, with Paul's permission, I made a copy of the letter to send to Mel.

V

There was too much happening in Palestine at this time for me to want to return to Rome. Mel and I corresponded by fast courier and I kept him informed of events in Caesarea and Jerusalem. After the letter to his father, Paul began dictating in Greek. One letter was to Philemon, a prominent Christian, about his escaped slave Onesimus. Paul had converted Onesimus in prison, had become his spiritual father, and wished to return him to his master to be treated not just as a slave, but as a brother in Christ.

On the few occasions I saw Felix, the governor seemed a man beset by demons. At the time he arrested Paul he'd been in office about seven years and feared a recall to Rome any day.

Unfortunately for the governor, his support at Court had weakened with the accession of Nero a few years earlier. Nero had recently dismissed his brother Pallas from his post as chief accountant. This act infuriated Nero's mother Agrippina, to whom Pallas was allied. Then, not long after the arrest of Paul, news arrived that Agrippina – whom Felix had just honored with a series of coins – had been executed on orders of her son.

This wasn't a good time for the governor to lack allies. His marriage to the sister of Agrippa II – had he been circumcised for that union, I wondered? – was still in his favor. But even so, he certainly didn't want to arrive in Rome while his province was torn by civil and religious strife.

And torn it was; besides the terrible enmity between the Pharisees and Sadducees in Jerusalem, and the accusations of various Jews against Paul who was a Roman citizen, the Greeks and Jews in Caesarea were at each other's throats again over the problem of Jewish citizenship. In fact, it looked like a Jewish revolt was in the making. Felix had to be very worried; civil disorder on such a scale engulfing his province would be held against him in Rome, and could mean his execution.

Although he was imprisoned, Paul's friends were allowed to visit and serve him, bring him books, and even accompany him into town under

guard. The fact that he wasn't in a prison cell, but was allowed windowed rooms and even a writing table, showed that Felix was as much concerned with Roman justice as with Jewish sensibilities.

One visitor, Silas, had been Paul's companion on his second missionary journey, after Paul had split with Barnabas over the question of circumcision in the church. While Silas waited to see the prisoner, I mentioned to him that Paul was making notes for a letter to the Philippians.

"We were flogged and imprisoned in Philippi." Silas told me. "They put us in stocks."

"Who did?"

"The authorities. It's a Roman colony."

"But how dared they flog him?" I cried in amazement. "Paul's a Roman citizen."

"As am I. Of course, when we informed them of that they apologized and let us go. Actually, it was pagans who made the complaint against us for a change, not Jews."

"What was the complaint?"

"Paul had exorcised a slave-girl who'd been following us around and driving us crazy by speaking in oracles. Her owners had made a lot of money with her, but after the exorcism the pagan demon left her body and she couldn't do oracles any more. So her owners dragged us before the magistrates, accusing us of Jewish witchcraft and creating a disturbance."

"Well," I said, "however painful his memories of Philippi might be, according to the draft I penned, Paul's letter to the congregation there will be extremely cordial."

"Did he mention the flogging?"

"Not so far, but he did say that the Law of Moses was pure shit."

Silas burst out laughing. "Did he actually use that word? He really said 'shit'?"

"I can show you the draft. He also used the term mutilation for circumcision."

Silas shook his head. "Paul does believe in speaking his mind, of saying the truth as he sees it, and sparing nothing and no one."

"I hope that someday I'll hear him preach. He must be impressive."

"I'm sorry to disillusion you," Silas said, "but Paul's about the worst public speaker in Christendom."

His words astonished me. "I can hardly believe that! His letters are powerful and full of conviction."

"Listen," said Silas, "Paul's so nervous when he gets up in front of a group that you can see him shaking. He's ill sometimes hours in advance. In fact, he's told me that he fears damaging the Holy Cause by his inferior speaking ability. But he's driven to it, driven to spreading the Good News. Look how he forces himself to endure the terrors and tortures of land and sea voyages, and the exhaustion of working with leather, when he's not at

all a well man.

“It’s not because he lacks dedication to the Cause that he’s had so little success in proselytizing and converting,” Silas assured me. “You should have seen him in Athens. There again, for all his efforts, he proved a completely incompetent orator, unable to inspire a crowd or interest Greek intellectuals. And of course Jews reject him for his unabashed hatred of the Law and his antipathy to circumcision.”

I was thrilled by what I was hearing. Had I been wrong about the Greeks? Had their intelligentsia insisted on logical discourse after all? “I didn’t know Paul had so little success,” I told Silas, “but I have noticed that he has a terrible temper. Sometimes he seems to lose control of himself completely.”

“Tell me about it,” he sighed. “Spend a few years traveling with him. Paul’s filled with a fierce and burning love that sometimes burns its object. He loved Barnabas, but when Barnabas asked him to let Mark accompany them on their second voyage, Paul got so angry he picked a fight with Barnabas over circumcision, just to get rid of him. So Mark went home with Barnabas to Cyprus, and Paul took me with him instead. I should add that despite the way he felt about circumcision, Paul circumcised his beloved Timothy, who also came with us.”

I couldn’t help chuckling. “I’m starting to think that *all* you apostles are a bit barmy.”

“You may be right. But tell me, are you one of Paul’s converts or his hired scribe?”

“Neither. He lets me send copies to my adoptive father for publication or safekeeping.”

“Oh, right. You have the same name as that publisher who does codices. Well, that’s good. Paul’s letters must survive; they’re the real essence of his message. Believe me, I’ve lain awake at night wondering why Lord Jesus chose a man like him to do missionary work. Paul blames himself bitterly for his faults, but it doesn’t change the way he is. From what I’ve heard, he’s a lot like his father.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m just glad he didn’t use the word ‘shit’ in the letter to his dying dad. It sounds even worse in Aramaic than it does in Greek.”

“Paul wrote to his father in *Aramaic*?”

“Absolutely. He told me he thinks and even dreams in Aramaic.”

“Strange. He never told me that.”

“And he studied the Septuagint, not the Hebrew Bible.”

“Of course. We all did.”

“My father read the Septuagint too,” I told Silas. “The way you all hate the Law of Moses, I sometimes wonder if something got lost in translation. Still, Mel once told me that Philo the Exegete thought the Septuagint was divinely inspired and probably surpassed the original.”

Silas chuckled. “Philo didn’t know it, but down deep he was a Chris-

tian. Many Jews think he was an apostate, a pagan. I was told that once, on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he saw some tame birds, took them to be an evil omen, reversed course, and never saw the Temple.”

“What a great story!”

“But tell me, as a Jew and a Christian do you agree with Paul’s assessment of the Law?”

“I’m neither Jewish nor Christian,” I replied, “not circumcised or baptized. I was born right here in Caesarea and am a Roman citizen through adoption.” Pointing to my face I added, “This is a Roman nose, not a Jewish one.”

“Your nose is absolutely Roman,” Silas said quickly. “It out-Caesars Caesar’s. No offence meant.”

“None taken,” I replied gravely. “Do you still want my opinion of the Law of Moses?”

“Of course not. Why would a Roman citizen have an opinion of the Jewish Law, a Law that’s been around for millennia and which Romans need not obey? You hate it, right?”

“Right. I was raised to despise it for hand-me-down reasons that you could never imagine and which I don’t care to divulge.”

“Fair enough,” said Silas, getting to his feet as guards arrived to take him to see Paul. “If it’s a family thing it should remain private. But if some day you care to divulge it, just let me know.”

VI

Another visitor who came to see the prisoner was the physician Luke. He arrived by chance on the very day that Mark, passing through Caesarea on his way south, also stopped in to see Paul. Mark and Luke had never met before, but they’d heard of one another. I’d been a small child when I met Mark years earlier, but since then I’d read his correspondence with Mel, including an account of his travels with Paul and Barnabas on their first journey.

Mark and Luke quickly found they had something in common.

“Paul tells me you’re writing a gospel about the earthly life of Jesus,” said Luke to Mark. “That’s something I plan to do myself some day. Tell me, do you begin your gospel with the virgin birth?”

“The virgin birth?” Mark looked puzzled. “To whose birth are you referring?”

“Why, the birth of Lord Jesus,” said Luke, as if shocked at the other’s ignorance. “Jesus was the Son of God, born of Mary. You surely don’t think that God came in bodily form to inseminate her, do you?”

“I suppose not,” said Mark.

“Well, then, Mary had to have been a virgin when she conceived Jesus,

wouldn't you say?"

"But what about James and her other sons, and the girls?"

"They were Jesus' *half* brothers and sisters. Their father was Joseph."

Mark frowned. "But Jesus wasn't the *first* of Mary's children, so she couldn't have been a virgin when she conceived him. Her hymen was already broken for sure."

Luke drew himself up to his full height. "Don't tell *me*, a physician, about hymens," he said grandly. "We're talking miracles here, not medicine."

I was as confused as Mark. "But why," I asked, "would the almighty, jealous, Hebrew god choose some woman to bear his son who already *had* a husband and children? He could have had *anyone*."

"If you wish to plant a seed," said Luke solemnly, "you seek a fertile plot."

Deciding to move the conversation on, Mark asked, "So you'll include a virgin birth in your gospel?"

"For sure."

"Then be my guest. I begin my story years later, with the baptism of Jesus by John."

"I'd be most interested to read your gospel," Luke told him.

"I'm sure you would," sniffed Mark, already offended by the doctor's condescending attitude, and now perhaps wary of plagiarism.

"Well," I interrupted hurriedly, "I'm sure there's enough of Jesus to go around. Other gospel writers must be sharpening their nibs even as we speak. And their tongues as well."

Just then a guard came to say that Luke could visit the prisoner for one hour, and Mark would be next.

"What a stupid idea," said Mark when we were alone. "A *virgin birth*. And what next – a crocodilian gladiator?"

I felt my cheeks grow hot with blushes. "You've heard of that?"

"I have."

"Well, you'll have to ask my father about the crocodile," I told him.

VII

Under the administration of Felix, public order in Jerusalem had steadily deteriorated. The Jewish accusations against Paul were only the latest problem facing the governor. Earlier, a group of urban terrorists in Jerusalem – named *sicarii* after the short, curved daggers they hid under their clothes – had assaulted and killed in broad daylight Jonathan, a former high priest. The assassins then went on to commit daily murders, especially during times of festivals, creating great panic among the citizenry.

While these dagger-bearing killers escaped capture and their crimes

spread beyond the city, other problems arose. False messiahs and miracle workers excited crowds to behave like crazy persons. Promising them deliverance by God, they led them into the wilderness, then abandoned them without food, water, or shelter.

Even more worrisome was the conflict within the priestly hierarchy itself, between the wealthy and powerful high priesthood and the lower clergy. The enmity grew until both groups incited or hired gangs of revolutionaries to curse and throw stones at their opponents.

Behind this class warfare was an economic problem: the percentage of the grain harvest allotted to the priests, on which many poor priests depended. In this contest the greedy chief priests went so far as to send slaves to the threshing floor to take the grain for them alone, with the result that many lesser priests died of starvation.

I wrote of these matters to Mel, who was pleased to hear of them. "When the Romans have had enough of public disorder and insurrection," he wrote back, "they'll crush the lot of them." Then he added that Lucia wanted to know if I'd been converted yet. I replied no, but that since my birth was apparently virgin, I might apply for the position of Son of God, though the jury was still out on whether the post required circumcision or not.

Also much on my mind in those days was the fact that women seemed to be excluded from the lives of Paul and his friends. Conjugal visits, and visits by and to other women were allowed him, but Paul wasn't interested. For him and his associates, fornication wasn't an activity to be enjoyed, even by husbands with their wives; it was strictly a means of procreation. Sometimes I wondered if the "thorn in the flesh" that tortured Paul was the pain of unfulfilled desire.

Not sharing this apostolic view of sex, my friends and I took our urges to a district in the city where women could be had for a price. Episodes like these were enough for me. I feared finding a love such as Mel had for Sarah, a love that might rule my life completely. Aware that I'd be saddled with my adoptive father's obsession until his prophecy was fulfilled, I found myself looking forward to the destruction of the Temple almost as eagerly as he.

VIII [59 CE]

Paul had been imprisoned two years, and I was still in Judaea, when Nero replaced Felix with Porcius Festus. The new governor appeared more decisive than his predecessor. One of his first acts was to send troops after the latest "messiah" and his band of crazies, thereby delivering them from worldly sin and suffering to the hereafter.

Then, hoping to settle the problem of his controversial prisoner as

quickly as possible, Festus went to Jerusalem to speak to the high priest Ishmael and the Jewish Council. But when Ishmael requested that Festus send Paul to Jerusalem to be tried by the Jews, the governor balked. It had been whispered in his ear that the high priest was behind a plan to have Paul assassinated on the road to Jerusalem. As Ishmael had been appointed high priest by King Agrippa II, Festus was loath to expose the assassination plot for fear of embarrassing his influential neighbor.

So the governor decided to invite the Jews to come to Caesarea where he would hear the case himself.

I was staying then at Sarah's Hill, where a messenger from Paul found me. "Return" was written in large letters inside a folded sheet of papyrus. And so I returned to Caesarea where upon my arrival I was immediately escorted to Paul, who was livid.

"You will write a letter for me," he announced as soon as he saw me. "While I'm not to be tried by those Jews in Jerusalem, neither will I be accused by them and tried before a provincial governor in Caesarea."

"But what can you do?" I asked.

"I can appeal to Caesar."

His words startled me. "You want me to pen a letter to *Nero*?"

"Absolutely. He will decide my case."

"May I first shake the dust from my clothes and have something to eat?"

Paul stared at me, his eyes nearly popping from his head. "You may if you *must*," he said between clenched teeth.

"Have *you* eaten?" I asked. "Shall I ask them to bring you lunch?"

At this Paul's pent-up indignation seemed to collapse. "All right," he said. "Have them bring me something. I'm bloody starving. But be back in an hour."

And so I was. However, during that hour the chief priests and Jewish elders arrived from Jerusalem and Paul was commanded to appear in the court of judgment. I hurried to join them and found Paul surrounded by his accusers. His voice could be heard insisting he'd not blasphemed the Law, the Temple, or the Roman governor.

"If anyone can prove that I have," he cried, "then I'll gladly face my punishment. But it's not for any of *you* to meet it out."

