

Tracy Groot

The Stones of my Accusers

a novel

Praise for novels by Tracy Groot

“[*The Brother’s Keeper* is a] lyrical and affecting first novel.”

BOOKLIST, starred review

“Groot vividly portrays both the heroism and the horrors of World War II. With the release of Christopher Nolan’s film *Dunkirk*, there is bound to be interest.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *The Maggie Bright*

“Groot’s well-researched, inspirational historical tale . . . will be compelling and memorable for a diverse audience.”

BOOKLIST on *The Sentinels of Andersonville*

“Groot has done good historical homework. . . . The pacing is page-turning. . . . This Civil War–era story grapples with fundamental moral questions about decency and conscience—questions that can be asked about all wars.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review of *The Sentinels of Andersonville*

“Richly detailed, engrossing historical fiction.”

KIRKUS REVIEWS on *The Sentinels of Andersonville*

“If the truth hurts, [*The Sentinels of Andersonville*] is like a knife to the heart. . . . This story of a Good Samaritan shines brightly as the characters place themselves in danger.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, Top Pick review

“Groot . . . does good historical work with details and subtle psychological work with her characters. WWII-era novels are popular; this is a superior, page-turning entry in that niche.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Flame of Resistance*

“Scrupulously researched and lovingly written, *Flame of Resistance* plunges the reader into an exhilarating story of courage, grace, and one endearing woman’s leap of faith.”

THE BANNER

“[A] well-paced, beautifully written historical novel. . . . Entertaining and compelling.”

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“Groot cleverly combines historical research, Scripture, and thrilling imagination to create an ingenious story built around the Gerasene demoniac described in Mark’s and Luke’s Gospels. It’s one of the best fictional adaptations of a biblical event I’ve had the pleasure to read.”

ASPIRING RETAIL MAGAZINE

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The Stones of My Accusers

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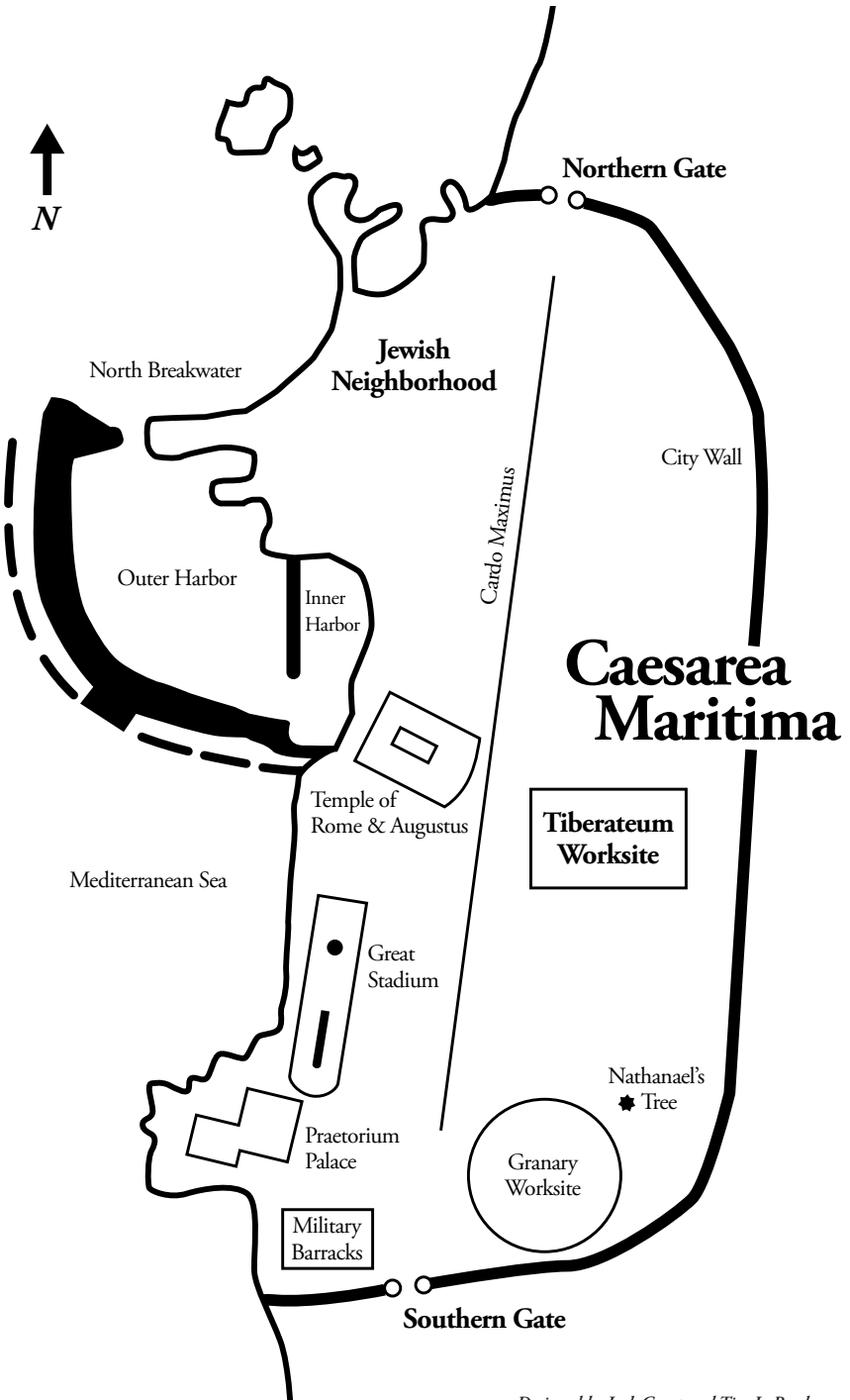
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Prologue

JORAH WATCHED as Annika marked the height of the child with the flat of her hand and scored the limestone wall with her thumbnail. The child stood back and watched the addition of his newest notch.

The occasion was a solemn one, Jorah could tell, a mysterious bargain struck between the old woman and the little street scamp. After making the mark, Annika pursed her lips and, with a mistrustful look at the boy, bent to examine the distance between the last notch and the fresh one. The mistrust turned to surprise, and her fists went to her hips. She regarded the child with suspicious interest.

“Well, Jotham. What have you to account for nearly two finger-spans of growth? Are you wearing sandals?”

“No, Annika,” the child said, lifting a foot for examination. “I have been eating the loaves.”

One eyebrow came up. “Every day?”

“Every day.” He nodded, dark eyes large in his thin face.

She glared at him a moment more, then the eyebrow came down. “Good boy.”

His face broke into a sunny smile, and he turned to skip to the tall cupboard in the kitchen. He waited until Annika got there, and

she reached to take down a wooden box. Jorah could not see what she gave Jotham, but the boy received it with a smile, then scurried through the kitchen and out the door.

Annika watched him go, smiling fondly. “Little rogue.”

Seated at the table, Jorah looked out the window to watch him dash away. “Little ungrateful wretch. I didn’t hear a thank-you.”

Annika replaced the box. “One thing at a time.” She turned to the shelves and took down the cups to set them on the table. She waved a few fruit flies from the pitcher of watered wine and set it next to the cups, then she set out a loaf of spiced honeycake and fetched a few plates.

Gazing out the window, chin on her fist, Jorah murmured, “It’s hard to think of him as a boy, but he was, you know. A little boy like that.”

Annika hesitated only a second as she sliced the bread. “Which him would you be speaking of?”

“You know.”

“I do. Try and say his name now and again. Else it would be as if he never was.”

Pain surged. As if Nathanael never was? But he was. And never would be again.

Jorah made her lips small to keep them from quivering. Annika was busy with the serving, she would not notice when Jorah pretended to adjust her head covering to wipe away tears.

Three weeks since they had buried Nathanael at Bethany. Three weeks of endless tears, and they did not appear to be slowing. There was too much to grieve over. The loss of the man she would marry. The loss of her old life. The loss of . . . but she could not think about Jesus. She lost him long ago, the day he left their home.

Annika was speaking. “. . . family from Sepphoris still interested in your place?” She shook her head and gave a heavy sigh as she slid

a slice of honeycake from the knife to a plate. “I never could have imagined such a thing: no tribe of Joseph left in Nazareth. My steps may stop at the well, but my heart will ever wander past it. Up that old hill to that old home.”

“They are interested. But Jude and James do not want to sell until they talk to Simon about it, and he’s off on some crazy lark to Decapolis. They want to talk with Joses and Mother too, but that’s not the reason they’re going to Jerusalem.” No, it was the same old story. People leaving her for God. Jorah never seemed to figure in.

“So,” Annika said as she slid onto the bench across from Jorah. “Caesarea Maritima for you.”

“Someone has to tell her.”

They fell silent. Jorah’s glance kept straying to the uncut portion of Annika’s honeycake. What was it about that loaf . . .

Annika was right. Soon all of the children of Joseph would be gone from the home forever. In just a few hours, Jorah and James and Judas were leaving, she for Caesarea Maritima, they for Jerusalem. The home would be an empty shell. As she was without Nathanael.

Why would a loaf of bread . . .

She remembered. This time she could not conceal the tears.

“Child,” Annika said softly, reaching to grasp Jorah’s hand.

“He brought them bread,” Jorah gasped, and bit her lip. Sorrow wrapped around her like an old black garment.

Nathanael had brought them bread, one of Annika’s loaves. He went back to ask the strangers to join their party on the road to Jerusalem, so they would feel safer traveling in a larger company. For bread, they gave him blood, his own. He died days later of the wounds.

Jorah sagged and rested her forehead on the table. Grief upon grief. Nathanael and Jesus, dead within days of each other, both

murdered. One was said to have risen again. Well, Jorah never saw him. The other lay beneath a pile of stones in a common grave outside Bethany. No rumors of resurrection there.

Her face became humid with her breath on the table. "I would kill Joab if I could," she breathed into the old oak. "I would kill him, Annika, God help me I would."

"I would lend a hand."

Jorah looked up, scowling. She drew her sleeve across her face. "You would lend a hand," she sneered.

Annika smiled sadly, cheeks pushing skin into a multitude of soft wrinkles. "You and me both, Jorah. We'll be the terrors from Nazareth. Instruments of God's vengeance. What do you say?" She balled her fist and held up her arm to show she still had some muscle.

Jorah couldn't even smile.

Did everyone change as much as Annika had in the past month? News of Jesus, and news of Nathanael . . . Annika had gained ten years with all the news from Jerusalem. That made her old indeed.

"You would not kill a fly if it bit you twice." She hated the sound of her own voice. All the crying made her speak through her nose.

Annika snatched her fist from the air. "You would not either," she retorted. "Judas tells me that boy was not responsible for Nathanael's death. He said that Joab tried to save him—that he killed the one who attacked Nathanael. Stop making him responsible for your pain. That's cowardice, Jorah. You are not a coward."

"Joab could have prevented it!" Jorah spat.

"Jorah, Jorah," Annika said, voice low. "Sorrow is enough to bear."

"He was going to marry me, Annika."

The old woman nodded heavily. "I know, child. I know he loved you."

Did Nathanael talk about her? Jorah scrubbed her eyes, then poked at the honeycake on her plate. "You knew he loved me?"

“He was addled over you.”

“I didn’t—know if he loved me as—” She swallowed the words and scowled at her plate. She didn’t want to cry; she was tired of sounding ugly.

Honeycake. The way her mind worked these days, sluggish as an overfed ox. Annika told her a soul hobbled in grief moved slowly for a time, like a wounded animal. She felt doubly dosed with pokeweed.

She touched the cake on her plate. Touched the wine cup and watched a fruit fly imbibe on the rim. These days she would do crazy things, like see a flower sprig in the midst of a crying spell. She’d take and hold it close to her face and see satin sparkles, pattern, and color. She’d take an orange peel and squeeze oily spray on her hand, and marvel at the fragrance. She’d examine a pinch of sand. So many colors. How could someone say, “It is the color of sand,” when sand was a rainbow up close? Marveling at orange peel and sand did more than speaking with a rabbi.

She picked up a slice of honeycake. “I used to make them exactly as you told me, and mine would always turn out dry,” Jorah murmured. “You probably told me wrong on purpose, else lose your reputation for the best.”

But Annika was in her own thoughts. “Even Judas leaves me,” she grumbled unhappily, “and he is my least favorite. What is Nazareth without a single member of the Joseph clan?” She hesitated. “Jorah. I know what James believes of Jesus. How does Jude feel about . . . the rumors?”

Moist and delicious. Or it would be, if its flavor hadn’t fled at the mention of her oldest brother. Jesus! *Oh, God* . . . But no—no. Jorah had piled that way with boulders. She set the bread down and brought her palm close to inspect a few crumbs. “Why don’t you ask Jude?”

“Fair enough. One thing at a time.” Whatever she meant by it, Annika left it. “How long will you stay in Caesarea?”

“As long as it takes me to find her.”

“You are sure your father’s cousin still lives there?”

“Yes. Simon and Joses visited Thomas on the trip to sell the benches. He lives across the commonyard from a famous mosaicist. I should like to visit his workroom. I have a talent for mosaics, you know.” She brushed the crumbs from her palm to her plate.

“Child?”

Jorah looked up.

Annika looked at her long. “You do a good thing. A hard thing. To tell a mother her son is dead . . . I am proud of you, Jorah ben Joseph.”

Jorah hoped her smile did not look fake. Annika would not be proud if she knew the real reason she was going to see the woman.

“Oh. I nearly forgot.” Annika got up and went to her bedroom in the back of the house. When she returned she was folding a long cloth, a narrow linen tablecloth. “I made this for Rivkah. Please take it to her for me.”

Rivkah? But of course. Nathanael’s mother. It was hard to think of her with a name. She who gave him birth . . . she who gave him scars.

“Annika.” Jorah hesitated. “Did you know of Nathanael’s scars?”

Surprise, then wariness came into Annika’s face. “What scars?” she said sharply.

“When Abi and I wrapped Nathanael’s body for burial, we found—” She squeezed her eyes shut. Orange peel fragrance. Flower petals. “There were—scars on his thigh. Old ones. From childhood.” She clenched her teeth. Grains of sand. A mosaic. “Nathanael told James his mother did it. To let the evil out.”

When Jorah looked at Annika, she found she had aged again. She was looking out the window, chin in her hand, tears brimming.

“Six different shades of ugly, all of us,” she murmured, and a tear dropped away. “He wanted to tell me. He tried to tell me, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. It would have shamed her more than him.” She sniffed. “Poor thing.”

Through her own tears, Jorah suddenly smiled. “He would have never let anyone call him a poor thing.”

“I wasn’t talking about Nathanael.” Annika wearily pressed her fingers against her eyes.

The smile dropped. “Why is *she* a poor thing?”

“She hated herself, not Nathanael.” Annika wiped her nose with a fold of her tunic. “Oh, Jorah, what we are capable of. God have mercy on us.”

Jorah could only stare, then look away. Annika could say what she wanted, but she had seen the scars with her own eyes. God would not have mercy on that. Never that.

He’s dead now, Jorah would tell Nathanael’s mother. She knew exactly what tone she would use. She had rehearsed it several times, whispering to a fingerprint of sand. I know what you did. I’ve seen the scars. And now your son is dead. You never deserved him, and now he’s dead.

It was the only thing to give true comfort. The only thing to help her breathe. At the times when the grief would consume her, when she would suffocate and go mad, she would think on these words and allow them to calm her.

She owed it to Nathanael if only to raise a voice against an old, horrific deed. If only to not allow it to go unnoticed. It was God’s justice, after all. God knew what Rivkah had done, and he would expose it through Jorah. It was Jorah’s mitzvah, her responsibility to Nathanael’s memory.

Calmness came, like wine warming her blood, and she actually smiled at Annika.