Festus appeared completely out of his depth in the ensuing discussion. There were no criminal accusations here – all the talk was about a man named Jesus and whether he was alive or dead. Festus asked Paul if he'd prefer to go to Jerusalem and be tried there on the charges, but Paul refused.

"As a Roman citizen I demand that you keep me under guard while I appeal to the emperor," he told Festus.

Paul's words were like magic. The Jews fell silent. Festus turned and consulted his advisors, then said to Paul, "If you appeal to the emperor, to

the emperor you shall go.”

The next day Paul dictated his letter to Nero. I was surprised that there was nothing in it alluding to the risen Christ or to God, nor one word about the hereafter. “They’ve all heard of Paul the Apostle,” he assured me. “Nero knows who I am. There’s no point in gilding the page.”

In fact, the letter was a simple personal statement by a Roman citizen who found himself trapped by circumstances and wished to appeal to his emperor. His appeal was based on the Law of Augustus, which said that a Roman official had no jurisdiction over a Roman citizen outside Italy. Paul’s letter left that same day for Rome.

IX

A few days later two illustrious visitors arrived in Caesarea to pay the new governor a courtesy call. Had they known what they were getting into, King Agrippa II and his sister Bernice might not have come at that precise moment. Still, their intentions were good; they hoped to heal any breach they might have caused by avoiding the capital during the time of Governor Felix, who was married to Bernice’s prettier sister, Drusilla.

Festus explained to them the trouble he was having with Paul’s detention and with the Jews who wanted to try him in Jerusalem and possibly execute him for blasphemy. “I didn’t understand a word of what any of them were saying,” he told his royal visitors. “It all had to do with religion, but the gods aren’t in my purview. Now Paul has appealed to Caesar and I must write my opinion of this matter to the emperor, but I don’t know what to tell him.”

“I’ll hear this man myself,” said Agrippa, “but we’re only staying another day.”

“Then you’ll hear him tomorrow,” said a much-relieved Festus.

I was with Paul when he received word King Agrippa would give him a hearing.

“That’s fantastic, Sarus,” he cried. “At last a *real* Jew to speak to, not those Temple tyrants who twist my every word to prove my guilt. Agrippa has power and surely stands in the emperor’s good graces; last year he named his capital city Neronias. And for a woman, Bernice doesn’t lack intelligence.”

“When you speak before them will you try to proselytize them?”

Paul burst into laughter, a bitter laughter, but more pleasing to the ear than his other recent outbursts. “That would be a coup, no? Herod’s great-grandchildren converted to Christ?”

“Then you’ll try?”

“I hope not. I hope I don’t try to convert the lot of them, from habit.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want to get out of these shackles. First things first. And anyway, I’m not sure I’d succeed in anything more than enraging them, for I’ve been told my arguments lack *logic*.” Suppressing a smile, he glared at me accusingly.

“Perhaps you should write them a letter,” I grinned. “You’re good at that.”

I was curious on my own account to be in the presence of King Agrippa II and his sister Bernice. Lucia had told me of meeting her when she, Mel, and Pontius had accompanied their father, Agrippa I, from Alexandria to Caesarea on the emperor’s trireme. This had happened before my birth, but anything I could learn about my adoptive family vitally interested me. I hoped that if the opportunity arose I’d have the courage to speak to Bernice.

I walked behind Paul as he was brought in chains into the audience hall. What a sight greeted us! Everyone was there: King Agrippa and Beatrice both royally arrayed, Festus with his people, and all the top military brass and leading citizens of Caesarea.

Festus stepped forward and spoke to the royal guests. He reiterated to them, so that all present could hear, that he didn’t understand the dire charges the Jewish people had brought against the prisoner, but that Paul had appealed to the emperor to judge his case. He explained that he would gladly send Paul to Rome, but had no idea what to tell the emperor. He wanted Agrippa to hear the case and advise him what to say, for he didn’t see how he could send a prisoner for an appeal without clearly defining the charges against him.

King Agrippa then told Paul he had permission to speak on his own behalf.

I was interested to hear what Paul would say and how he’d say it. Would he be the trembling missionary Silas had told me about, or the brazen Pharisee Mel and Lucia had described, a man whose fiery rhetoric had roused his fellows to attack the Nazarenes?

In fact he was neither, or perhaps both. Glad to speak before persons who knew what he was talking about – who knew what it meant to be both a Jew and a Pharisee – so passionate was Paul in his own defense that his shaking and nervousness were hardly noticeable.

He spoke first of his upbringing and his early intolerance of the Nazarenes. He told how he’d persecuted them in their homes and synagogues and had consented to many executions. Then he spoke of his journey to Damascus and his vision of Jesus, who asked him to believe and become his apostle.

“I wasn’t converted by Jesus the man,” he said, “but by Jesus the Holy Spirit.”

While listening to Paul, I watched the faces of his judges. The king regarded him throughout with a bemused frown, Bernice with an emo-

tionless stare. Governor Festus looked around everywhere at everyone, his eyes rolling in distress brought on by total incomprehension.

But it was when Paul got onto the subject of the prophets and Moses, relating the prophecy that a Messiah would come who'd suffer and then arise from death to announce the way to salvation for Jews and Gentiles, that Festus couldn't stand it any longer.

"Paul," he cried, "you're crazy! Too much Bible study has driven you mad!"

Ignoring this outburst, Paul said boldly, despite his shaking, "King Agrippa, you know about these things. Surely you believe in the prophets!"

I instantly felt it was a mistake for Paul to have said this, for it sounded like the first step in a process of conversion, and as such did Agrippa see it too.

"Paul," he said, "do you really think that in the short time you'll have in my presence you'll succeed in making me a Christian?"

"In a short or a long time," cried Paul, "I hope all of you who hear me today will become what I am. Except, of course, for these chains."

At this the king, and then everyone, got up to leave. Pushing forward, hoping to get Bernice's ear, I heard Agrippa tell the governor that Paul had not done anything to warrant death or imprisonment, and that had Paul not appealed to the emperor, he could now have been released.

Then suddenly Bernice was passing in front of me, surrounded by her attendants. "Madame," I said, shaking harder than Paul as I fell into step beside her, "do you recall a journey you made some years ago from Alexandria to Caesarea with your father the king and some others?"

When she had recalled the voyage, I made so bold as to ask if she remembered meeting a woman called Lucia and a man named Mel.

"I do remember them," she smiled. "Lucia was pregnant and often ill."

Her words startled me. Lucia? *Pregnant?* "Oh, no," I said. "Lucia never had a child."

"Well, you certainly look like your father," said Bernice. "That's definitely his nose. How old are you?"

I told her I was eighteen and that Mel was my adoptive father.

"And you say Lucia wasn't your mother?"

"Absolutely not. My mother's name was Sarah. I was named Sarus after her. She's buried outside Jerusalem."

"Well, Sarus, I recall that the voyage took place eighteen years ago, just before I married my second husband, so you'd be the right age. But then, you know best."

As she moved on, I looked after her in bewilderment.

X

I had no time to ponder Bernice's words or the meanings behind them – or perhaps just didn't want to. That same day Festus wrote to the emperor regarding Agrippa's opinion in the case against Paul, and began preparing Paul's voyage to Italy along with several other prisoners. They had to leave soon for it was already late August and the sailing season was to last only six more weeks.

"That will take us up to the day the Jews call Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement," Paul told me. "But don't worry if the name sounds ominous; the real kicker is *Judgement Day*."

When the time came, Paul and the other prisoners were handed over to Julius, an officer in the Emperor's Regiment. Julius agreed to let me travel with them and assist Paul.

Sidon was our first stop. Paul had friends there and Julius allowed him to visit them, under guard. Of course I went ashore too, to visit the town and purchase a few items that would make the passage more comfortable for Paul and the other prisoners.

Leaving Sidon the wind was against us. It was decided to sail northward around the cape of Cyprus, then continue along the lee side of that island. Eventually we arrived at Myra on the coast of Lycia. It was here that Julius found a grain ship from Alexandria bound for Italy, and transferred us all to that vessel, the *Sea Onion II*. He left us at that point, replacing himself with another officer, Marcus. From there it was slow sailing to arrive off Cnidus, where it was decided to give up fighting that wind and head southwest. Rounding Cape Salmone, we were sheltered from the winds on the lee side of Crete until we arrived at Fair Havens.

During those tedious days Paul mercilessly proselytized both the prisoners and the Jewish crew, sparing – indeed avoiding – only the ship's Jewish owner and captain. But what at first seemed to the men a distraction from their daily toil and boredom, soon turned them into a restless, captive audience. A few confided to me that were they not chained they'd gladly throw themselves into the sea rather than listen to another word about the Holy Spirit and salvation. Nor was I persuaded to embrace Paul's faith.

Paul was saddened by his futile efforts to convert the men, so I tried to comfort him. "After all, Paul," I said, "why should they believe a chained criminal?"

Taken aback by my words he was about to make a fierce reply, then saw from my smile that I was joking.

We spent several days at Fair Havens taking on supplies and waiting for the weather to improve. The Day of Atonement came and went. This late in the year it was dangerous to continue the voyage. Paul felt that to keep going would endanger the ship and all the lives on board, but the cap-

tain didn't consider the harbor a safe place to winter, and the ship's owner agreed. They convinced Marcus and the crew that it would be better to put out to sea and spend the winter in the harbor of Phoenix, which was oriented away from the winter winds.

Just then, adding credence to this plan, a soft wind began to blow from the south. Sure that this breeze was the answer to the prayers they'd made to their Hebrew god, the crew gladly hoisted the anchor and we began sailing along the south coast of Crete.

But suddenly the wind changed again, becoming a wicked northwesterly. The first blow so jolted the ship that it broke free the lifeboat and tossed it overboard. Unable to keep the ship headed into the wind, the crew could only let it drift, carried by wind and currents toward the coast of Libya.

Before reaching Africa, however, we found shelter in the lee of a small island named Cauda. There the sailors were able to get the lifeboat back on board, securing it with ropes that passed completely around the ship. Then they lowered the sail and once more ceded control of the ship to Jupiter, Neptune, Aeolus, Jesus, and the Existent.

It was a terrible storm. For many days we had neither sun nor stars to determine our position or drift. In the heavy seas jars of oil, sacks of grain, and other supplies broke loose and had to be jettisoned. This helped lighten the ship but for days we had nothing to eat.

Morale was very low; we believed nothing could save us. Then one night Paul had a dream. He told us the next day that in his dream an angel had come from God – *his* god, Lord Jesus Christ. The angel told Paul to have no fear, for the Lord intended that he appear before Caesar and so would save not only *his* life, but the lives of all traveling with him.

"Our ship will be driven onto some island," he told us, "but we'll be alive and safe."

That night the sailors sensed we were nearing a landmass of some kind and made soundings with line and weight that confirmed this. Afraid of going onto rocks in the dark, they dropped anchors from the rear of the ship. Then, saying that they had to go to the front of the ship to drop more anchors, they lowered the small boat. But the soldiers quickly saw that if the crew deserted the ship, those of us remaining on board would be lost. So before the men had time to get into it, the officer cut the small boat adrift.

When daylight finally came we saw an unfamiliar coast. Recalling Paul's dream, the captain decided to run the ship aground. With great enthusiasm the men cut the anchor ropes and raised the sail. The steering oar was unbound and the ship was turned toward shore. But alas, before getting there we encountered a sandbar and became hopelessly mired. Stuck as we were, the heavy seas battered and started breaking up the rear of the vessel.

It was time to abandon ship, but the soldiers wanted first to kill all the prisoners so that they wouldn't escape. Marcus stopped them. He ordered all the men who could swim to jump overboard and swim to shore. The others should cling to planks and other floating debris and get to shore that way.

Before leaving the ship, a Roman soldier, three prisoners, and a Jewish sailor told Paul that they'd converted to Jesus. Still, to hedge their salvation, before going over the side all but the Jew cut off their hair and beards as offerings to Neptune.

Luckily for me, Mel had insisted I learn to swim at an early age. This allowed me to direct the flounders to hold onto pieces of flotsam and to each other, thereby creating fantastic chains of wood and flesh that could paddle while being steered toward shore.

The landmass was the island of Malta. Cold, hungry, and stripped of possessions we were warmly welcomed by its inhabitants. Over the winter the *Sea Onion II* broke up completely. Her planks and other parts were salvaged by the Maltese, while anything washed ashore of a personal nature was returned to us.

Other seafarers were wintering on Malta and the owner of our wrecked ship was able to find and purchase another Alexandrian vessel. This ship was the *Twin Gods*, which her new owner immediately renamed: *Sea Onion III*.

The sailing season finally arrived and over the next weeks we made our way toward Rome. When we reached Puteoli, Paul sought out Christian congregations, some of whom offered the hospitality of their homes to Paul, his new converts, and me. For reasons of security, Marcus refused to allow this. However, with the sea journey now at an end, he did rule that the apostate Jewish sailor was free to accept the Christian hospitality. Paul was delighted for him, but at the last moment the fellow decided to renounce his new faith, return home to Alexandria with the rest of the crew, and fight the Greeks.

XI

At Puteoli I was obliged to take leave of Paul and the others and make the last leg of the trip in a rented conveyance. Even so, along the way they and I moved at the same average speed, often passing and re-passing each other with shouted greetings and farewells which, coming so close upon each other, caused much laughter.

Then, approaching the city, there came that wrenching moment when our paths were fated to diverge – theirs turning left to where prisoners are taken, mine straight ahead, toward home.

Arriving at the house I found no one there except the servants; these

were not slaves since long ago Mel had freed every one of them. I recognized almost all by sight and name, and we greeted each other with smiles and hugs.

A bath was drawn and clean clothes put on me, after which I enjoyed a late lunch. Hardly had I finished when Mel arrived with Lucia. Who could describe our joy at seeing one another after three years?

There was so much to tell. We talked almost till dawn, slept a few hours, then began talking again. Lucia listened to all I had to say, regretting only that I'd not been converted to Christianity.

"Years ago, when I lost faith in the Roman gods," she told me, "a great emptiness was left in my soul. The death of Pontius enlarged it, but now Jesus Christ has more than filled it. How I prayed to him to bring you home safely, and he has."

Mel was satisfied that I'd not been converted. "Nothing Paul said could sway you?"

"No. In fact I'm surprised *you* haven't been swayed while reading his tracts and letters. After all, you do have one major thing in common."

"Which is?"

"Your antipathy to the Law of Moses. I'm sure you read the draft of his letter to the Philippians."