Annika smiled back, if uncertainly.

Yes, Jorah would go and tell a woman that her son was dead. *Let those words score that heart as she had scored Nathanael's leg. Let her take those words to her grave, as Nathanael took the scars to his.*



Nathanael was dead. Joab lived. This is what he knew for now.

The road from Jerusalem would break west, and he would bring Nathanael's last words to his prostitute mother in Caesarea. Bring them, yes, but how to give them? They were tricky, treacherous words. Not Nathanael's words at all.

Tricky, too, telling a mother her son was murdered.

Joab sat on his haunches, tunic tight over his knees, trailing his knuckles back and forth in the dirt. He stopped when it made him think of what the doctor said, that Jesus had his fingers in the sand too. He folded his arms instead, and lifted his eyes to the silver box a distance away.

The box on the boulder, with the wrapping cloth splayed beneath, picked up a scrap of the descending sun and put a painful gleam in his eye. He stared at it until white blindness came. He couldn't see it now, but he knew every detail. The lid was etched with a strange design, pagan symbolism for all he knew. It was inlaid with cut stones of lapis lazuli. Threads of white laced through the indigo stones. Glitters, half the size of sand grains, shone golden in the blue.

Nathanael was dead. Joab lived.

He had fancied the box had powers, maybe, because it once held frankincense for the Teacher. He had brought it to Nathanael, hoping it would save him. It did not. The Teacher was dead too; so much for a magical box. There were crazy rumors he came alive again, and that was much to think on, but Joab couldn't think past

the words he was charged to carry. Why couldn't they be "Mother, I love you," "See you on the other side," that kind of thing?

How could he be doing this? He was the son of a dye works owner. Lived in Hebron all his life. He knew color. He knew what iron salts and alum could do, he knew which plants produced the best color for the cheapest price, he knew he should never have listened to Avi and his Zealot friends. Everything had been fine until Avi came along. Avi was dead too. Joab lived.

What if Nathanael had been his friend instead of Avi? They wouldn't have cared about the land and the Romans. They would have paid mind to things at hand—playing tricks on Joab's older brother, hauling in a good harvest, working hard and laughing hard and getting drunk on occasion and goading each other to talk to a pretty girl and—

The blood and the knife. There was a great deal of blood.

Joab looked away from the box. He had found out things about Nathanael after he was wounded. Found out he had quite a sense of humor, and he was fiercely loyal—that, Joab knew already. He'd discovered that the day Nathanael kicked him out of the carpenter's shop. And even as Joab had fled the home, he put a backward glance on the house and thought maybe he was in the wrong company . . . that he should have been in the shop, laughing as James did, watching the Zealots run away.

He didn't know much about Nathanael, he who was loved of Jorah, only that he should not have died. Mostly he knew Nathanael had quality. He learned of the quality in the way Jorah tended Nathanael after he was wounded. The way James, the oldest brother, never left the cart. Learned it by the way Jude, the quiet one, hovered with hawk eyes on the wounds and the way Simon, a fellow he suspected of a normally grim nature, rivaled Avi himself with furious, anxious brooding. What little he learned in words, he

learned from Simon, information resentfully given by a man who hated him as much as anyone in that party traveling to Jerusalem for Passover.

Where is he from?

Caesarea.

Which one?

By the sea.

Who are his parents?

He has only a mother, a prostitute.

What is her name?

What do you care? Get out of my sight!

Joab flicked an ant off his toe. Curious that he should think so much about Nathanael. He remembered feeling jealous, watching Nathanael in that cart, even the way he was, slick with sweat and his breath coming hard, face pale against those colorful cushions. Jealous because the way they acted, you would have thought the worst thing in the world was for that apprentice to die. And him trying to act as if his wounds were nothing but an inconvenience.

Nathanael had quality, a mystical kind, the kind the Teacher had. The kind that had Joab heading to a place he had never been, to give a stolen box to someone he had never met, to tell her words he feared would stay in his throat for the consternation of them. The quality made him do it, and the knife and the blood.

Why—he scrubbed up his hair—why did it take that long? Why had he been so blinded to Avi's madness? Avi's madness, his own madness . . . why did it take blood to bring the truth? Why were the words *these* words?

You're the one, Nathanael had said. You go and tell her, no stones.

Who? What are you talking about?

No stones . . .

I don't understand!

Tell her what Jesus said.

The doctor had taken him aside and told him what Nathanael meant. Told him of Jesus and the adulteress and the ones who would throw the stones. But it was no explanation at all. It drove up new thoughts he wished would stay put. He went to flick another ant, but his fingers left the ant to hesitate over the sand.

What did Jesus write? Was he buying time because his words would change everything? Maybe he was working up the courage to say them. Did he and the woman look at each other, there on the ground, he on one side and she on the other? Did she look at him just as amazed as the others; did she wonder what he was doing? Writing in the sand in the middle of a conversation. What kind of craziness was that? The doctor told the whole story; it was the most troubling thing Joab had ever heard.

Joab wrote *no stones* in Aramaic, then erased it to write the same in Greek. He would soon be in Caesarea. His father said they spoke mostly Greek where the Romans had set up their government in Palestine. Avi had refused to speak in Greek. Called it the tongue of the oppressor. Soon, from Joab's own tongue would fall words in defiance of the Torah he had been raised to revere.

He rose and dusted off his hands. He rewrapped the box and stuffed it in his shoulder sack, slipped the strap over his shoulder, and took up again for Caesarea.

The sack thudded softly on his hip. He hoped it looked like nothing more than an extra set of clothing; a silver box inlaid with lapis lazuli was a prize indeed.

Joab gazed at the green appearing in the brown hills. It was late spring in Judea; color came up everywhere in this tawny land. About this time he usually helped his father and brother bring in the first blossom harvest from the cultivated field, where the bees

worked with them. He could hear the hum, smell the sun-warmed flowers. He lifted his face to the sun, closed his eyes, remembering.

Where would he go after Caesarea? It didn't matter. Catch the next vessel out of the harbor. Go to Rome, go to Gaul. He could never go home. Never again see the field or the bees, because Nathanael was dead and Joab lived. This is what he knew for now.



They had kicked the stones out of place. They had to go far out of their way to do that, up here on the slope facing the sea. The tree was not an obstruction to their beast building project, not even in the way of foot traffic. Not yet. The stones were a warning.

Rivkah knew they watched her replace the stones into the ring around the cedar tree. She thought about spitting, "Fah!" and hissing like a cat, but they might not recognize a good Jewish insult. They would only think her mad, and she was, a little bit, but at least they would not see her fear. When every stone was back in its place, she stood back to look at the tree. It was an eighteen-year-old cedar, nineteen next month. It fared well.

Half the time Rivkah feared she'd come and find the branches stripped. Her worst fear she could not name, because if she allowed the thought it might happen. If God heard the prayers of a prostitute, it wouldn't.

She looked past the cedar, let her gaze travel every rueful inch to the top of the slope. She did it to torture herself. Ever since the threat came upon Nathanael's tree, she wished she had planted it at the top. But who could have foreseen Caesarea would grow so much? Eighteen years ago the southeast part of the city was neglected and barren. She had chosen the site for that reason.

She was only fifteen then, and alone. If anyone had seen her plant the tree for her baby boy, they would have scorned her to dust

for the hope she had for her son. If she had planted it where her old friends had planted theirs, the tree would have been cut down long ago. By Mother. Or maybe Zakkai.

She ran her hand over the comforting roughness of Nathanael's tree, then turned and sat against it where she could watch the sea, and more importantly, where she could watch the ugly beast pigs at the work site.

Two months now Nathanael had been gone. She had much to tell him when he returned. His grandmother died two days after he left. His friend Hepsominah married a rich Egyptian and moved to Alexandria.

Kyria might fret about Nathanael's long absence, but Rivkah wasn't worried. He could take care of himself. Wasn't he her boy? If she was a little mad, so was he, and madness had a curious quality of preservation. If Kyria said she knew Nathanael could take care of himself, it was other people who worried her, well, Rivkah refused to allow Kyria to scare her. Sometimes she screamed in Kyria's face to force the bad words back and prevent them from creating havoc—something Mother had taught her, and you had to scream yourself hoarse to make it work. She'd stiff-arm Kyria's evil words and think only on the letter Nathanael had left.

Do not worry about me, Mother. I am going north for a time. I will explain all when I get back. I should return by the next full moon. Ho, the stories I will tell. Just you wait.

If Nathanael did not return by the next full moon, or the next, wasn't he still her boy? She'd taught him to take care of himself. Kyria taught him things too. From her he learned to hit a gecko at fifty paces.

Rivkah squeaked a yawn and pressed her fist against her mouth.

She was used to sleeping at this time of day. At least she had some coin to live on for a while, and enough possessions to sell or trade if things got bad. Or she could live on Kyria; Kyria had lived on her enough times when business was slow, when the Roman garrison was out on field maneuvers. She would sleep here if she had to. Kyria could bring food if she could not leave.

Day after day, brick by brick, the walls of the granary grew. It seeped toward the tree like an incoming tide. Day after day Rivkah went to the Praetorium to try and stop the tide. Day after day she petitioned for Nathanael's tree. Pilate's chief secretary, Orion Galerinius, came to expect her visits.

He had a different expression on his face this morning. When he looked up from the table and saw her next in line, his face cleared. *You again*, he had said, folding his arms and sitting back. *Me again*, she had replied, folding her arms to copy him. His eyes had a tiny twinkle, and she wanted to say something to make him smile, as she had done before.

He'd have been disappointed had I not shown up, she thought, and the idea made her laugh out loud.

The sound brought attention from a worker at the wall. He leaned toward another worker and said something to make him sneer as well. She made her own sneer six times as ugly—she could hood her amber eyes, fill them with rage, and make them look hellish as a demon-cat. She wished she could scream curses, but couldn't risk it. Instead she cupped her hands and whispered a curse, then blew the ugly words to the workers and deepened the demon-cat look.

Muttering and sullen, they went back to their work.

The tide seeped daily, brick by brick. So the fear grew, brick by brick. She looked out to the Mediterranean, saw a ship bound for the harbor. Rivkah ground her heels into the earth to push her spine harder on the tree. If God heard the prayers of a prostitute,

and Kyria thought maybe he did, then somehow Rivkah would stop the swelling tide. Or she would chain her neck to the trunk and drown with the tree.



Orion tried another note on the pearwood pipe. That was closer. He added it to the last note, and it sounded promising. He wet his lips and started the tune from the beginning, ending with the new note; it didn't work.

He'd have it right one day, but he wondered if memory played tricks on his ear. It was a tune that had made him lift his head when he passed a stall in the marketplace. He had slowed his steps to hear more, but the crowd carried him on. He passed the same stall on other days, listening, but never heard anyone play there again.

At the rare times he took out his pipe, he closed his workroom door. A closed door to the people of the palace meant serious discussion lay within, and Orion could enjoy a little peace. Duty always made him open the door after no more than a few minutes, but today he was bearing down on half an hour. He played in defiance of the two matters that lay in wait.

Protecting Jews had been a game up until now. Petty defiances that amounted to no more than a stuck-out tongue behind Pilate's back. Protecting Jews was an easy way to look like a benevolent man, a quick and cheap way, because protecting Jews had never cost him. He lowered the pipe and looked out the window to his bit of the Mediterranean. Hazy out today.

If he brought the matters to Pilate, disaster would come of it. But there was no *if* about it: the two matters had escalated to the degree that if he did not put them before the governor, Pilate would learn that Orion had delayed them. And that would make Pilate wonder what else Orion did around here. It might expose

the gleaners' program he had granted to the soldier Cornelius for hungry Gentiles—and Jews. It would threaten the little son of the Jewish laundress. It would lay bare his arrangement with a cruelly poor old Jew who paid his taxes in dried-up dates.

So he allowed Jews to eat Pilate's scraps, so what? The scraps filled the bellies of the Gentiles too. It used to be things were not alarming. Now, anything with a tiny taint of Jew was touchy as a mad scorpion. Things had changed over the last five, six years, he wasn't sure when or how.

One woman wanted to keep her tree, and one man did not want to work on his holy day. Orion had looked; it was only a tree. Orion had inquired; the man was a hard worker. Simple requests borne from custom. If they were Roman requests from Roman customs, there would have been no delay. But they were Jewish requests, and that is why Orion played his pipe.

It was either the pipe or heavy drinking. A tent filled with poppy smoke sounded nice. Wasn't he second in command? Couldn't he ask around for the local poppy tent? He pictured fat pillows and people lolling and laughing. He'd like to loll and laugh. He'd never been in a poppy tent before. He'd never defied Pontius Pilate before. Not like this.

His eyes went to the top of the recessed shelves. He couldn't see it from where he sat, but upon the top shelf was a small wooden box. In the box was an iron collar, made to fit the neck of an eight-year-old boy. The collar had belonged to his father.

When courage was as scarce as barley after gleaners, Orion thought of the box. He had taken it out only once in the six years of his Palestine sojourn, when he had to tell a palace slave his wife was dead. He went to reach for the box—

No! He would *not* bring the matters to Pilate. He did not need a collar to tell him what to do. He'd fire the stonemason and tell

them to cut down her tree. What did he care? Gods and goddesses and all their mincing offspring, these people *vexed* him! Two weeks trying to come up with solutions. He'd wasted enough time. Didn't he have a palace to run? What did he care? He didn't care, he was too tired to care.

If he took the matters to Pilate, and only a majestic idiot would, he would have to make them sound fresh from the petitioners—as though the majestic idiot had not taken two weeks to puzzle over them. If the idiot took the matters to Pilate, and only a pox-brained lackwit would, he had to sound casual as he stated the matters . . . as though he didn't care about the outcome one way or another.

It was only a tree. It was only a day, just one day away from work in a week. They were not unreasonable requests. They were simply wishes. Pilate could grant them as easily as saying hello.

They were Jewish wishes.

Orion rewrapped the pearwood pipe in felt and placed it on the recessed shelf, then pulled his stool to his table. He took a tablet, freshly filled with beeswax. He took a stylus from the vase and picked off old wax. He blew on the stylus and glanced at his bit of the sea. After a hesitation, in which he wondered what poppy smoke was like, he went to work scratching into the wax two new items for the attention of Pontius Pilate.

1

Pontius Pilate, Governor of Judea, the Eastern Imperial Province of Rome, to the honorable Decimus Vitellus Caratacus, Primipilaris, greetings.

I am heartened by your consideration to an appointment within my administration. This position of Chief Secretary is held by Orion Galerinius Honoratus. Orion is unaware of the precariousness of his employ; he knows only that an old friend is coming to Judea for a visit. I will appreciate your discretion upon arrival.

You may have heard of the recent event in Jerusalem, the matter of one Jesus of Nazareth, leader of a Jewish sect in my province. It was a distasteful matter, typical to the trials involved in ruling a people as obstinate, rebellious, and

seditions as the Jews. I look forward to discussing this event with someone of true Roman sensibility.

Most important to me is your witness to the veracity of my reports of a people as difficult to manage as the Jews. The jeopardy of my secretary's position testifies to this: he is a Jewish sympathizer, a vexatious man bewitched by whatever spell these people hold over the weak-minded and frail.

How fares Sejanus? I hear disturbing reports that he falls from favor with Tiberius. A pity . . . he was my sponsor, you know. Bring what news you can.

I anticipate your arrival, and will begin to look for you. May your journey be accompanied by fair winds and good fortune. Long live Tiberius.

Pontius Pilate, by my own hand.

Herod may have been Jewish—Jewish enough—but at least he had taste. He had chosen the best place in Caesarea for his palace, right on a dramatic promontory, right in the spray of the Mediterranean. The first story withstood any threats from the sea, and the second story afforded a magnificent view. It was arguable that the mighty harbor to the north was built only to grace the view of the palace.