"I did," said Mel. "He called it crap."

"Hey, guys," interrupted Lucia, "how about changing the subject."

I had to laugh. "All right, Lucia," I said, "but let me tell you about the vision Paul had the night before the *Sea Onion* ran aground."

"The *Sea Onion*?" cried Mel in disbelief.

"*Sea Onion II*," I corrected myself. "We sailed on her from Myra to Malta, where she broke up. The Jew who owned her bought another ship in Malta. He renamed her *Sea Onion III*."

"I've so much to tell you," Mel said to me. "One of these days I'll let you read my History. But that can wait. That can wait."

Looking at the two of them, I saw how they'd changed. Their quiet lives in Rome had caused each to add a few pounds; the years had added gray hairs. I didn't mention this, of course. Instead, I told Lucia that she hadn't changed at all.

"That's the result of having had no children," she told me. "A childless woman keeps her youth."

I glanced at Mel who was looking down, saying nothing. It seemed the three of us might talk for a month and I still wouldn't discover all the answers they held inside them. Nor perhaps would they.

XII

The first thing I wanted to do in Rome was see Paul. He'd lost some drafts of letters at sea, but before leaving Caesarea I'd sent copies of these to Mel for safekeeping; now I wanted to give them to their author. But how to get in to see a prisoner? Rome wasn't Caesarea, after all.

Mel assured me he had contacts at Court and in the military. "If you want to see Paul, or even meet Nero himself," he told me, "I can arrange it."

"I'd love to meet Caesar," I replied, impressed.

"Then first you should see what Caesar has wrought; after that you can ingratiate yourself by praising his works."

So together we visited the magnificent public baths Nero had recently completed. In love with everything Greek, the young emperor had added to them a sumptuous gymnasium where Roman athletes exercised and competed naked in the Greek tradition. Mel told me that these goings-on shocked the aristocracy, who feared the Hellenization of the warlike Roman character.

Certainly these baths were the best place to meet important people, which was one reason Mel normally avoided them. The first person he recognized was T. Claudius Balbillus, formerly the Director of the Library at Alexandria and a procurator in Egypt. Balbillus was on good terms with Nero and promised he'd arrange for me to meet him informally.

In fact, I was most curious to meet Nero, that player of musical instruments, singer, ardent charioteer, and reputed orgiast, whose intimates included the writer/voluptuary Petronius, author of the *Satyricon*, and who at twenty-five had already been emperor eight years.

"Nero's mother was Caligula's sister Agrippina," Mel reminded me. "On his father's side are five hundred years of the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* – the 'Bronzebeards.' In other words, cruelty and recklessness run on both sides of his family."

Mel didn't have to remind me of Agrippina's last words when the soldier sent by her son to kill her raised his sword. "Drive it through my womb," she told him. Probably everyone in Rome had heard the story, certainly Nero himself.

Interested as I was to meet him, this wasn't the best time to petition the emperor for a favor. Currently he was involved in divorcing his wife Octavia and marrying the wealthy and beautiful Poppaea Sabina, who was already married to, and pregnant by, Salvius Otho. Nero's divorce from Octavia was unpopular with the masses, so to make his action against her more credible, he accused her of infertility and of adultery with a slave who was a suspected revolutionary.

Also at this time Nero was busy giving musical performances, writing poetry, holding poetry readings, and looking after the affairs of state. My

opportunity to speak with him finally came in a palace hallway where I had just enough time for a brief exchange.

"Princeps," I began, "I'm Mel Sarus, a scribe working for Paul of Tarsus. I would like access to him."

"Paul of *where*?"

"Of Tarsus. Paul's a Roman citizen, come on appeal from Governor Festus in Caesarea."

"Oh, *that* Paul of Tarsus. Well, tell him his appeal is granted, whatever it was."

"I think right now he's being held in your prison."

"Not for long. He'll have to find his own lodgings. I'll put a guard on him." He turned toward an officer standing next to him. "Go with . . . your name again?"

"Mel Sarus, a Roman citizen, at your service."

"Go with Mel Sarus. I know your father, Sarus," he said. "Tell him I'm sending him some lines of poetry for publication."

"Yes, Lord Caesar," I answered respectfully.

He stared at me briefly. "Good, good." Then he swept off down the hall, followed by his retinue and guards.

How my heart rejoiced. Paul was free – almost. A guard? Did that mean house arrest? That wasn't so bad. He'd told me on Malta that he wanted to live for a while in Rome and organize and enlarge his church there. I even half suspected, from something he'd let slip, that he only appealed to Nero in order to get free passage to Rome.

Paul was quickly able to find suitable accommodations. These were paid for by his congregation and guarded day and night by a soldier. But after a few weeks the guard was withdrawn and he was allowed to move about the city freely, see friends, and engage in church activities. I continued as before to take dictation, but sometimes his eyes were good enough for him to read and write himself. Even then he usually liked me to be there to help him test his ideas.

"Does that make sense?" he'd ask, referring to some arcane piece of theology he'd just devised. Of course, my dutiful yes's or no's were all the same to him; he knew I couldn't possibly judge his ideas. Still, he'd ask for my opinion, then rack his brain to find any possible truth or error in my reply.

In the following months Paul kept both of us busy writing and sending off letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, as well as to the Philippians. He also dictated a letter to Timothy, a young Christian who'd accompanied and assisted him in his missionary work. Although Paul missed him very much, he counseled him to remain in Ephesus, where he was needed. Later, in another letter, he gave Timothy loving Christian advice, like a father to a son, and urged him to come to Rome and visit him.

XIII [62 CE]

It was fortunate that Paul got his reprieve from Nero when he did. Others, including Nero's wife Octavia, weren't so lucky.

At the start of his principate, Nero had two brilliant advisors: Seneca, his former tutor and chief minister, and Burrus, his Praetorian Prefect. Burrus, believing an emperor's safety lay in the love of his people, worked on building popular support for Nero. He organized lavish games in which Nero played the lyre and drove chariots. He advised Nero to build, among other projects, an amphitheater on the Campus Martius. This was so opulently accoutered that it made all former gladiatorial and wild beast shows seem shabby in comparison.

Seneca believed that to gain the love of his subjects an emperor should practice clemency and be just. This is perhaps why, while most arena games were a means of executing slaves and criminals for the delight of the spectators, Nero decreed that henceforth no contests would be to the death.

This happy time ended when Burrus died and Seneca withdrew from public life to study philosophy.

The loss of the benign influence of these two men brought change. Nero now fell under the influence of Poppaea and Tigellinus. He, a man of low social status and even lower character, had many years before been exiled from Rome following an affair with Nero's mother, Agrippina. These two counseled Nero to seek the people's love by exhibiting his talents to them; to assure his safety he shouldn't grant clemency, but practice repression. Ruling by fear, Nero became a tyrant. When his efforts to justify his divorce from Octavia caused riots, he suppressed them and sent her to Pandateria under guard. There, a few days later, her wrists were slashed – a method of murder resembling suicide. Twelve days later he married Poppaea.

While I worked with Paul, shaking my head over the Court gossip that pervaded Rome, Mel journeyed back to Sarah's Hill, leaving Lucia and Ari in charge of publications. In Jerusalem he found that King Agrippa II had built a tower onto the old palace of the Hasmoneans.

"The tower has a dining room from where the king, the governor, *anyone*, could look down on the Temple," Mel told me when he got back to Rome. "They could see the sacrifices and spy on everything else going on there."

"Could? Not *can*?"

"No, dammit. Before I got there the priests had built a wall so high the view was completely blocked. Governor Festus ordered them to take it down – he's supposed to keep a military watch over the Temple during festivals – but the priests refused. They decided instead to appeal to the emperor. The whole bunch should arrive here any day."

Sure enough, soon after Mel's return the delegation of priests, including the high priest Ishmael, arrived from Jerusalem and was granted an audience. Mel was delighted when Nero ruled against the Jewish king by decreeing that the Temple wall should stand. But then, to ease the slight to Agrippa, Nero kept the high priest in custody. This gave the king the opportunity to depose Ishmael and appoint Ananus II in his stead.

"For some reason Poppaea favors the Jews," Mel told me sourly when the news arrived from Jerusalem. "I see her hand in this."

As it turned out, the new high priest despised the Jewish Christians who were led by James the Just, the brother of Jesus. The unexpected death of Governor Festus at this moment gave Ananus the opportunity, before the arrival of the new governor, Albinus, to have James arrested and tried before the Jewish Council. They found him guilty of blasphemy and condemned him to death by stoning.

"Ha!" exclaimed Mel when he heard this. "They're still up to their old ways. What they did to James is exactly what they did to Stephen. Unless something's done to stop them, there won't be an innocent, unbloodied stone left in all Jerusalem."

"You're beginning to sound like a Christian yourself," I chuckled. "At least you take their part." Mel's stern look made me hastily retract my words and change the subject. "I'll tell you what Paul's been thinking lately," I said. "He sees such a huge divergence between Christian faith and Jewish Law that he considers the term 'Jewish Christian' an oxymoron. But Jesus and the twelve apostles were Jews. Paul himself is a Jew. Neither Christians *nor* Jews can escape that truth."

Mel considered this. "They will," he said after a moment. "If they want to, they'll find a way. Paul calls Jewish Christianity an oxymoron? Perhaps. Theology is based on a fiction, and fiction can be twisted any which way. Truth too. The day will come when too-zealous Christians will behave as badly as too-zealous Jews – persecuting pagans and blasphemers, cutting off circumcisions, killing Jews who do or *don't* believe in the risen Christ."

"Is that a prophecy?" I grinned. "Another of dad's do-it-yourself prophecies that he'll try to make come true?"

Mel laughed. "I should live so long," he said. "And you should live so long too, my son."

XIV

It was clear that Mel, despite his publishing venture and other ties to Rome, was becoming restless. The Judaean pot was simmering and the slightest increase in temperature might bring it to a boil. He wanted to be there when that happened.

Always on the lookout for the latest news of events in the East, Mel used his occasional trips to Ostia and Puteoli to speak to travelers arriving from Palestine with fresh stories to relate. It was in the port of Puteoli that he – and I, who happened to be with him – heard an extraordinary tale and had an unexpected encounter.

The story concerned a shipwreck on the Adriatic of a vessel arriving from the East. Of the six hundred passengers, only eighty were rescued. We were present and eager to offer assistance when some of the survivors reached Puteoli in various states of horror at their ordeal, and joy at being alive.

Of the two or three to whom Mel and I spoke, one man, who seemed to be in his twenties, told us his name was Joseph, son of Matthias, but that he preferred to be called by his Roman name, Josephus. Mel was impressed. “If I recall correctly,” he told me in a whisper, “this fellow is the son of a Jewish priest and a woman descended from the royal family of the Hasmoneans. Some time ago he ran away from home and spent three years in the wilderness with that hermit Bannus. If this is the same son of Matthias, he should have some good information for us.”

“Once they wring the sea water out of him I’m sure he’ll talk,” I whispered back, earning a sharp glance. “Let’s offer to share our carriage.”

“Good idea.”

The place Josephus wished to be taken was the home of Jewish friends living in a magnificent villa on the shore outside the city. Because of the late hour, Mel and I were invited to sup with the other guests and remain overnight.

After talk of shipwreck and rescue had run its course, Josephus explained why he was traveling to Rome.

“You surely recall that a few years ago Governor Felix sent some priests – who happened to be friends of mine – to Rome. There they were imprisoned by Nero and have suffered greatly ever since. The food they’re given isn’t kosher. Terrified they’ll be fed meat left over from pagan sacrifices, they’ve subsisted miserably all this time on a diet of nuts and figs.

“I left Jerusalem some weeks ago as part of a Jewish deputation determined to seek the release of our friends. Alas, I suspect I’m the only one of our group who escaped the sea, although some of us may have been taken to other ports.”

Hearing this, a guest named Aliturus, a Jewish actor at Court, spoke up. “I’m leaving for Rome in a few days myself,” he told Josephus. “I’d be happy to introduce you to my good friend the Empress Poppaea. She’ll surely help you succeed in your mission and reward you handsomely besides. I don’t doubt that everything you lost at sea will be returned to you tenfold upon reaching Rome.”

“Is the empress so generous to *all* the shipwrecked of the Adriatic,” smiled Josephus, “or only the wealthy, well-connected Jewish ones?”

"Ah," replied Aliturus, "there's no personage in Rome who doesn't desire good friends and allies in the provinces."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Josephus, "and can promise you that the emperor's wife won't be disappointed in her . . . *investment*."

Josephus also told us of some recent happenings in Jerusalem. It seems that the trial and execution of Jesus' brother James, ordered by the high priest and the Sanhedrin, was causing trouble. King Agrippa II, the high priest, the Council, and Nero's newly appointed governor, Gessius Florus, were in disagreement less over what had been done to James than who'd had the legal right to do it.

"My biggest worry," Josephus said, "is Governor Florus. Of all the governors, Pontius Pilate included, he's the one who most hates the Jews. Even his predecessor, Albinus, who released criminals from prison and flooded Palestine with brigands, who put heavy taxes on the people and stole their property, was a lesser villain than this Florus, who right away joined in cahoots with those very thieves and murderers. I can't imagine why Nero appoints such men. Florus will cause a general insurrection. You'll see. Within a year war will break out between Rome and the Jews. You'll see."

I glanced at Mel who looked ready right then to get up from the table and begin packing his bag.

XVI [64 CE]

The next morning Mel and I were sitting in the villa garden overlooking the sea when Josephus strolled up. He noticed I was writing and, in answer to his question, I told him I was making notes for a History, an opus begun by my adoptive father.

"I too intend to write a book one day," Josephus told us rather grandly. "It will be a history of the Jews, to explain our ways to the Greeks and other peoples. Tell me, have you ever come across the writings of the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria?"

At this we two broke into smiles. Mel explained that not only had he met Philo in person, but had published some of his works, both during his life and posthumously. "Which of his writings do you like best?" Mel asked.

"Besides his brilliant exegetical works, I was fascinated by his description of the contemplative lives led by the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides at Mareotic Lake."

"Indeed! And did you run right off and join them?"

"No," said Josephus. "I chose to live a few years in the wilds of Judaea with the sage Bannus. It was a hard, exacting existence, but one I found extremely enlightening . . . to a point."

“What point was that?”

“The point at which my father discovered where I was and dragged me home. But that was just as well; it was time for a change.”