Pilate leaned on the window and caught the salty tang of the sea in a billowed mist on his face. The glorious harbor; the sumptuous Praetorium Palace; the Temple of Rome and Augustus; the theater and the statuary and the gardens; the Great Stadium with clashing tournaments, its sands dark and foamy with blood . . . because of these things, these alone, Pilate could feel at home in a gods-blasted outpost like Judea.

Because of these alone Pilate could ask his old friend Decimus to come from Rome. On the way, he had surely put in at the decrepit

harbor at Phalasarna in Crete, then at Paphos on Cyprus. Either harbor would provide perfect contrast to what Decimus would soon find upon arrival at Caesarea.

If Decimus were at the bow, sea spray on his face, gazing at shining green-blue crests in the perfect weather of early summer, perhaps he would see a white speck upon the horizon. He would squint and ask of a deckhand, and be told, yes, that is Caesarea; the white speck is the Temple of Rome and Augustus. And Decimus would wonder out loud, You can see it so far out? And the deckhand would assure him, Just wait until you come into the harbor.

He would have heard about Herod's harbor, the better between it and the mighty Piraeus in Athens. This sweep of coastland, from Antioch in northern Syria down to the Egyptian border, provided no natural harbor, not for major trade. Herod the "Great" built a harbor so glorious, so sweeping in size it took a Roman to fully appreciate it. Indeed, Caesarea—he had named it for Augustus—became Herod's little Rome. It was Herod who built the pagan temple for Augustus. Herod who built the Roman amphitheater. Herod the Jew.

Decimus will remember that when he sees the colossal statues at the harbor mouth, and the colonnaded temple on the hill, the majestic centerpiece of the quay. When his ship comes under tow by a smaller vessel, and when he passes, openmouthed, beneath the sculpted stone arch connecting the towers at the harbor entrance, perhaps his skin will rise from a chill not induced by sea spray. He will think, astonished: *This, from the hand of a Jew!* And in the marveling, his childhood friend will be elevated in his estimation—Pilate is governor here. Pontius Pilate!

Pilate smoothed his hand on the damp stone windowsill. Maybe it was built on the promontory because it was closer to Rome. He pushed off from the window, away from the view, away from the

pull of Rome. Orion Galerinius was waiting. Orion was a poor substitute for the view.

When he knew he had the governor's attention, the slightly built man opened and consulted his tablet. "Theron," Orion stated. "He is waiting in the audience hall with a few other candidates. Remember Theron? He repaired the mosaic around the drainage hole in the pool last winter."

Would Decimus trade his freedom for the tablet and stylus? Decimus was free. Free, after twenty years of military service, ready to take a pension and a wife and head for family land. Would he run back to Rome when he realized what sort of smug, cantankerous people he would have to deal with? Or would he see it as a challenge, just the sort he loved?

He would soon see what the Jews had put Pilate through. A mere letter could not convey the vexatiousness of these people. He'd rather face Jupiter in a bad mood than a cohort of these circumcised subjects of Rome. . . .

Orion Galerinius was waiting for an answer.

"Theron does fine work," said Pilate. "Hire him. Have him bring samples of borders, as well as any new patterns from Pompeii."

"You plan for more than a border for the walkway?" Though Orion kept his eyes on his tablet, over which his hand busily worked, his brow came up ever so slightly.

"If it pleases me," Pilate snapped.

"As you wish, Excellency. Theron and his people will be honored to be in the employ of Rome."

"Has the Primpilaris arrived?" Primpilaris, ex-first spear. Decimus had earned that title.

Orion finished pressing a note on the waxed tablet. "Not unless he has come in the last hour. I have a man waiting for him."

"His rooms are ready?"

“Have been for days.”

“Good.” Pilate would miss Orion’s efficiency. He had a way of anticipating the governor that was both pleasing and irritating. “This Theron did fine work. Talkative, if I remember. Went on and on about the barbarian mosaicist who had done the original pool tile.”

Orion’s mouth twisted wryly. “Opinionated, sir. The good ones always are. His work rivals that of Dioskurides.”

Pilate felt himself brighten. Dioskurides of Samos, one of the most brilliant mosaicists ever. So Caesarea had a Dioskurides. Another thing to tell Decimus. “Yes. Theron is an excellent choice. Put him to work right away. As soon as the hole is punched through.”

“As you wish, Excellency.”

“Next?” Pilate said, and Orion fell into pace beside him.

“Another letter from a place on the Galilee. Magdala. Owners of a dye works protesting an import tax on the Phoenician purple.”

“Reply standard. Inform me when the letter count reaches five.” Pilate trotted down the stone steps and rounded the corner. Orion kept pace, jotting as he went.

Pilate suddenly stopped. “There is a Phoenician-purple dye works at Joppa. Since when is the purple imported?”

Orion’s lips pursed. “It isn’t.”

Who had slapped an import tax on the dye? Was Rome getting a cut? He continued down the steps. “Inform me when the count is five. Contact the magistrate who originated the tax and tell him we get 10 percent. Next?”

Orion pressed the notes in the wax, then hesitated as he consulted the other side of his tablet. “Conscription of a Jewish stone-mason for the Tiberateum.”

Pilate stopped, and Orion continued a step before he stopped as well.

“Well, what is it?” Pilate demanded. “He’s purple over the fact that it’s in honor of Tiberius? Tell him his own Herod built the Temple of Rome and Augustus.”

“He has agreed to work on the Tiberateum—”

“Generous of him.”

“—but will not work on his holy day.” Orion’s brown eyes met Pilate’s briefly, then dropped.

Pilate stared down at the diminutive man, even smaller for standing a step lower. Will not work on his holy day. Will not. Pilate scratched his nose with his fingertip. “Well,” he said softly. “Curse me if I cross the creed of the Jew. Of course, reply Jewish standard: give him his way.”

Orion began to jot, but fury came. No. Pilate couldn’t let this one go, not so soon after Jerusalem. The Jews needed a reminder of who was in charge. Every seventh day is their Sabbath?

“No, Orion. This: let him be scourged with seven times seven every day he does not work his Sabbath. If the others think to get out of work because of his example they will think again.” He cut a quick glance at his secretary—yes, Orion was slow to record it on his tablet. *Don’t think I did not see.* “This evening their Sabbath begins. The day after tomorrow I want you to be at the work site just before the men leave for the day. Assemble them and give the decree. The man will have one week to ponder his indiscretion.” Scourge him seven times seven. It was lyrical. He drew a breath and said brightly, “Next?”

They came to the bottom of the stairwell and out into the colonnaded corridor. The columns bordered the swimming pool on all sides. It was a vast area that would be called the atrium back home.

A small room near the stairwell, of what purpose before imperial occupation Pilate was unsure, now served as the palace shrine. In it he could see Janus Bifrons, the palace priest, arranging a grain

offering in the corner. Fussy as a prissy grandmother, that was Janus. He positioned the bronze dish, stood back to look, repositioned it. He glanced up as they passed and gave a ridiculous smile, as if pleased to be caught at his duty. Pilate ignored him and looked past the shrine to the triclinium.

A glance told him the dining room was ready, as was Orion's way. The table was set with refreshment, the serving ware polished to impress. Each day for the past week the table had been laid at the ready. Pilate hoped Decimus would prove as efficient. He had known Decimus since childhood; yes, he was a fine soldier, and ever the Roman competitor. But had he the talent for detail? Patience for it? Pilate had his doubts. Orion would have to train him well.

Pilate's fists closed. By the favor of the gods—and Janus Bifrons had taken his vow to the temple—he would secure Decimus. Decimus's father, Vitellus, was instrumental in Pilate's own posting; Vitellus had been friends with Sejanus, and Sejanus had been the confidante of Tiberius. Though scuttlebutt said Sejanus had fallen from favor with the emperor, time was Sejanus had his ear . . . and the gods had favored Pilate through suggestions whispered there.

Vitellus had always been good to Pilate. Ever since he was a boy, throwing makeshift javelins with Decimus, he had been treated by Vitellus as another son. It pained him to know that good Vitellus heard the rumors, too.

Why couldn't the Jews act like a subjugated people? *Why* couldn't Tiberius see their insolence? All the emperor heard were reports. Jewish reports. Whining and griping about the way Pilate ran things. Caesar was deceived into thinking *Pilate* was the instigator! Caesar should come to Judea himself. Give him one month here, just one month. He'd kick them out of their own country as he had kicked them out of Rome.

His smirk disappeared. If only Tiberius knew of Pilate's devotion,

of his loyalty. If only he knew the inspiration he himself was to a patriotic governor on the outskirts—no—on the *expansion* of the Empire.

He quelled the growl in the back of his throat. Curse the Jews for turning his devotion into humiliating scandal. Curse them for making his name a mockery! He knew what they thought in Rome. *Pilate is weak. He cannot control as simple a folk as the Jews. What makes him think he will ever rise above a provincial governor?*

Decimus was the key. Pilate's good name could be restored with the witness of Decimus. They would believe him; his father was Vitellus.

“. . . a delicate matter. Her name is Rivkah. She is a Jewish prostitute. It appears she has—”

“Do not speak in my presence the name of one so insignificant as a Jewish prostitute!” Tiny missiles of spit landed on the tablet. “If that contains one more Jewish matter, you shall lunch on it.”

“As you wish, Excellency.” Orion discreetly slid his sleeve over the spit.

Pilate tugged down the sides of his toga. “Next?”

Orion doubtfully studied his tablet. “It appears our business is concluded. I will see to Theron.”

“Good. Ready my escort. It is a beautiful day; I will walk to the harbor myself to see if Decimus has arrived.”

“As you—”

“Tell me, Orion, what matter involving a Jewish prostitute is so cataclysmic it must be brought to the attention of the governor of Judea?” Pilate watched Orion color. “What matter could not be solved by a common magistrate? By a harbor sweeper!” Pilate now stood his tallest, gazing down on Orion. “What matter involving a Jewish *whore* could not be solved by the Chief Secretary to the Governor of the Judean Imperial Province of Rome?”

Orion had closed his tablet. He kept his eyes appropriately averted and appropriately did not answer. He had been told, after all, that he would eat his tablet if he said one more Jewish word. Orion was smart, if not wise.

Pilate let the moment linger, then said, “State the matter.”

Orion opened his tablet. “It involves the granary going up in the southeast quadrant. There is a certain tree planted within the perimeters of the project. Apparently it is a custom of the Jews to plant a tree for a child when it is born. Work has not progressed to the slope, but the woman has—” for an instant, Orion’s cadence faltered—“taken up residence in front of the tree. Because she is a prostitute, she has caused a bit of—” again that very interesting hesitation—“a scene. According to the foreman, some of the men have a hard time keeping attention on their work. The woman attends the Praetorium daily to plead for her tree, and the foreman on the project wants to know what is to be done.” Orion closed his tablet.

Pilate stared. It was a perfect example of a Jewish matter poisoning the natural reason of a man normally talented in his work. Anyone who could not deal with a situation like that deserved to be kicked all the way back to Rome. Any misgivings at losing Orion evaporated once and for all.

He put his palms together and tapped his lips with his forefingers. “The foreman wants to know what is to be done with the tree . . . gods, what a perplexing situation. Would that I had Cicero at my aid. Perhaps I should write to Seneca. Shall we appeal to Tiberius?” Orion’s face was growing dusky red. Pilate couldn’t wait to tell this to Decimus. “Or . . .”

Pilate caught sight of a slave girl kneeling at a poolside planter, picking through the lavender plant, plucking out dead leaves. “You there!” The girl froze, fear making her eyes huge. “Yes, you. Come here.”

She stood quickly, knocking over her watering can. She stared in horror at the can, jerked as if to right it, caught between instant obedience and her clumsiness. She left the can and scurried to Pilate. She stood trembling with hands clasped and eyes on the floor.

“A tree blocks the progress of a granary. What should be done about it?”

Her head jerked up. She gaped at Pilate, quickly averted her gaze, eyes shifting wildly. She even appealed to Orion with an astonished glance, but Orion’s eyes were rigid on his tablet. “I—I—”

“What should be done about the tree?”

She swallowed. “I suppose . . . it should be . . . cut down?” She waited, wincing, for Pilate’s response.

Pilate smiled warmly. “You may return to your duties.”

She ducked her head and murmured with obvious relief, “Thank you, Excellency.” She scurried back to the planter faster than she had come.

Orion should be plucking dead leaves from planters. Were he not so well organized, were he not so capable . . . yet his capability slipped bit by bit. An issue like this would have been too trivial to reach Pilate’s ears a year or so ago. He could snap that scrawny neck in two, a Roman should not—yet suddenly—unexpectedly—Pilate felt compassion for him. Of all people Pilate should know what befuddled Orion’s sensibilities: the man dealt daily with Jews. Daily.

“Orion Galerinius Honoratus.” Pilate spoke his name with weary tenderness. With the compassion a father would have for a son. *It isn’t your fault*, Pilate wanted to tell him. *It is the way of things, Orion. You were simply not strong enough. A lesser man would not have lasted as long as you did. Do I not know it? A perplexing thing, this corrosion from Jews, a disease, Orion. You had the misfortune to contract it.*

Pilate laid his hand on Orion’s shoulder. “Here is what you do: Have the foreman cut down the tree. Have him send the Jewish

whore away. If you have any other Jewish matters, bring them to me, we will work through them together.” He wanted to tell Orion of the pity he felt for him, but could not risk *too* much compassion. Compassion weakened, it made the receiver feel sorry for himself. Whatever backbone Orion had left Pilate would need until Decimus arrived.

Orion slowly opened his tablet, took up his stylus. His hand paused over the amber-colored wax, then he pressed in a few notes—written in Greek, at least, Pilate noted, not Aramaic or Hebrew, thank the gods—and slipped the stylus back into its loop.

“I will call up your escort, Excellency,” Orion murmured. “Enjoy your stroll.” He inclined his head and took a few deferential steps backward. Clutching his tablet to his breast, he turned and strode away.

Pilate watched Orion walk past the long pool and disappear around the corner. He would miss Orion, the way he used to be. He would grieve for this son of Rome, as surely as if he had been murdered by a band of Zealots.

Would there was a cure for the madness. Only one Jew ever offered a glimmer of interest in Pilate’s entire tour of duty in Judea, and now he was dead. He was only another stubborn, intolerant Jew. But . . . *Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice* . . . ? It still made Pilate laugh. So gloriously outrageous. Beautifully arrogant, even for a Jew. That was one Jew Pilate would have invited to dinner. His smile faltered.

He was leaning against one of the columns lining the pool. Next to the column was a planter filled with lavender flowers. Green and lavender flowed gracefully from the planter, the green-leaved tendrils perfectly trimmed to barely brush the marble floor. The same planter with the same array stood beside each column lining three sides of the pool. There were forty-five columns, eighteen

each on the long sides. Pilate counted them the first day he came to Caesarea.

The swimming pool was open to the sky, and the waxing sun warmed the fresh water. The pool was nearly half the length of the private wing of the palace, its grand centerpiece. Pilate liked to come here. Not to swim, which was nearly un-Roman. The mesmerizing symmetry of the pool attracted him. Symmetry soothed.

Even in the main triclinium, the one with the view that waited for Decimus, symmetry prevailed; the mosaic was a transfixing marvel of pure pattern: tiny black-and-white tiles formed squares within ever-smaller squares. Though others found the floor hard on the eyes, it was there Pilate could breathe deeply. There, with the soothing rigidity of pattern, he felt most Roman.

He unlaced his sandals and set them neatly at the poolside, then sat and put his feet in the water. He stared at the gently rippling surface of the pool, until his eyes focused on the bottom. The mosaic in the center of the pool bottom was created by the same master who had done the triclinium mosaic. Overlapping concentric circles this time. Pure pattern. Pure order. Decimus will be impressed.