“Do you believe the society at Mareotic Lake really exists,” asked Mel, “outside of Philo’s imagination?”

“If not, so much greater the loss,” sighed Josephus, adding nothing to our wisdom by these words.

Next, Josephus asked about our publishing business. When Mel mentioned that Apion’s story of Androcles and the Lion had proved popular, Josephus was aghast. “You published that scoundrel Apion?” he exclaimed. “I can’t believe it. He was the worst of the Greek anti-Semites. Claudius Caesar judged and executed him at Rome, not for his anti-Semitism perhaps, but for his evil soul.”

When Mel told Josephus he’d attended the trial, had first met Apion during the reign of Caligula, and was the one who’d told him about Androcles and his lion, Josephus replied, “You’ve given me an idea. I myself will write a rebuttal to Apion’s vilification of the Jews. I’ll call it ‘Against Apion’. Think you might publish it?”

“Why not? If you want, I’d be happy to show you what I have in my History concerning the man.”

“I’d like that,” said Josephus.

Josephus’s mission to Rome was crowned with success when Poppaea persuaded Nero to release the imprisoned priests. The occasion was celebrated with a kosher feast to which Mel and I were invited. The priests, well fattened from their lengthy diet of nuts and figs, delighted in the kosher fare.

At the dinner Josephus reminded Mel of his promise regarding Apion. The next day Mel had those parts read aloud to both of us, since I too wanted to hear. I listened with a special interest, for he’d never allowed me to read any of his History.

“That was amazing,” Josephus said when the reading was over.

“What in particular?” asked Mel, obviously flattered.

“I’m amazed you call this history. Actually, it’s more like biography, a kind of biography I’ve not encountered before. It’s not just written *about* its subject, but *by* its subject. One might even call it *autobiography*, or *autohistory*. That isn’t at all what I intend to write. My book about the Jews will be true history.”

“Only the bare facts?”

“As bare and factual as can be, for it will be based on the Bible itself.”

“When do you expect to write your history?”

“Asked like a dedicated publisher,” chuckled Josephus. “I can only promise that I’ll do it before I die.”

“That’s a popular time to write things down,” nodded Mel.

During Josephus’s stay in Rome, Aliturus gave him a grand tour of the

city. Mel and I were invited to visit the *Domus Transitoria* with them, and briefly met the beautiful Poppaea. What struck me was that whenever her gaze met that of the handsome actor, it seemed to stick there. Were they lovers? If so, perhaps that was the source of her mysterious sympathy for the Jews.

When Josephus left Rome for Ostia, we saw him off in the royal coach, ten pack animals loaded with gifts following. Before leaving he told us how impressed he'd been by the magnificence and might of Rome, and of course he was overwhelmed by the generosity of the empress.

"I've had a wonderful time here," he told us, "in great part because of your many kindnesses. I insist you call on me when next you're in Jerusalem so that I can return your hospitality."

Mel promised him that we would, but what worlds of history would transpire before we three met again.

XVII [65 CE]

The days passed and gossip about life at Court went on as usual. Nero, glad to be free of the stuffy influence of Burrus and Seneca, seemed happy in the company of intimates such as Tigellinus and Petronius.

Intent on increasing his popularity through exhibitions of chariot racing, singing, and playing, the emperor wasn't satisfied with giving performances in his own house or at other amateur venues. Still, not feeling himself ready for the Roman stage, he opted to give a recital of his singing and playing in his beloved "Greek" city, Naples.

It took a lot of persuasion to get Mel to go with me. "Our History needs an unbiased critique of the emperor's musical talents," I told him, "and you're more unbiased than I."

"Who will be there?" he asked with mock concern. "*Le tout* Neopolis?"

"No one of importance," I assured him. "Probably Neapolitan locals, people from nearby towns, and a clique of fawning courtiers and Praetorians."

"That's okay, then," he said. "I wouldn't want anyone important to think I'm a Nero fan."

"May the theater collapse on our heads if anyone does."

And so we went. It was an occasion to remember, but not for the quality of the performance. Still, it was clear that Nero took his work as seriously as any professional. The emperor addressed the overflowing crowd in Greek, and to his obvious satisfaction the spectators – especially the Praetorians – showed their appreciation with rhythmic applause, a technique introduced to the event by visitors from Alexandria.

When the performance ended no one cried out for encores. The theater

emptied promptly, which was good, for moments later we felt the earth move beneath our feet. The building we'd just vacated began to rattle like skeleton bones, then suddenly collapsed.

Some looked upon the theater's fall as a bad omen, but not Nero; it was reported later that he believed the gods had so approved of his performance that they'd destroyed the theater to insure no lesser entertainment might ever be held there.

If the collapse of the theater was truly an omen, its prophecy was fulfilled some moments before dawn on 19 July of that year. Awakened by shouts and tumult inside the household and without, we ran to the windows, then into the garden, to see the center of Rome in flames.

"It's near the Circus," cried Mel. "It must have started in one of the shops."

His words took my breath away. Which shop? Which shop? One near ours? Had we lost months of work, hundred of books, copies, translations, and originals, through the carelessness of some idiot? Had our labored-over papyri fed the flames?

The sun rose but the day became darker. Our eyes tried in vain to pierce the dense smoke rising from the city. The heat of the fire would soon make a hot July day a veritable furnace. If hell is hot, I was thinking, the screaming we hear from below is the screaming of the damned.

"Where was Ari last night?" Mel's voice was tight with concern. "Did he sleep over at the shop?"

I didn't know. "I'm sure he'll come here when he can," I said, trying to reassure both of us. "He must be helping fight the fire."

"We should help too," said Mel. "If it isn't stopped it'll reach the Palatine."

And so we went, but found it impossible even to approach the conflagration. The stones of buildings had grown so hot they burned everything that touched them, even the air. Everything was on fire. Tenements with or without shared walls collapsed, filling the narrow streets with fallen masonry. Dwellings of the poor, houses of the aristocracy, places of work, temples – all crumbled, nothing was spared.

Nero, vacationing in Antium, returned to Rome immediately. He ordered whole streets of buildings razed to stop the fire's advance, but to no avail. On it went, flesh and bone turning to ash, coins melting in the pockets of the dead.

Over the next days thousands were killed and injured, thousands lost their homes and businesses. It was said that such a conflagration had not been seen in Rome since the sack of the Gauls – exactly four hundred years earlier. A deadly, all-consuming monster, the flames moved along the eastern side of the Palatine Hill, then across the valley, to lap at the feet of the Esquiline.

It was evident to us from the moment we saw the fire that our shop and

warehouse were gone, but we didn't say this aloud. We only voiced our conviction that Ari, if he'd slept in the shop that night, had gotten out safely.

To house the refugees, Nero opened buildings on the Campus Martius. Some believed Nero himself had started the fire. Why? Because he'd hated the jumbled, unplanned city that was "filled up rather than laid out," as Livy had described Rome. Others opined that Nero wouldn't have done it because his own house, the *Domus Transitoria*, was also destroyed. Still others argued that Nero hadn't liked that palace and had started the fire to destroy it. They felt justified in their opinion when the emperor began building his new palace, the huge *Domus Aurea*, the Golden House.

The fire burned for six days. After that it seemed to be out, then suddenly flared up again on the property of Tigellinus to rage for another three days. Some blamed Nero for this fire too, thinking he'd set it as a dissolute joke on his dissolute friend. I found myself wondering what Josephus would have thought had he seen these symbols of Roman might going up in smoke.

It wasn't until the fires were out that Ari appeared at our house, his hair and beard singed, his blistered feet bound in rags. After seeing to his needs, we listened as he recounted a terrible tale.

"It was those tracts we were doing for that Jewish Christian church," he said in a raw, exhausted voice. He was referring to texts we'd prepared that had been circulating in the poorer sections of Rome and across the river. The tracts quoted ancient and current prophecies that pagan Rome would and must be engulfed by fire and reduced to ashes.

"They came in the night seeking them," Ari told us.

"Who did?" demanded Mel. "Who came?"

"A group of Gentile Christians. They wanted to destroy all the copies they could find."

"But why?"

"They said they wanted Christians to stay in the emperor's good graces. They didn't want to be blamed for what some Jews and Jewish Christians were doing, trying to promote the destruction of Rome in order to end the occupation of Palestine."

Ari paused to refresh his throat with some water, then continued. "They came late at night and started searching the warehouse. When they didn't find what they were looking for, they decided to burn the books. The books set fire to the walls. You know the rest."

Mel looked stunned. "When I took that work I never thought it would actually result in Rome *burning*. I thought . . ." He broke off, but I could guess what he'd meant to say. He'd thought the circulars would just stir up ill feelings between Rome and the Jews.

But in fact his plan, if plan it could be called, almost literally back-fired. Nero, finding himself blamed for the fire and needing a scapegoat,

blamed the Christians. Why not the Jews? It could have been Poppaea's influence. Or it could have been because the ancient religion of the Jews, despite its clannish, isolationist traditions, had been around long enough to earn legitimacy with the Romans. Christianity, with its own special god, rules, and demands, was considered an upstart cult. And so it was the Christians, not the Jews, who were chosen by Nero to suffer the punishment.

XVIII

The dislocations resulting from the fire changed more than the map of Rome. The aristocratic senatorial class, when they lost their living and working places in the Forum, lost their vital historic center of power and influence. The rest of the Forum, the open part, became a commercial mall where anything was bought and sold. Romans watched, scarcely comprehending, as the majestic Forum, so integral to history itself, ceased to be what it had so long been.

In the days and weeks following the fire, the emperor encouraged and financed homeowners to rebuild their dwellings with fire-resistant stones, interior courtyards, and porticos. He planned a city with wider streets and avenues. To get rid of the debris, he had empty grain ships bear the rubble away.

Nero then began construction of his huge new palace, the *Domus Aurea*, in the heart of the ruined city. The hundreds of acres of landscapes and vistas by which it would be surrounded did nothing to alleviate the housing shortage.

First Mel's house on the Esquiline, then his fortune, yielded to the financial pressures of building the Golden House and rebuilding Rome. After these were confiscated, we found ourselves homeless among many.

"I suppose I can't complain," Mel told me. "Given that I may have had an indirect hand in the burning of Rome, there's a certain justice in what's befallen me. Let's go live with Lucia."

And so we took temporary lodging in Lucia's country house where we found small wooden crucifixes nailed above our beds.

Rather than be upset at his losses, Mel seemed content to return to a lifestyle of possessing only a tunic or two and a pair of sandals. He recalled another period when he'd lived in Lucia's home – in the time of Crocchus. Much had changed since then: Tressa and Olivia had long ago married and moved away; the library had grown with the many texts we'd stored there over the years.

"We could make this our new shop," Mel suggested, an idea Lucia didn't find at all amusing.

If he wasn't worried about his own losses, Mel was very concerned

about his household staff, scribes, and other employees. Fortunately, after the fire but before the confiscations, he'd given them large bonuses to help them put their lives back together with new lodgings and jobs. For some he'd paid medical and burial expenses. Ari and his family, after living a while in temporary quarters on the Campus Martius, moved into a cottage on Lucia's estate.

We weren't the only refugees invited into Lucia's home. There were also several of her Christian friends who came there hoping to hide from Nero's persecution. I wanted before anything else to get back in touch with Paul. He'd been in Spain during the fires, and was said to have returned, but no one seemed to know his whereabouts.

Then Mel announced his plan to return immediately to Sarah's Hill. This didn't surprise me. We'd heard things were not going well in Palestine, that there was growing dissension between the current governor, Gesius Florus, and the Jewish population.

"Will you come with me?" he asked.

"Not just yet," I told him. "Maybe in the next sailing season. I have things to do here first."

The following day Mel gave me his History to read. It was the whole book, including his travels with Lucia and Crocchus, his time with Sarah and Ben, his years in the court of Caligula – everything that had transpired until he'd laid down his pen. Reading, it became clear to me that I wasn't Sarah's son, but it still remained a mystery why no one had claimed me – not Mel, not Lucia.

Much of Mel's past life amazed but didn't surprise me. My father – for that's how I now knew him – was a man of many parts. Before, I'd never understood what bound them together; now I did. Time, chance, love, denial, and revenge were strands so strong they could hold a man together or entrap and destroy him. In that respect my father was no different from the rest of us.

XIX

There wasn't a person living in Rome who remained unaffected by the fire and by the subsequent actions of the emperor. The plebs were patient with their lot, but the aristocracy, who'd lost much, were not. It didn't please them that Nero, instead of behaving responsibly, wooed the people by competing in chariot races and singing in public performances. The state treasury was drained to build his Golden House.

Not known to us then, the growing discontentment in the senatorial classes had resulted in a secret plot to assassinate the emperor. So that no vacuum would be created at the top, Nero was to be replaced immediately with the popular C. Calpurnius Piso, a descendent of the Republican nobil-

ity. Some plotters desired that after Piso became emperor he'd be killed too, and replaced by the Stoic philosopher, Seneca.

The plan was first modeled on the assassination of Julius Caesar, then modified to resemble that of Gaius Caligula. But instead of an attack in a theater, Nero would be slain while attending chariot races in the Circus Maximus. Time was of the essence because Poppaea was in advanced pregnancy and the conspirators wished to do away with Nero before he had an established heir.

When Nero learned of the assassination plot, counseled by Poppaea and Tigellinus he instituted a purge of senators, stoic philosophers, and writers, using torture and killings so horrific that most of the accused gave up names of fellow conspirators quickly. The city was blocked off from the sea and river and put under guard along its walls and roads. Lines of chained men were dragged to Nero's Gardens for interrogation by Nero and Tigellinus. The one woman interrogated, a freed slave, refused to reveal names and was tortured so horribly that the next day, while being dragged off for more torture, she managed to strangle herself with a cord.

It was a grisly time. Seneca was forced into suicide. His wife tried to join him in death, but was found and revived. The following year Tigellinus, jealous of Nero's friendship with Petronius, denounced the writer as a conspirator. Tigellinus was rewarded for his treachery when Nero erected a statue of him on the Palatine.

Petronius, the elegant voluptuary, took his time dying. While reading poetry to his friends he opened his veins and bound them again, opened and bound them, letting his life slip away drop by drop. He attached to his will an appendix listing Nero's sexual perversions and naming names, then sent it to him. Finally he unbound his veins for the last time, got into his bed, and died peacefully in what seemed a natural death.

Poppaea died before she could give birth. It was rumored that Nero killed her in a fit of rage with a kick to the stomach, but if so his soul must have burned with regret. No one could have mourned a loved one more. Rather than have her body cremated, at great expense he had it stuffed with eastern spices and embalmed. Her funeral was extravagant at a time when the state coffers were nearly bare.

So grieved was he at the loss of his wife that Nero had a young freedman who resembled her castrated, to use as a substitute. Later, on tour in Greece, the two were married. On his return to Rome Nero married his former mistress, Stilia Messallina, after first executing her husband, who'd married her while she was still his mistress.

XX [65 CE]

When Paul returned to Rome he found his lodgings devastated by the fire, but he wasn't homeless for long; within two days he was arrested and returned to prison where I finally caught up with him.

"Of what are you accused?" were my first words.

"Of being a Christian and an arsonist," he replied with a smile.

"But you weren't even in Rome when the fires broke out. And your own dwelling was destroyed."

"That was only my *earthly* residence," he replied. "In heaven I'll dwell in the house of the Lord."

"All well and good," I snapped, "but you're not a ghost *yet*. You can't go on living in chains in this prison. You're innocent of arson, and Christianity is a crime only in the eyes of one man – Nero."

"No matter. Sarus, you've read just about everything I wrote in the past few years. You know I believe that to rebel against Caesar is to rebel against divine authority; Nero is emperor by an act of God."

"But that's *theology*," I cried. "This is *life, politics, insanity!*"

"Have my writings engendered no faith in you at all?"

It pained me to hear the disappointment in his voice, even feigned as it surely was. "Paul," I said, "you've turned my friend Lucia and many more into true believers. But what you wrote were musings, fictions. What we speak of here is *life – your life*. *Christ* won't set you free – the *emperor* must."

"Don't worry," he told me. "Tomorrow I'll be free."

"Free? Nero's setting you free?"

"Yes. He's eager to help me complete my mission."

"He *is*?" I could hardly believe my ears. "Are you joking?"

"No."

No? It was *true*? How elated I was to hear Paul's good news.

The next day Paul was set free as he, but not as I, had expected: his head was liberated from his neck, his soul from his body. If his mission was to be martyred for his cause, that goal had been achieved. With fearful Christians unable to approach the Roman authorities, I attempted myself to learn what had been done with Paul's remains, but was unable to find out anything.

Meanwhile, I continued to live at Lucia's country house, which became more and more crowded as her Christian friends flocked there to hide from Nero's soldiers.

Almost every week a letter arrived from Mel telling of the growing unrest in Palestine against the Roman occupation. He also reported that some gold he'd hidden away on our last visit to Sarah's Hill was still where he'd put it; when I rejoined him we'd not want for necessities if we lived like Spartans.

While I'd not planned to leave Rome any time soon, the fire's aftermath, the death of Paul, the hideous excesses of Nero in persecuting the Christians, and the constant praying, grieving, and debating of theological ideas in Lucia's house day and night, caused me to reconsider.

Then, to my horror, Lucia and her co-religionists voted to announce themselves as Christians to the Roman authorities, and to name only each other. Christianity, they argued, was built on martyrdom; becoming martyrs themselves would attract converts to their cause. In this way all met their deaths proudly, without torture, and I was able to recover Lucia's body.

Ari, living in a cottage on Lucia's estate, was arrested with the others. Perhaps because of his circumcision he was allowed to live, but his wife and children were murdered before his eyes.

After the burials, Ari and I were aboard the first merchant ship heading east.

XXI [66 CE]

It was early May, the winds were favorable, the skies fair. And yet it seemed to both of us that a pall hung over everything, like smoke over Rome, making each day dark.

Ari's tragedy was certainly greater than mine, but it was hard to lose a mother, even one who'd denied her maternity. And what about Mel? How could he possibly have written his History and remained in denial of his own words, his own actions, his own son. Wouldn't the very process of writing it down have unveiled the secret to him? And most of all, how could he have given his book to me, his son, to *read* – much less to complete?

Had Mel ever seriously considered publication of this work? Impossible! The personal reflections and confessions we were writing could never be shown to any other. What immodesty to do so – what blasphemy! Better never to write this History at all or, having written it, seal the pages in some dark cave and let centuries seep away their painful immediacy.

We changed ships in Athens for one to Caesarea. Ari, deeply affected by the murder of his family, spoke little and kept to himself most of the time. One day I found myself in conversation with a Jew from Caesarea named Samuel. Taking me for a fellow Jew, he railed openly against Governor Florus and the Greeks. Before leaving Rome I'd learned of Nero's ruling that once more denied citizenship to the Jews of Caesarea, so I already knew I wasn't headed toward a land of tranquility. But I couldn't have imagined the horrors to come.

"If matters don't change," Samuel told me, "there'll be an uprising. You'll see; at any moment one spark could ignite a conflagration."

"Let me tell you what happened recently," he continued. "The Greek owner of a plot of land located in front of the synagogue I attend, who'd refused all our offers to buy it, built a workshop right there. Some of our youths began pelting the workmen with stones. Afraid this might get out of hand, our elders appealed to Florus, who agreed to help us in exchange for a bribe of eight talents." Samuel shook his head sadly. "That's the only way to get anything done in my country: stones and bribes. Well, we gave him the money, so I'm sure by now the shop's gone and the situation is calmer."

Then he invited Ari and me to attend services with his family on the Sabbath. I was happy to accept; I'd never been inside a synagogue and this seemed a good opportunity, since no one here knew I wasn't Jewish. But Ari declined, preferring to set out immediately for Sarah's Hill.

Arriving in Caesarea we learned that the Greek workshop still stood in front of Samuel's synagogue. However, since the obstruction didn't completely block the entrance, Jews were able to attend services there. Samuel and I joined them on the Sabbath following our arrival, never expecting the strange scene we were to witness.

That day a Greek had set himself up to sacrifice birds on an overturned clay pot in front of the synagogue entrance. Seeing this, the arriving worshippers stopped and began milling about nervously.

"Oh, Lord," moaned Samuel in horror. "What an insult. What an insult."

"How so?" I asked, one animal sacrifice seeming to me very much like another.

He looked at me in amazement. "*Leviticus 14*," he exclaimed in a loud whisper, obviously hoping to jog a memory I didn't harbor. Seeing my blank gaze, he went on, "The ritual way to cleanse a man of leprosy requires a dead bird slaughtered and bled into an earthenware vessel underneath which water is running."

When I still didn't understand where the insult lay, he continued, "These anti-Semites are reminding us of their claim that Moses led *lepers* out of Egypt."

"But where's the running water?" I asked, wondering to myself what Moses' cure for buboes in the groin might have been.

"The running water is *implied*," whispered Samuel harshly. "That's a *chamber-pot* he's using."

The symbolism was clear enough now, as was the intended insult. But I hadn't long to reflect on these curious abstractions, for suddenly a Jewish youth threw a rock at the fellow who was killing the birds. He and his Greek comrades were prepared for this of course, and a fight ensued. In the melee a Roman officer managed to take away the pot, but couldn't quell the rioting, which continued and began to spread.

"Well, where's Florus and the eight talents?" I asked Samuel.

“Good question.” Turning, he spoke with another worshiper, then replied to me, “John says Florus left for Sebaste yesterday, taking the money with him. He thinks the Jews must flee the city.”

“Flee Caesarea? Now?”

“Yes, right now. But we must take a copy of our Law with us.” So saying, Samuel turned, spoke briefly with some others, then disappeared with them into the synagogue. Moments later they came out carrying the Torah scroll.

And so the Jews fled, and I went with them out of curiosity. When we reached Nabata a few miles away, a delegation was selected which included Samuel, with John at its head. They were to go on to Sebaste and beg Florus for help, reminding him of the eight talents he’d accepted. But when they got there, Florus arrested and imprisoned the lot of them for having stolen the Torah from the synagogue.

Then, abandoning Caesarea to its civil strife, the governor went straight to Jerusalem where he removed seventeen talents from the Temple treasury to settle some tax debts. When this perceived thievery enflamed the Jews, he sent for a cohort of soldiers to march on Jerusalem.

I remained in Nabata some days, but found no way to help my Jewish friends. It was time to say goodbye and continue on to Sarah’s Hill. I traveled as far as Jerusalem in the dusty wake of the cohort, wondering whether those dead birds might have touched off a conflict that would one day engulf all Palestine.

Had the Jews any chance of winning against Rome? It didn’t seem likely. But whichever way it went, history was being made, and I was prepared to write it down before I died.

XXII [66 CE]

My father was out when I arrived at the house, but Ari was there to take me inside and see that I had something to eat and a place to sleep. In keeping with the new austerity there were only a few slaves, but I found nothing stinted.

Mel arrived the next day. After we’d embraced, he held up a finger. “Listen. Can you hear it?”

I’d already discerned some distant noise, but hadn’t identified the source. “What’s happening?”

“Troops Florus sent are on a rampage,” he told me. “They’re sacking the Upper City while pretending to search for insurrectionists. Blood’s flowing in the streets. I saw a Jew being crucified. In their haste, the soldiers even nailed up two Romans – *Roman knights!*”

I told him there’d been riots in Caesarea too. When I related the story of the sacrificial birds, Mel broke into laughter. “You see?” he cried, “it’s

that stupid Law again. What horse shit! Has anyone in the history of the world ever cured leprosy with the blood of dead birds or anything else?"

"They say Jesus cured lepers with a touch of his hand," I replied with a straight face.

"If you believe that," said Mel, "I have a nail from his crucifix to sell you."

And so we laughed together, but I think there was little laughter anywhere else in Palestine at that time.

Bernice was in Jerusalem just then, fulfilling a religious vow. We saw her leaving the Temple barefoot, her head shaven, looking distraught. She recognized us as we hurried toward her.

"My brother's in Egypt," she told us without slowing down. "This morning I was hardly able to escape the soldiers. I'm going now to *beg* Florus to call off the violence. Do you know that he's ordered two more cohorts to come here?" Not waiting for a reply, she hurried off with her courtiers to see Florus at his tribunal.

While most Jews of the city hid in their homes, others joined the high priest and Council elders outside the walls by the palace, to witness the arrival of the troops from Caesarea. Mel and I were there too, and noticed Josephus on the edge of the crowd with other leading Jews.

"These people are here to *welcome* the soldiers," he told us, "not to protest the occupation. They hope in that way to tamp down the fires that Florus and those crazy Zealots are stoking."

"Think they'll succeed?"

Josephus shrugged. "What else can they do? There's no way they can fight a thousand armed men and cavalry; they can only salute the soldiers and hope they'll respond in kind. I personally think it's a useless gesture."

So it was with great interest that Mel and I watched the troops advance.

It was soon clear that Josephus had been right; the arriving troops were no ordinary Roman cohorts, but natives of Caesarea and Sebaste who hated Jews. By the time they arrived the number of Jews who'd come to welcome them had grown considerably. When the soldiers refused to return their salute – under orders from Florus – push quickly turned to shove. The soldiers laid into the crowd with batons, a cavalry charge was ordered, and many Jews were crushed and trampled as they tried to crowd back through the city gates.

Then suddenly the Jews, realizing they actually outnumbered the soldiers, began to fight back. Crowding the horses, they unseated riders and grabbed up weapons. Then they attacked from the rooftops, forcing the troops to retreat into their encampment adjoining the palace.

It was an embarrassing setback for Florus. He decided to end the confrontation by accepting the demand of the high priest and Council to withdraw two of his three cohorts, including the one that had pillaged the Up-

per City. Florus then returned to Caesarea with his men, but we all knew he was just biding his time.

“I agree with Josephus,” Mel told me. “There’s no way the Jews can resist Roman power in the long run. The Jews think Partha will come to their rescue, but the Parthians are signing a pact of friendship with Rome. In fact, their king’s in Rome right now, solemnizing the agreement.”

Meanwhile, King Agrippa II, on the way home to his kingdom from Alexandria, was met in Jamnia by an envoy from Syria and by the high priest and Jewish Council. These persuaded him to go directly to Jerusalem and do something about the crisis there.

“If you fellows want something to put in your History,” Josephus said to Mel and me, “be there tomorrow when I speak before Agrippa, and listen to the advice I give him. For what Agrippa tells the Jewish people will mean the difference between their survival and their demise.”

And so naturally we went with him to see Agrippa. We found the king sitting with Bernice in the audience room of the old palace of the Has-moneans. Neither of them looked particularly happy as Josephus took the floor.

His opening argument was one that certainly many others agreed with; what surprised me was hearing it so boldly expressed. Josephus prefaced his words with a description of Rome’s many beauties, then spoke of the excellence of her army which had conquered and brought peace to so much of the world. He spoke of Rome’s toleration of the ancient religious practices of the Jews, and of her gracious empress and brave emperor. Nero had gravely erred in sending them a man like Florus, he admitted, but the next governor would surely be better. And anyway, just because the Jews disliked a particular governor, it didn’t mean they should revolt against Rome.

As Josephus continued speaking, the ugly word “collaborator” crept into my mind and refused to go away. Mel, having gotten the drift of where the speech was headed, sat stony-faced. But the cause of his vexation was surely quite different from anyone else’s: he didn’t want to hear an argument for peace.

Then Josephus said that this passion of the Jews for liberty had come too late; having once accepted the Roman yoke they couldn’t just toss it away. To do so would be no better than a slave escaping his master. Their forefathers, who had kings and armies far stronger than theirs today, had not withstood Rome in the time of Pompey. So how could *they* hope to prevail against the entire Roman Empire, whose army had never suffered defeat and was now more powerful than ever?

And what allies would fight with them against this army? Not Partha. Forget Partha. Partha knew its safety and prosperity lay with Rome. God? No. God was on the side of the Romans, for without his divine sanction such an empire could never have been achieved. “Once you revolt against

Rome,” said Josephus, “expect neither victory nor mercy.”

There wasn't a sound as Josephus spoke, no shuffling of feet, no movement. Then he came to his final and most telling argument: to rebel would put at risk every Jew in every part of the world. If Jerusalem rebelled, not just Jerusalem but every Jewish city would be drenched in Jewish blood. Those who might not care if they themselves, their wives and their children were martyred, should think of the Temple. The Temple was the very heart of Judaism; if plucked out, their religion would die, their Law would be no more.

I glanced sideways and saw Mel's face looking brighter.