Orion heard his own footsteps echo back from the walls. He kept himself rigid, he walked with precision. If he looked over his shoulder he'd see Pilate seated at the pool's edge again, sandals at his side, feet in the water. Reveling in his many clevernesses. He came to the end of the corridor, turned the corner, and closed his eyes. He could wail like a woman over the memory of Pilate's hand on his shoulder.

Sympathy! Pilate was showing him *sympathy*! Didn't he feel like a little boy who just had his head tousled? Shrieking gods and goddesses and all their mincing offspring. But the thought of shrieking gods reminded him of the look Janus Bifrons had given him when

they passed the shrine . . . that simpering smile. It only started his flesh on a crawl, and now Pilate's sympathy. What a day this was going to be.

He pried the tablet from his chest to look at the nonsense he had pressed into wax. Scourge the Jewish architect with seven times seven? Every time he did not work on the Sabbath? Brilliant, Excellency. Ho, brilliant. And cut down the tree? Cut down *her* tree? Gods, he had to think. How could he cover for him this time? Why not leave the Jews to their peculiarities? They did no harm. Even the Caesars saw that, Augustus a long time ago, Julius well before. Tiberius was another matter.

Pilate's renovation to the northeast stairwell was about the only impressive decision he had made lately. The new entry from the private wing of the palace to the public auditorium would save Orion countless steps. He came to the place where workers would soon punch a hole through the Praetorium wall. Already a man was measuring and taking down notes on his own waxed tablet. He gave Orion a glance.

Pilate was foolish to order an entire mosaic for the walkway. A border would have been sufficient. Tasteful and unpretentious. The expense would be astounding, for Theron of Caesarea did not come cheaply. It was one more thing local magistrates could fling in Pilate's face regarding his excesses with public money. But Orion couldn't stop a smile; he would see Theron every day. With his own duty to oversee the project, life in the palace had a sudden warmth to it.

But the worker was looking strangely at him. Orion stopped smiling and escaped around the corner and out the entryway. Already the day was hot, and it was nowhere near noon. Ornamental trees lined the flagstone walkway and would soon give shade from the early sun. The Great Stadium just beyond the Praetorium blocked the sun for now. From there came the faint sound of metallic

clashing. Cornelius would have been running the auxiliary troop through drills since dawn.

He stopped a moment to kick a few pebbles off a flagstone. His stylus slid out of the tablet, and he bent to retrieve it, glancing at the inscription etched into the ivory on the flattened end. It had been a gift from his father before he left Rome over five years ago. He tucked it back inside his tablet.

He entered the doorway to the business half of the great Praetorium; here, rooms and corridors had bewildered him for the first six months of his new position. He would constantly turn a corner into a dead end, or come into a hallway when he expected a wall. It was as frustrating as a garden maze in Annapolis. Once Pilate's renovation was complete, Orion could avoid the extra steps in this honeycomb and go straight to the auditorium. It would be the best decision of Pilate's tour, and not even Orion could see how it could offend the Jews—unless Pilate decided to make the mosaic a tribute to Caesar or a god. Or make it Jews dining on pork. Ha! Pilate would even invite the Jewish Council to come see its unveiling—and expect praise for it! Orion laughed out loud.

He wound his way deftly through the halls and came out into the huge auditorium. He looked for Theron, and found him already studying the floor at the northwest corner.

Orion went to dismiss the other candidates. There were only four, but each seemed resigned to the fact that Theron would get the job; indeed, scowls had formed on their faces when Theron was the last to arrive this morning. Orion thanked each of them and watched them go, then strolled across the auditorium to Theron.

Not many people were shorter than Orion. His height had prevented him from joining the Roman army, had fated him to a life of scholarship or politics, and only an unexpected summons

from Tiberius himself had delivered him. Only Tiberius could have changed the course of his stars. Tiberius or Theron's god.

Theron of Caesarea was nearly as thick as he was short, and hairy as a bear. Tufts of hair came out the top of his tunic. He did not wear the hair on his face, which was not particularly Jewish of him, and the only time he did not wear a scowl was when his wife, Marina, upbraided him for this or that. He looked like a tiny giant at those times, abashed and found out. Marina was the only one to confound the fearsome Theron.

Theron also had the biggest lower lip Orion had ever seen. It looked like a fat earthworm. Sometimes it was hard not to look at it. It stuck out far now, as Theron studied the pavement.

"He wants it to match the border, or he wants a different one?" Theron asked when Orion joined him.

"Most people would find your presumption irritating."

Theron glared at the existing border. "I hope he wants a different one. I could complement it nice. Who knows where Herod got his tesserae; a match will be impossible without sourcing it. You got some wear, you got some variations from the lighting. See? Look at the lighting in here, it's terrible. What did you say?"

"I said you have the job."

"Oh. You coming tonight? Marina is making fried fish balls."

Orion pretended casual surprise. "It's your Sabbath already? The week has flown." But the thought reminded him of Pilate's latest decrees. He was supposed to give Pilate's order for the stonemason day after tomorrow, but the punishment didn't go into effect until next week. That was when Pilate would inquire if the man had changed his mind. He would buy himself thinking time with that one week. Thinking time? Only a fool wouldn't give the order.

Only a fool would. Orion pinched the space between his eyes. What could he do this time? Whatever it was, Pilate would find out.

He would want to know how the Jew had held up under the whip. He would want details. And what of the tree? No, he couldn't think that far, the scourging overwhelmed it. Forty-nine? Every time he did not work the Sabbath? The full import settled in. No one could survive a straight forty-nine; the tree was nothing compared to this. A woman could lose her tree, but a man would lose his life. A woman would lose her husband; children, their father. Flaming gods and goddesses and all their mincing offspring, where was that poppy tent?

"You like the fish balls. What's the problem?"

Orion glanced about before he replied. "A tricky one this time."

"What's Pilate up to now?"

"Keep your voice down, Theron," Orion hissed through a smile. "We're not at your table, we're in the Praetorium Palace. You will have to remember that every single time you enter that doorway."

Theron shrugged and put his glare back on the pavement. He scratched his black curly head. "Well? What's it gonna be? Match it or complement it?"

"You don't look like an artisan. You look like an ornery stonemason."

Theron glanced at Orion, bemused. He shook a thick finger at him. "You know, that's why I like you. You got a sense of humor with a nice nasty streak."

Orion laughed. It didn't take long, around Theron. "Fish balls, eh?"

"And fish gravy. Marina wants to impress our new apprentice."

"You hired someone? He must not be from around here."

"He's out on the steps. Trying to decide if he's a good Jew or a bad Jew. I says to him, 'You coming in? Good Jews don't.' He says, 'What does that make you?' I says, 'Rich.'" Theron chuckled.

"He must have decided he's a good Jew."

But at that Theron's amusement disappeared. He pursed his thick lips and shook his head. "No, he don't think he is. Marina

says he's got a bunch of heart trouble. You can't tell by looking at him. I leave such things to Marina."

Orion gazed across the auditorium at the Praetorium entrance. Marina is probably why the lad even got hired. "You've got a good wife, Theron," he said quietly.

Theron looked at the entrance too, and sighed so deeply it became a groan. "He don't know a template from a tile."

"Where is he from?"

"Hebron. He's been in Caesarea awhile looking for someone. Couldn't find him, needed to eat. Marina found him in the marketplace and brought him home for dinner."

Marina had an uncanny knack for spotting the lost.

Theron bent to examine the color of the border. He wet his thumb and rubbed it on a tile. "So. What does the Illuminated One say? Match it or complement it?"

"Complement it. And he wants a mosaic for the entire walkway. Bring your patterns tomorrow. See if you have anything new from Pompeii. He specifically mentioned Pompeii."

Theron rose and rubbed his chubby hands together. "Good, good. I'll be on the job for a year."

Orion shook his head. "You, a whole year. A whole year of daily insolence."

"Palace food, every day." Theron patted his protruding gut.