As Josephus spoke, envisaging Jewish blood flowing and the fall of the Temple, his words caused discomfort in the listeners, who began to fidget. Mel leaned toward my ear. “What I find amazing,” he whispered, “is that not once has he referred to the Jews as the chosen people. He as much as said the *Romans* are.”

Josephus was eager for Agrippa to adopt his message and pass it on to the Jews of Jerusalem. “Someone they trust has to tell them that they can't possibly win a war against Rome,” he said later to Mel and me. “Agrippa must make them understand that insurrection will be met with the annihilation of all they hold sacred and dear.”

But the next day, when Agrippa did address the people of Jerusalem, the best he could offer them was the hope that the next governor would certainly be better than Florus, and that they should be patient until such a one was sent to them.

The Jews, disgusted by this call for inaction, reacted by throwing stones at Agrippa, who quickly left for his kingdom.

“I'd say the Jewish people have rejected collaboration,” observed a smiling Mel.

“I'd say you're right,” said I.

XXIII

To keep on top of what was happening in the rapidly-changing martial situation, I began spending more time with Josephus. Adamant that he was no collaborator, he insisted that the views he held were meant to preserve Judaism and his people, not rob them of their soul. “The reason the Lord favors the Romans,” he told me, “is because of these rowdy, murderous Zealots who keep stirring the pot. Like Florus, they want war for their own selfish reasons, and try to provoke Rome in every way they can.”

He pointed out how Eleazar, son of the latest high priest, Ananias, had managed to put a stop to the Temple sacrifices made to the emperor. “Ananias and others *pleaded* with Eleazar and his rebel friends not to bring Rome's wrath down on Israel by insulting Nero. Who knows what will

happen next?”

What happened next was that the priests appealed to King Agrippa, who sent troops to help them. For a week the insurgents fought the king's army, then burnt Agrippa's palace, the residence of the high priest, and the public archives. Roman troops surrendered after making a deal for their lives with the rebel leader Menahem, but Menahem broke his word and slaughtered all of them as soon as they'd laid down their weapons. He allowed only their commander to live – at the price of being circumcised.

“Have you heard the latest?” Josephus asked me some days later.

I had. Who in Jerusalem hadn't heard that the high priest Ananias had hidden in the sewers, but was found and killed by Menahem. Menahem was then publicly tortured and killed by Ananias's son, the rebel Eleazar.

“And on the same day, in *one hour*,” Josephus told me, “the 20,000 Jews of Caesarea were slaughtered by the Greeks. And that was just the beginning, Sarus. Since then tens of thousands of Jews have been butchered by the Greeks and Florus's troops in dozens of other cities. I *told* those fools not to get started with the Romans, *didn't I*, Sarus? *Didn't I*.”

There were times when I wondered whether Josephus exaggerated a bit to make his point, but he was learned in many disciplines and had good sources of information. “I've received word,” he told me another day, “that Nero is sending Vespasian here to fight the rebellion.”

I'd certainly heard of Vespasian, the Roman general who'd done so brilliantly in Germany and Britain. “If the Jews don't back down,” Josephus told me, “they'll be facing the toughest man in the Roman army.”

The Jews didn't back down. Instead, faced by this terrible threat they grew supremely confident in their God-given strength, juiced up by victories their ancestors had won five thousand years earlier. When Josephus, still unable to dissuade them from war, was asked by the Jewish leaders to take over the command of Galilee, he reluctantly accepted the post. Not wanting to remain behind, I elected to go with him.

“The Jews will go down,” he told me, “but we'll fight hard against that day and see some glories. And I prophesy, Sarus, that you and I will somehow survive. We must, you know, because we have histories to write that will tell the world what happened here.”

“And autohistories to write too.”

At this Josephus burst out laughing. “Choose your weapon, my friend,” he said, “whichever best fits your hand.”

XXIV

In Galilee Josephus made preparations against the coming Roman onslaught. Amassing and training an army of 100,000 men, he provisioned it and fortified the major cities.

“The Romans don’t wait for war to train their armies,” he told me. “They’re born with swords in their hands. But what choice do I have?”

Josephus selected Jotapata for his stronghold. The town was built on a hilltop with deep ravines on three sides, accessible only from the north where mountain ridges descended. The road leading up the mountain was a stony trail, difficult for infantry and impossible for cavalry. Even so, Josephus built a wall on the north side to protect the town and garrison from attack. His wife, he told me, had been born in Jotapata and would be staying there with her family. Admitting that she was his severest critic, he said he wished to keep her safe and give her no reasons to complain.

It was clear that Josephus had grown up playing with toy Roman soldiers and reading books on warfare. Now, aided by his keen intelligence, imagination, and a remarkable memory, and despite limited supplies, he laid out well-fortified encampments and introduced a Roman-style command hierarchy. Although the Jews were unable to obtain the kind of military hardware available to Roman troops, except by capturing it, Josephus consoled himself that against such odds the defeat of *his* troops, or *any* troops, was no disgrace. In fact, he looked upon his own eventual defeat as a good lesson to any who might in future consider going up against the Romans.

Vespasian arrived in the spring to take over two distinguished Roman legions in Syria. Before leaving Rome he’d sent his son Titus to Alexandria, to bring another legion from there. Reaching Antioch, Vespasian found three kings – Agrippa, Antiochus, and Soaemus – plus Malchus, the Arab ruler, ready join their armies with his.

Hearing this I was amazed. “These Jewish kings are actually joining the *Romans*?” I exclaimed.

Josephus laughed. “Is that any more bizarre than Josephus the ‘collaborator’ fighting on the side of the Jews? Or the priests and Council siding with those same rebels who murder them with daggers?”

The storm clouds of war were gathering. Vespasian marched his army to the port at Ptolemais where he was joined by Titus and the legion he’d brought. Counting in some accompanying cohorts, Josephus calculated Vespasian now commanded infantry and cavalry totaling sixty thousand men, plus servants and camp followers who’d also had military training.

Looking anything but worried, he absolutely glowed as he described the usual Roman armaments. “The infantry wear breastplates,” he told me, “helmets, a sword on their left side and a long dagger on the right. In addition to these, the cavalry carry spears and quivers full of long arrows. The troops are compact in their ranks, alert to the right and left, and respond promptly to orders. No army in its right mind would go up against such a foe.”

And then, as if to dispel any lingering doubts I might have, he continued, “Listen, Sarus, here’s the customary marching order of Roman troops,

undoubtedly as Vespasian is now commanding his. First come the auxiliaries with their light arms, and the archers to seek and destroy any ambushes. Heavy infantry and cavalry follow them. Then come the surveyors and road builders with their equipment, and behind them Vespasian and his officers. Next come the legionary cavalry, the mules bearing siege towers, ballistae, rams, and other war machines. Following them are the junior officers with the eagle-bearing standards of the legions, the trumpeters, a solid column of infantry, the servant corps, and mercenaries. And finally a guard of infantry and cavalry to protect the rear.”

Despite his many misgivings and warnings, I had the definite feeling that Josephus considered it an honor, even a privilege, to engage troops like these.

XXV [67 CE]

While assembling his army in Ptolemais, Vespasian sent ahead some forces under the command of the tribune Placidus. Once in Galilee they commenced to attack and ransack the cities. Hearing that Placidus was moving on Jotapata, Josephus was desperate, even knowing he'd fortified it more heavily than any other city. So he was greatly relieved to learn that the citizens of Jotapata, expecting the attack, had ambushed Placidus outside the town and sent his forces packing.

“I'm so glad,” Josephus chortled at this news. “If the town had fallen my wife would never have forgiven me!”

But all wasn't over for Jotapata. Vespasian, hearing of the Roman defeat, decided to do better. He sent a force to turn the impassable mountain trail into a broad road, a feat that was accomplished in four days. Informed of this, Josephus decided to use that road to move his own forces to Jotapata before Vespasian arrived with his legions.

I wasn't the only one who thought it rash to enclose ourselves in a town with limited resources, a town that would shortly be under siege by a powerful army, but Josephus wouldn't listen. I wondered whether he was driven by a wish to rejoin and protect his wife, or secretly planned to capitulate if he could forge an agreement that would avoid a massacre.

Vespasian must have rejoiced hearing that Josephus had locked himself into an impossible situation. He garrisoned his army on a high hill about a mile away where we could plainly see it. It was an intimidating sight, but Josephus wasn't cowed; he seemed defiant. Wanting to rest his troops, Vespasian didn't attack right away, but to secure his advantage he surrounded Jotapata with cordons of infantry and cavalry.

The first attack began with a rain of arrows and stones. This covered the advance of Vespasian's infantry to a part of the wall that was difficult for the Jewish troops to defend. Josephus called up his entire garrison to

stop them, and in six days of hard fighting the Romans were unable to breach the ramparts.

Vespasian then turned his attention to what he considered the most accessible part of the wall. To raise an embankment there he sent his whole army to strip the mountains around of trees and stones. To protect themselves from our projectiles, they spread screens of interlaced branches over beams propped against the wall, but this didn't stop us from at least slowing their work.

Then, to clear our forces from the battlements, Vespasian brought up artillery – catapults that shot volleys of lances, and ballistae that hurled huge stones. To counter this, Josephus sent out teams of guerillas to set fire to their screens and props, but his men weren't successful in this and the embankment continued to rise. Soon it was almost level with the ramparts.

Josephus was worried. "We've got to make the wall higher," he said, "but how can we do that with all these incoming projectiles?"

He decided that tall stakes should be driven into the tops of the walls with fresh oxen hides stretched across them. Behind this shield the stonemasons would build the wall twenty cubits higher and crown it with a strong parapet. But the builders pointed out the problem with this plan: they'd make easy targets as they put up the poles and skins and the work would never be finished. During this time the citizens of Jotapata, feeling desperate, went out at night in small groups to harass the Romans and burn their earthworks.

This resistance decided Vespasian to stop fighting and simply blockade the city until it surrendered. We had grain and other supplies to last a long time; the only thing we lacked in quantity was water. This being summer, we couldn't expect much rainfall, so Josephus decided to dole out the available water, a decision he was to regret. For when the Romans on higher hills saw people crowding around to receive their water ration, they fired catapults into their midst. Among those killed in the fusillade was Josephus's wife.

His wife's death seemed to unhinge something in Josephus who moaned that it was his fault. He began giving strange orders. First, he had precious water poured over garments that were then hung dripping on the battlement. "See how much water we have?" he cried out to the Romans. "We have water to waste. We'll never surrender."

His ploy didn't help the water situation, but it convinced the Romans to end their blockade and again attack the wall, this time with a battering ram.

From afar we could see the ram starting to move our way. Josephus was still defiant. His message to us was that it was better to die fighting bravely than to linger and die of hunger and thirst. Then a narrow gully was discovered leading to a ravine which led outside. Josephus ordered

messengers disguised as sheep – on all fours with fleece on their backs – to creep down the gully past the sentries. In this way he sent letters to Jews outside, asking them to send the supplies he needed. But the sentries soon got wise to the ruse and blocked the gully with wooly carcasses.

Now that his wife was dead and the military situation apparently hopeless, Josephus began thinking how he could escape and save his own life. Learning of his intention to leave, the people begged him to stay and defend them.

“I can do more for you on the outside,” he told them. “I can call upon the Galileans to make a diversion and draw the army away from your walls.”

But the people got down on their knees, crying and pleading with him not to go, and finally he acceded to their request.

“Do you know what I’m going to do, Sarus?” he said. “I’m going to take my best troops, break out of here, kill the sentries, and set the damn earthworks on fire once and for all. When all hope is gone, like now, it’s the time for one heroic, glorious adventure that will be remembered throughout history. I want the Romans to see that they cannot fight men so heedless of death.”

“But what about the battering ram?” I asked.

“We’ll lower bags of chaff to cushion its force. We’ll rush out and set fire to it. We’ll hurl stones down and crush it. And then we’ll cut the iron ram’s head from its beam and parade it on the ramparts.”

Nothing like this was done; not a sentry was killed and the embankment continued to grow. As the battering ram approached, the Romans kept the ramparts picked clean with arrows, rocks from their slings, and a continuous rain of boulders from the ballistae.

Eventually the ram arrived and was put into place. The first blow of its iron head struck the wall with such a shuddering impact that a scream arose from the town, as if Jotapata itself had been mortally wounded.

“Damn women,” muttered Josephus. “They’ll discourage the men.”

The Romans didn’t pause but hit the wall again and again in the same spot, while the Jews threw flaming objects and stones down on them. This did little good, for the soldiers manning the machine were sheltered by a canopy they’d fastened over the frame.

Toward morning, after a night of heavy pounding, the wall was breached. Despite his weariness and the exhaustion of his forces, Josephus ordered the breach defended. But when in the first light the townspeople beheld the enemy standing there with swords in their hands, and the hillside behind them glittering with arms, the women and children let out a terrible shriek.

“Shut them in their houses,” Josephus ordered, “and tell them to be quiet. They mustn’t worry the men.”

The soldiers attacked and the Jews fought back, wounding many but

taking many casualties too. On the forty-seventh day of the siege, the Roman troops made their final assault into the town, massacring the men and taking the women and children prisoner. Forty thousand Jews died at Jotapata. When it was all over, Vespasian ordered the city and fortresses burned to the ground.

XXVI

If there was a search for the body of Josephus after the flames had died down, it was of course not found.

"Come, Sarus," he said as the world crashed in sparks around us. "It's time to head for the pit."

The *pit*? With few other choices available, I followed him down a deep crevasse in the earth. Was this an escape route to the other side of the world, I wondered, or did he plan to bury us at the bottom and wait for our resurrection?

Suddenly his purpose became clear; off to one side of the pit, unseen from above, was a large natural cavern. More amazing still was that we weren't the first to arrive. Indeed, we found ourselves welcomed by thirty or forty distinguished men and a few women already in hiding there. These had brought with them a good amount of life's necessities, including smoked and pickled foods, wine, water, lamps, and a small number of slaves.

But whatever pleasures the place offered, Josephus had other plans. "We must escape," he whispered to me. "We can't stay here forever, and if they find us they'll kill us."

While our companions in this nether world were stymied by fear and had given up all thoughts of escape, on two consecutive nights Josephus and I made attempts. But each time we saw the exit closely guarded and were obliged to return to our goatskins on the cavern floor. On the third morning one desperate woman rejected Josephus's advice not to try to escape during daylight hours, and left the cave. When she didn't return we wondered whether she'd made it safely or had been caught.