Orion cocked his head. "Or is it a year of comic relief?"

"Wait, wait—I got it. Tell them the artist will not work without a pistachio pastry every day. Two of them. Tell them it inspires me."

"I'll have to offer extra sacrifices for patience . . . Janus will have to bribe the *di penates*."

"Which god is that?"

"The spirit of the pantry. Protector of the household stores. It will have to go on extra duty with you around."

“Well, you got a god for wine? Tell your priest to throw in extras for that one too. And only the good stuff. Tell them the artist works better with the good stuff.”

Orion laughed. “Go tell your new apprentice the artist got the job. I have to call up Pilate’s escort before the governor drowns himself.”

“See you tonight.”

“Tonight.” Orion left him and entered the honeycomb of rooms.

His duties did not often allow time for personal things, like writing letters home. Orion had long since taken a habit of sending them on the wind until he had time to put ink to parchment.

“To my beloved Father,” he dictated under his breath, “from your son, Orion Galerinius, greetings. I pleased a god today, Father, I don’t know which. But Theron will work in the palace for a year.”

Theron in the palace for a year. Not even Tiberius could have pulled off that one.



Theron watched Orion leave. He did not believe the man had forgotten it was Sabbath. Orion never forgot. He hadn’t missed a Sabbath meal for nearly a year.

Marina had found him, too, same marketplace. Theron thought maybe Marina was like the story of the angel in Jerusalem, with the pool. Maybe the marketplace got stirred up, and Marina was there to make a lame one well. At least get him on the road to well. Last year she brought home Orion. Before Orion, Bereniece and her mother. Before Bereniece, Lucius and what’s-his-name. Before Lucius, Rivkah and her boy, Nathanael. He frowned at the border tiles. This new one, though. He was a case even for Marina. Orion, she had drawn out. After a month of his awkward visits every Sabbath evening, he began to smile. Another month, and he

was laughing with everyone else. Another month, and he was making the jokes himself.

But this young Joab. He had a black cloud snuggled over him that even Theron could see. And Theron usually did not see. That was for Marina. Maybe it was twenty-five years with her that did it. He would have never noticed before. He wasn't sure he liked it that he noticed now.

He slowly strolled to the entrance, taking his time to gaze all around. He liked to work on-site. Some transferred their designs by portion to the pavement; not Theron. He worked classically, like Samos, and wasn't about to stop now. Once he had the preliminary sketches complete, once the construction workers put in the archway, and once he sourced out enough tesserae, he would work in this posh place every day. Unless of course, this turned out to be the right place for his ribbon pavement. A long time he had been waiting for a place for the ribbon pavement. He'd have to wait and see what those construction workers did with that walkway.

He couldn't wait to tell Marina: he was now on the payroll of the Roman government, every shekel guaranteed. Regular pay, and at the price he was worth. His stroll became a swagger. They would do some celebrating tonight. He paused halfway across the auditorium to regard the bema seat, set on the dais in the center of the great room. All the swagger suddenly went out of him.

Pilate's latest act, the crucifixion of that prophet from Nazareth, still had Jewish Caesarea buzzing. It was cruel even for Pilate. Theron shook his head. The lad was a good man. Did good things. Wasn't Jesus the main topic of every Sabbath meal for the past few years? Probably didn't have enough money to barter for his life, and Pilate could be bought. Surely he worked hard to line his pockets as much as possible before his term in Judea was up, like any other Roman official.

Theron left the bema and came out, squinting, into the morning sun. Joab sat on the steps with his chin on his fist, gazing at the curved wall of the Great Stadium. Next to him was the bundle that never left him. He rose when he saw Theron.

“You got the job?”

“I got it. We’ll celebrate more than the Sabbath tonight. Pilate will keep me in pastries for a year.”

“Good,” Joab said, and looked again at the Great Stadium. The tinnny sound of steel meeting steel came from there; it was where the auxiliary troops learned the Roman method of warfare. The stadium was impressive, but Theron had lived in Caesarea most of his life. He barely noticed the things Joab gawked at.

He was a Judean country boy, complete with accent. And he didn’t speak much Greek. Most of Caesarea was going Greek, had been for a while, since the days of Herod. It was good for Theron to practice his Aramaic with Joab. His mother would be proud.

“Come, boy, we have much to do before tomorrow. Pilate wants to see patterns of Pompeii. Patterns of Pompeii, we will give him.”

“But . . . tomorrow is Sabbath,” Joab said doubtfully as he scooped up the bundle and followed Theron down the steps.

“Aye, and the Lord of the Universe is aware of the fact that it doesn’t mean much to Pilate, save for some peace and quiet from his Jewish subjects. Besides, you constantly forget that I am a bad Jew.” He reached over to flick him on the head. “You have been with us for a week, this you should know.”

“Yes,” Joab said, squinting at the stadium. “I have been with you a week, and you are not a bad Jew.”

“Neither are you.”

To this, the boy did not respond. He kept his gaze on the Great Stadium as long as he could, walking backward to do it, until the road put it behind them.

“Pompeii,” Theron muttered. “Whatever I come up with has to be from Pompeii. If he asks you, it’s from Pompeii.”

“Do you have anything from Pompeii?” Joab ventured.

Theron tapped his head. “Right here, boy. I was trained in Pompeii, seven years. So anything I come up with is from Pompeii. And anything I come up with is new: there you have it. New patterns from Pompeii.”

They walked in silence for a while. At least Theron would get the exercise Marina spouted about; the palace was nearly a mile from their neighborhood. He was already sweating from exertion. He glanced at the morose boy next to him and grimaced. The lad had barely spoken all week. Made for awkward times in the workroom.

But he seemed willing enough. Theron could see the blisters on his hands from chiseling stone boards, and the boy didn’t whine about them. And often he forgot he was a bad Jew and kissed the mezuzah in the doorway. It seemed to take deliberate thought for Joab *not* to kiss it. Theron would learn his story soon enough.

“Fish balls tonight,” he said gruffly.

Joab did not answer, lost in a brood that rendered him deaf. Theron fancied he could reach out and touch the shroud that walked with the boy.

Presently, the quiet one spoke. And it was Theron’s turn to be speechless.

“Do you know where I can find a Jewish prostitute?”

Theron slid him a glower the lad did not see. He was too busy staring at the back of the Temple of Rome and Augustus. Theron shook his head. Some people’s children. If Joab was his own boy he wouldn’t sit for a week, asking a question like that.

He sighed. Well, Joab wasn’t his boy, and it was none of his business. “Does she have to be Jewish?”

Joab broke from his stare at the temple. Interestingly, his cheeks went red as a sunset. “No—that’s not what I—”

“There’s a place, an inn—the kind no honest mother’s son has business being at—in the west part of the Old City. It might have what you are—” and on behalf of the boy’s mother, he scowled his blackest at the lad—“interested in.”

The boy’s face went redder, and Theron scratched the back of his head. Well, did he want directions or not? Who could figure out young people these days?

Joab stammered, “I don’t want—I’m not—” but he didn’t finish the thought. He simply sighed deeply.

Maybe it was a good time to change the subject. “Did you find your friend yet?”

The boy gave a strange half chuckle, then said, “No, not yet.”

“Are you sure he is supposed to be in Caesarea?”

Joab gazed at a lawn party of affluent Romans in the back of a stately villa. He murmured, “It’s not a he.”

Ah. This was an important piece of information. Not a he the boy was looking for, a *she*. No matter that it took a week to find it out. He would bring this to Marina, and she would be pleased. He clasped his hands around his belly, delighted with himself. Eh, someday he would be as good at this as his wife. And he knew enough not to proceed further with Joab. Like a perfect mosaic, he would walk around it, study it, give it time. Then place the tile exactly where it should go.

Heart matters required finesse, he was learning. After twenty-five years, Marina was finally getting her hands dirty and learning how to create a mosaic; so, too, Theron was learning Marina’s craft.

“Fish balls tonight, my boy,” he boomed cheerfully. “And nobody makes them like Marina.”