"Let's try again tonight," Josephus said.

But as we were eating our sparse supper we looked up to see two tribunes entering the cave. Josephus was furious. "I *told* that stupid woman not to try sneaking past the guards in broad daylight," he fumed.

And in fact he was right; the Romans had learned of the cave, and the presence in it of the Jewish general, from the unfortunate woman. Vespasian had sent the tribunes with orders to put Josephus under their protection and convince him to come up from the cavern and surrender.

Josephus wasn't eager to comply. He wondered at the general's real motives and asked for time to consider their request. "I don't trust them,"

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he told me. "If I go up there they may kill me."

When the tribunes reported to Vespasian that they couldn't persuade Josephus to come with them, the general sent a tribune named Nicanor, a friend of Josephus. Nicanor assured Josephus that Vespasian wanted to save him because he knew Josephus was a man of great valor and a fine general. Josephus of course lapped this up. Then Nicanor told him that the officers outside could hardly restrain their men, so eager were they to throw firebrands into the cave and kill all the Jews. But he stressed that Vespasian wanted the great Jewish general saved.

"Give me some time to decide," he begged his friend. "Kindly withdraw while I consider the general's generous offer."

Josephus was in a quandary. How was he to extricate himself and leave the others to die without behaving like a criminal in the eyes of God and man? After the soldiers had stepped out of the cavern, he turned to me. "What should I do, Sarus?" he asked in a whisper. "God is watching."

"Then do what you think he'd want you to do," I replied, without the hint of a smile.

Josephus's face lit up at my words. "Perfect," he exclaimed. "After all, haven't I always known – and said repeatedly – that the Almighty is on the side of the Romans? Haven't I always prophesied that they would win and the Jews lose? I'm as sure as I can be that God would want me to surrender. Why else would he have sent Nicanor?"

"Then you have a duty to go," I told him, "and to take me with you."

"Absolutely," agreed Josephus, unbuckling his sword.

But when the others realized their leader was about to surrender and leave them to their fate, they were furious. Drawing their swords they pointed them at Josephus. "Take one step, traitor, and we'll finish you," shouted one, and the rest roared their agreement.

"You're wrong," cried Josephus. "A man has the right – the duty – to save his own life if he can do so without dishonor. The sin would be to throw it away, unless that was done in battle with an enemy. As God is my witness, I save myself not as a traitor but as his servant!"

His argument did nothing to persuade them, for now they ran at him en masse, pinning him against a wall with their swords at his throat.

"Wait!" he cried in his most commanding voice, and the attackers stepped back. "If we're all to die, then let it not be at the hands of our enemies, but by our own hands."

When he said this, the Jews looked at each other with joy, as if a great truth had been revealed. "We'll kill ourselves and die as martyrs," cried one, "not at the ends of Roman spears."

"Why give those bastards the satisfaction of killing us?" cried another.

Then all lowered their swords. "Lead on, great general. Show us the way."

But Josephus wouldn't hear of it. "Suicide is a sin," he told them, "for which God's punishment is death. If die we must, let's kill not ourselves, but each other. We'll draw lots. The one who draws the first lot will be killed by he who draws the second, and so on until we're all dead."

The others were enthusiastic, so Josephus prepared the lots and drew with the rest, watching as each man slew one other man, or slew one man plus one woman or slave, so that no woman or slave would be left over, alive and helpless, at the end.

Finally, only two men remained standing, Josephus and myself.

"It's either by an act of fortune or by God's providence that you and I remain, Sarus," he said. "Do you want me to dispatch you to your heavenly reward so that you too can die a martyr?"

"Not really."

"Do you still want to surrender with me?"

"Absolutely."

"Then let's go find Nicanor and have him take us to Vespasian."

As we walked under the protection of the tribune to see the general, soldiers near and far shouted for Josephus to die, whereas the ones closest to us, and our guards, seemed more respectful.

"Please note, Sarus," Josephus said, "that the men who see me up close see how nobly I carry myself, unbowed by these shackles and the misfortune of my surrender."

Arriving before Vespasian and Titus, we were told that Josephus would be sent to Nero. As for me, I had no doubt that these might be my last living moments.

But I was underestimating Josephus. Asking to speak to Vespasian privately, at the same time he raised one shackled arm as if trying to put it protectively around my shoulders, making it clear that we were friends and our fates should be bound together. All the others then withdrew, except Titus and two of his friends.

Then Josephus spoke. "You think, Vespasian, that you have in me a mere captive, but in truth I come to you as messenger of a greater destiny. Why are you sending me to Nero when Nero will not be emperor much longer?"

These words alarmed the two generals and they looked with hard, suspicious eyes at Josephus. "Don't say such things to us," said Vespasian. "Are you a prophet or a conspirator? If a conspirator you will die here and now; if a prophet, tell us who will replace Caesar?"

"I'm no conspirator," smiled Josephus, "but you're correct when you call me a prophet. The man who will one day succeed Nero is none other than you, Vespasian, and your son Titus will succeed you." Holding up his chained arms, Josephus added, "For you are not only *my* master, but master of the land and sea and of the human race."

"Flattery. Nothing but flattery," muttered Vespasian, looking flattered

in spite of himself.

Then one of Titus's friends spoke up. "You say you can predict great matters like the imperial succession," he said, "but obviously you were unable to predict both the fall of Jotapata and your own surrender."

"Not so," countered Josephus. "In fact I predicted both, didn't I, Sarus?"

"He did," I affirmed without nodding, unwilling to tempt their swords by drawing attention to my neck.

At this Vespasian decided to end the interview, saying only that he would question others about the predictions. Then he looked at me. "What would you have me do with your friend?" he asked Josephus.

"Release him. Sarus is no warrior, only a young historian. If you give him his life I'm sure he'll thank you for it in the books he writes, when he writes about the great Roman emperors, Vespasian and Titus."

Vespasian burst out laughing. Turning to the guards he told them to strike off my chains. "Escort this young historian from our camp, give him a safe-conduct pass, and let him find his way where he will. Josephus will stay with us, to be called upon when we feel a need for flattery."

And so I was released. Without time to bid farewell to my friend and savior, I found myself on the road to Jerusalem.

XXVII [67-68 CE]

When news of the fall of Jotapata reached Jerusalem, it included the erroneous information that Josephus had been killed. Mel greeted me with the news of our friend's death. But when I related to him the story of the lots, and how Josephus had contrived that he and I surrender and survive, Mel was both touched and cautioning.

"I'll say nothing against a man who saved you, my son, but the people of Jerusalem are grieving for a brave Josephus. When they hear he's alive, and surrendered while thousands died, they'll be more furious at him than at the Romans. This is a terrible war." He paused to reflect. "If the Temple could be brought down quickly, the war would end and many lives would be saved."

"Josephus counseled the Jews to surrender to Rome in order to *save* their Temple," I reminded him.

"Do you really think he cares deeply about the Jews *or* the Temple?"

I had to admit that the Josephus I knew seemed more interested in Roman armies and saving his own skin. "I suppose we'll have to wait and read his books," I smiled.

While Vespasian continued his victories in Galilee, the infighting between the Jewish factions in Jerusalem was quickly becoming as destructive to their people as anything the Roman general was doing. The Zeal-

ots, led now by a different Eleazar – this one the son of Simon – had through murder, the drawing of lots, and other means, replaced the high priest Matthias with an uneducated country bumpkin. Then they'd occupied and fortified the Temple sanctuary. Next, twenty thousand fanatic converts to Judaism, uprooted from Idumaea by Vespasian's army, fled to Jerusalem, joined forces with the Zealots, and systematically massacred Jerusalem's leading citizens and its middle and priestly classes.

Another rebel leader was John, who arrived in Jerusalem following the fall of the city of Gischala. He and his gang of Galileans, bored after weeks of looting, dressed themselves in gowns and cloaks, painted their faces as women, and doused themselves with perfume. Selecting a victim, one would approach him in a friendly manner, then pull out a sword and run him through.

Other rebel factions found this method disgusting and tried to chase John and his followers out of the city, but they fled to the Temple. Unable to enter the sanctuary, which was occupied by the Zealots, they took over the rest.

Meanwhile, having destroyed much of the north, and the ascetic community at Qumran, Vespasian turned his army toward Jerusalem. But at that moment word arrived that Nero had been deposed and General Galba appointed by the senate to succeed him. While awaiting orders from the new emperor, Vespasian returned to Caesarea.

"Small empire," remarked Mel when he heard the news. "Galba must be getting pretty long in the tooth since the time Caligula sent him to Germany to kill Gaetulicus."

"His accession could be bad news for Josephus," I reminded Mel. "He told Vespasian that *he* would succeed Nero. I hope Galba's appointment doesn't cost our prophetic friend his head."

Nero, we were to learn, had been declared a public enemy by the senate for acts we could only guess at. Fleeing Rome, he'd been helped to end his life by one of his freedmen.

It was good being beyond the vicissitudes of the Imperial Court, even though the violence and political chaos going on around us was no less awful. To seek relief from the follies and cruelties of our fellow men, Mel, I, and occasionally Ari, would saddle up and ride into the countryside. At least once a week my father and I would visit Sarah's grave, sit in the shade of an olive tree, and take turns reading and reciting philosophy and poetry aloud.

Mel and I didn't speak often of women. I'd never felt the urge to marry or settle down, and for Mel any such thoughts had died with Sarah. Nor to my knowledge did he ever visit brothels or make casual love, perhaps not wishing to plant a seed that would grow up in a cruel and godless world.

XXVIII [68-69 CE]

A newcomer to the fight between the Jewish factions was Simon, son of Giora, a strong, brutal Jew whom even the Zealots feared. When he reached the walls of Jerusalem, instead of attacking him the Zealots ambushed and kidnapped his wife and her attendants. Simon, furious, had every person who left the city tortured and killed, even old people coming out to gather herbs and firewood. He cut off the hands of many and sent them back into the city as a warning. His strategy was effective, for soon the captured women were released. Simon's arrival wasn't a happy day for citizens already suffering from the horrors inflicted on them by the Zealots and other rebel groups.

Meanwhile, in Rome, Emperor Galba was murdered, then succeeded by Marcus Salvius Otho, who committed suicide after being defeated by the troops of Aulus Vitellius. The new emperor thanked his army by turning them loose on Rome where they sacked, pillaged, and starved the citizenry.

Hearing of these outrages, Vespasian, who'd been biding his time in Caesarea for a year while awaiting orders to march on Jerusalem, was furious. Buoyed when his troops proclaimed him emperor, he traveled to Alexandria and seized Egypt to assure grain supplies for Rome. While he was in Alexandria, Governor Tiberius Alexander and his troops declared for him. Realizing that the prophecy of Josephus was coming true, Vespasian had his prisoner's shackles struck off; Josephus was free.

After a rule of eight months, the cruel, gluttonous Vitellius was hacked to pieces in the street and the Romans too proclaimed Vespasian emperor. On hearing this, Vespasian sailed from Alexandria to Rome, after first sending his son Titus with three crack legions to smash Jerusalem.

Much of this news we learned from Josephus, who arrived at Jerusalem with Titus and the troops. Also with the general was his new mistress, Bernice. The problem of where she could stay in safety and comfort during the campaign was solved by Josephus, who recalled Mel's house east of the city, beyond the Kidron Ravine and the Mount of Olives.

We were delighted to offer our hospitality to our old acquaintance, not least because she came with a twenty-four-hour guard that protected us too. Josephus arranged safe-conducts for everyone in the household, and Mel was paid a handsome rent.

When Titus decided to garrison his Tenth Legion on the Mount of Olives, Mel and I couldn't help speculating whether the reason was military or personal. Was he putting it there to have an excuse to visit his mistress while "in the neighborhood," so to speak? This possibility put smiles on our faces, for my father and I had a deep, scholarly interest in the historical events unfolding around us, an interest that sometimes bordered on shameless curiosity.

The battle between the Romans and Jews was not yet joined, but everything was falling into place. All Mel needed to do now was sit back and wait for the right moment – the moment to fulfill his Temple prophecy at last.

Titus encamped his army and headquarters four miles northwest of Jerusalem. Besides the original three legions, he now had another, the Twelfth, as well as troops from the allied kings. One day, while Titus reconnoitered the situation on horseback, approaching the city wall with some six hundred of his men, they were attacked by rebels and the general barely escaped with his life. That night he was joined by more legions and the next day he garrisoned two legions on Mt. Scopus, with the Fifth at the rear. When the Tenth arrived they began to set up their fortifications on the Mount of Olives.

At this point the Jews were essentially all within the city and the Romans without.

“Titus thinks he should just hang tight, do nothing, and let the Jewish factions destroy each other,” Josephus told us. “This isn’t a Roman/Jewish war; it’s really a war of Jew against Jew. Someday I’ll write about this conflict. I may even call my book ‘The Jewish War’.”

But if Titus believed he could simply wait for the enemy to defeat itself, the bickering Jews at last began to question their own behavior. They didn’t like seeing Roman camps springing up around the city while they did nothing to prevent it. So, joining forces, they dashed across the Kidron and made a surprise attack on the men of the Tenth, who’d put down their weapons to construct their fortifications.

Sarah’s Hill was close enough to the fighting that we were able to hear the clashes between the attackers and the attacked. Later we learned the details. At first the Jews had prevailed, chasing the Romans away. Then Titus arrived with forces to save them, but the battle raged on, up and down the Mount of Olives. Twice Titus almost lost his life, and twice he rallied and saved his men. After finally chasing the Jews down into the Ravine, he put a line of forces between them and the Tenth while the soldiers completed their encampment.

Meanwhile, to facilitate the movement of his troops, Titus leveled the ground from Mt. Scopus to the northern and western walls, removing every structure – even garden fences – cutting down every fruit tree and olive grove that stood in the path of his army, and filling in all the gullies. He then made his camp about a quarter mile from the city, entrenched another legion not far away, and kept the Tenth on the Mount of Olives.

XXIX [70 CE]

Mel and I hadn't seen Bernice since that day outside the Temple when she was on her way to beg Florus to call off his atrocities. Now about forty years of age, she descended from her litter looking like a woman whom strong men must love, a woman who would always be desired not just for her proven fertility, but for her character and intellect.

Bernice appeared delighted to see Mel and me again. "It's been so long since our sea voyage to Jerusalem with my dear, late father. Of course," she added wickedly, "you, Sarus, couldn't possibly remember that trip, for you weren't born yet." Then, noticing a look of alarm on Mel's face, she dropped the subject.

While Bernice would stay with us in the main house, there was no room for all her female attendants, so Titus had a cottage built next to it. This proved popular with both the ladies and our guards, and there was flirting night and day between the male and female contingents. Even I got into the act, so to speak, with a girl named Tamara.

One day Josephus took Mel and me on a tour of the camp of the Tenth legion. Bernice came too, although she'd seen many encampments before.

"They're all exactly alike," she told me. "See one Roman encampment and you've seen them all."

Josephus nodded energetically. "Exactly. At Jotapata you'll remember, Sarus, that mine was very similar to this. Every Roman encampment has exactly the same layout, whether it's intended to house the army overnight during a march, or serve as a garrison for years. You see?" he said, as he led us about, "one always enters and leaves on the Via Principia or the Via Praetoria, and both of these streets meet at the headquarters, be it a tent or a wooden building. The name of every street is identical to the name of the same street in every other camp. A soldier coming home drunk will always find his billet."

As we walked, Josephus pointed out the latrines, mess halls, and laundries of this miniature city. I recalled how quickly the Romans had built their camp at Jotapata.

"Yes," he nodded. "The Roman army will march five hours each day, about twenty miles or so, then make its camp. Every soldier knows what his task will be and goes about his duty, be it to dig a ditch around the perimeter, pile up an embankment of dirt, sharpen poles for a palisade wall, or any one of thousands of tasks."

The picture he painted was impressive; I was beginning to see why the Roman army was such an effective war machine.

"It's the discipline that makes the Romans invincible," Josephus assured us. "Now and then it breaks down, as it did the other day when the Jews raided while this camp was under construction. But discipline always prevails in the end."

Then one day Josephus came to see us in a real fury. “Those *bastards*,” he railed. “They wounded Nicanor. He and I were riding around the walls, trying to persuade the rebels on the ramparts to join in peace negotiations, and what did they do? They *shot* him.”

“Could they hear what you were saying?” Bernice asked. “Did they know you wanted peace?”

“Of course they could hear us. We rode close to the walls to shout up our message. That put us in range of their arrows and they took advantage of it, the bastards.”

“Well,” she said, “I’m sure you understand that although we’re Jews they hate us even more than they do the Romans. They consider us collaborators. They don’t understand we’re trying to save Judaism.”

I smiled to myself. Saving the Jews while sleeping with the Roman general? Good trick, Bernice!

Josephus reckoned that the rebels currently in the city comprised over 20,000 men. Simon, son of Giora, had an army of 10,000, he told us. The Idumeans numbered 5000. John had 6000 when he took over the Temple, and 2400 more were led by Eleazar and his Zealots.

These disparate factions occupied the inner and outer Temple and the massive Antonia Fortress standing next to it. In normal times a cohort of Roman soldiers permanently occupied the Antonia Fortress, which had been built by Herod. Now the fortress, with its siege engines and other armaments, had fallen to the rebels, who also manned the towers and parapets on the city walls. From there they rained stones and arrows down on the soldiers constructing embankments for their siege engines.

“So where has Titus decided to attack?” I asked Josephus.

“He’s going for the western part of the Third Wall. It’s lower there and if he breaches it he’ll have an easier access to the Second Wall and the Temple. Since Nicanor was shot, Titus has been in a rage, more determined than ever to get the job done.”

The Third Wall was the one built by King Agrippa I to enclose the expanded northern area of Jerusalem. Josephus regularly brought us news of what was happening on that side of the city. “The rebels aren’t making it easy for the troops to build the embankments,” he told us. “As usual they’re attacking them with stones and arrows, and making raids to burn the earthworks.”

But, also as usual, the Romans protected themselves with screens and artillery and finally the embankments were completed, allowing the soldiers to bring up their siege engines.

“The next sound you hear,” Josephus told us one day, “will be the battering ram.”

And it was. From afar we could clearly hear the sound of the iron ram’s head pounding Agrippa’s wall. So terrifying was the noise that the first blow served to unite the Jews. In desperation they hurled down fire-

brands and sent out more groups of insurgents to burn the works and attack the ram operators. Titus charged the rebels with cavalry, killing several and taking prisoners. One of these, Josephus told us, was crucified in sight of the battlements, as a warning.

The battering ram didn't succeed in breaching the wall, so Titus had three ironclad siege towers constructed on the embankments. From the relative safety of these, archers could shoot arrows, siege engines could do their work, and drawbridges could be lowered to access the battlements. Building them took a good amount of time, for besides the tremendous work involved there was need to protect the soldier workers from the Jews.

In the next attack on the Third Wall, the archers in the siege towers did their jobs well, as did the siege engines. Battering rams, especially the largest one, apprehensively called "Victor" by the Jews, took their toll on the wall, which began to crumble. The rebels now retreated behind the Second Wall while the Romans poured through the breach they'd made. Not stopping there, Titus went on to demolish much of Agrippa's wall and the northern part of the city, where he then established his second camp.

Five days later Titus breached the Second Wall – now abandoned by the Jews – which opened the way into the New Town. Not wanting to destroy the city, Titus ordered his men not to burn down the houses. But the Jews, taking the general's forbearance as weakness, attacked. The soldiers, having made only a small breach in the wall, were unable to retreat back through it all at once, but Titus had his archers hold the rebels at bay and saved his men.

The following day Josephus brought us more news. "Titus has suspended the siege for a few days," he told us. "He's trying to get the Jews to surrender and save their lives and their city. Titus doesn't want to starve them into surrender, but it's an option. Problem is, the rebels aren't letting the people surrender; they're killing all who try."

Josephus urged us to take this moment to come with him to the new Roman camp where Titus was reviewing his troops and paying them their wages in preparation for the battle to come. Of course we went, and were rewarded by seeing the legions in formation, their armor gleaming in the sunlight.

Pointing toward the Jews who watched this from the parapets, Josephus said, "I'm sure they find it impressive too."

But if they did, they weren't intimidated enough to surrender. From much practice the rebels had finally become skilled in the use of the artillery engines they'd captured in battle and at the Antonia Fortress. When Titus decided the Jews weren't going to opt for peace, he began building embankments at the Antonia. Again the Zealots fired on the soldiers to impede their work.

Josephus was discouraged. "Titus wants me to ride around the city again, imploring the rebels to surrender," he told us. "He expects me to

throw my voice farther than they can shoot.”

“Think you can?” I asked.

“No.”

“Will you try?”

“Of course not. The bastards have no intention of giving up. Why should I risk my life?”

“Absolutely,” I agreed. “After all, you have books to write before you die.”

“Damn right,” said Josephus.

XXX [August, 70 CE]

There came a time when I stopped taking notes on daily events. The horrors of the siege, as well as the endlessly repetitive building of embankments by the troops, followed by their inevitable sabotage by the rebels, had worn down my powers, if ever I possessed any, to relate such events in an interesting or edifying manner.

How to describe, as the siege wore on, the starvation and butchery that killed hundreds of thousands? How to enumerate the rotting corpses piling up all over the city, or thrown for lack of room into the ravines surrounding it? How tell of the rising stench that saturated every breeze?

Not just flesh suffered; to build more earthworks more trees were stripped from the surrounding suburbs to a distance of twelve miles, leaving the land denuded and ugly. A siege wall built around the city by Titus kept people out of the area, and all the others in.

“The rebels survive the siege and keep up their strength by raiding the homes of the rich and even the hovels of the poor,” explained Josephus,” who never lost an opportunity to bad-mouth the Jews or praise the Roman army. “Ironically, many of the Jews being slaughtered here aren’t city residents at all, but pilgrims who came in the spring and were prevented from leaving by the rebels.”

I asked him about his father and mother, who’d earlier been imprisoned by the insurgents.

“If they’re alive,” he replied, “Titus will liberate them. He’ll liberate all those imprisoned by the rebels, I’m sure. And I do believe he’ll spare the Temple.”

While reassuring to some, Josephus’s opinion on the Temple’s safety worried Mel. We knew that the massive flames arising from the Temple Mount didn’t mean the inner sanctuary itself was threatened. “If Josephus is right,” Mel said, “and Titus decides to spare the Temple, I’ve got to go there.”

Seeing him pick up an unlighted firebrand, I tried to block his way. “No,” I cried. “The Temple will burn or not, but in all that fire and blood-

shed you'll be killed yourself."

"So be it then," he said, pushing past me.

I watched as he mounted his horse and rode away. What kept me from going after him? Only the feeling that no man has the right to stop another from trying to achieve a goal he's spent his life pursuing.

Suddenly I heard the pounding of hooves – it was Ari, riding after Mel. My heart seemed to stop. For the first time in my life I wished there were a god to pray to – for his and my father's safe return.

It was 30 August. On that day, Herod's Temple fell.

* * * * *

Mel didn't return. It was impossible for Josephus and me to enter the city and try to locate him – or his body – amid the carnage and flames. Later that afternoon, with the distant sounds of crumbling walls and the smells and screams of a burning, dying city filling the air, I went to Sarah's grave. I was sure that if I didn't find Mel there, I'd find at least his ghost.

Climbing the well-worn path I began hearing other sounds, some the snorts and whinnies of horses, some the crunch of a shovel biting earth. Unable to see through the trees I climbed faster, and suddenly was there.

My eyes took in the scene: two tethered horses, Ari standing past his knees in a freshly dug hole, and a figure wrapped in a bloody cloak lying nearby. Without a word, as if he'd been expecting me, Ari handed me the shovel and I replaced him. Digging in that spot I wept tears of gratitude; no one could have done this thing but Ari, not even I, the son.

When the hole was deeper he took my place, kneeling down and feeling with his hands for Sarah's body wrapped in its shawl. When he found her he climbed out. Together we lowered Mel's shrouded body and placed it beside Sarah. Then gently, with our hands, Ari and I pulled the earth over them.

There were no prayers, no golden gifts for them to take to the afterworld, only the turned earth mixed with stones – stones for them to play with, to hide wickedly in one another, to enjoy. Silently, Ari and I watched the day end, and what a strange day's end it was, with the sun sinking into a fiery horizon whose fire wasn't all of its own making.

But there were questions whose answers I had to know, and Ari knew I did. So, without my having to ask, after a long moment he spoke:

"Mel fulfilled his prophecy," he told me. "Titus was unable to control his men and there was terrible killing and looting in the Temple's outer chambers by both rebels and Romans. Perhaps the soldiers had put pitch in the rafters which was ignited by fire running up the walls and curtains, for the only part of the Temple not already in flames when I arrived was the inner sanctuary. I saw Titus force his way through the portal, then a moment later come rushing out, shouting to his men to restrain themselves.

Apparently he wanted to save this last part of the Temple – the Holy of Holies. It was then that I saw Mel holding high a lighted torch. The crowd seemed to fall back as he walked through the gate of the inner sanctuary.

“Breathless, praying to God that the entire temple wouldn’t fall before we got out, I kept my eyes on that doorway. *Hurry, Mel, hurry!* Then suddenly flames belched forth as the inner chamber erupted. In the same blast Mel was thrust through the gate, his clothes, hair, and flesh on fire. He staggered a few steps, then fell. Grabbing a cloak from a pile of the dead I ran to him and wrapped him in it, putting out the flames.

“I don’t know how I got him out of that raging hell. In the Kidron I found these abandoned horses and made it home. I didn’t want to bring his body to the house, fearing it would cause chaos and too many questions. I knew you’d come here.”

He stopped speaking and we sat a silently, thinking our own thoughts. Mel’s death had changed our lives forever; my father and our best friend was gone. The Temple had fallen, fulfilling his prophecy, but what about the Christian prophecy? So far the world hadn’t come to an end and Jesus hadn’t returned – nor did I feel that either of these events was imminent.

That left the question: what should Ari and I do now?

“We can leave here,” Ari told me, as if reading my mind. “Mel will watch after Sarah and she’ll watch after him. They’re earth now, and will never be parted again.”

“Ari,” I said, “was Mel really a Jew?”

“He absolutely was,” smiled Ari, “made in the image of the Lord: angry . . . unforgiving . . . vengeful – but with the heart of a man in him too.” He got to his feet. “I’ll wait at the house until Titus comes for Bernice. At the same time I’ll think about where to go and what to do with my life. That might take a while; it’s a big empire, after all.”

I nodded. Ari was right. This was no small empire any more. Indeed, suddenly it seemed limitless and timeless, encompassing the earth and air and sky in a continuum that stretched from the beginning to eternity. Yet how empty it felt, with so many friends and loved ones gone to dust.

The red sky lighted our way as we led the horses down the hill. Should we turn them loose, I wondered, or keep them to replace the lost ones?

“We can name them Incitatus IV and V,” Ari suggested, “and put them in . . . *your* stables.”

“Sounds like a plan.” But upon reaching the house we were greeted by our two “lost” horses that had found their way home. Ari hugged and kissed his mount’s neck while I held Mel’s by its bridle, feeling its anxious lips search my hand.

“Maybe it’s a small empire after all,” I said.

XXXI

The destruction of Jerusalem and the carnage didn't end with the fall of the Temple; Titus opened the prisons, then set about burning and demolishing the entire city and its walls. His soldiers went into the sewers and killed the thousands hiding there. According to Josephus, more than one million Jews died before it was over. Of the city itself, Titus left standing only the three tallest towers – Phasael, Hippicus and Mariamme – and part of the Western Wall, to show the world the strong defenses he'd conquered.

After victory celebrations during which he handed out awards for bravery, Titus dismissed most of his troops, keeping only those needed to help bring his prisoners to Caesarea. The Tenth he left on the Mount of Olives. The day he came to our house to reclaim his mistress, he learned that Mel had died, but not where or how he'd died. Saddened by the news, he asked if I needed a ride back to Rome, but I declined, saying I planned to stay a while on Sarah's Hill.

"Sarus has an autohistory to write," Josephus told him, "and a lady named Tamara to help him trim his nibs. But *I'd* be happy to accept your generous offer."

Titus then withdrew to Caesarea to await the sailing season. Some of the prisoners he took with him were killed in arena games there, or crucified. The handsomest among them, and such prizes as Simon, son of Giora, were saved for his Roman Triumph.

That same year, John Mark wrote his Gospel.

