

THE AGE OF  CHRONICLES
BOOK ONE

God

came
running

A NOVEL

Written & Illustrated by

Zené
A.PIENAAR



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God Came Running

by Lené A Pienaar

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To my Father.

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THE PREFACE

Ever had any of *those* questions? You know the kind, about the meaning of your life, why God seems to hide Himself or the enemy is allowed to run rampant? Sometimes the real world seems a very different place to the picture painted to us every Sunday morning. So how does God fit into this mess? Maybe you even asked Him and then waited to see if He cares enough to answer you.

Did He?

Imagine for the moment that eternal Truth is a fixed thing, a mountain if you will. Let's assume you long to see it, so you pray, "Lord, what is the mountain like?"

Of course God could answer you with a few simple words but would you really have a true picture then?

While you hope He will *tell* you the answer, God has infinitely better plans, He wants to *show* it to you. But you cannot see it from your vantage point, so He has to move you. And that is exactly what He will do – *if* you will let Him.

In answer He will lead you high and low, by whatever path will bring you to the truth. When you get there the breathtaking view, the breeze on your skin and the cry of a distant eagle will all answer your prayer.

Your heart will *own* the truth! That is the secret of spiritual revelation, allowing God to form the answer within you.

God Came Running, is that kind of journey. It will take us into the bowels of darkness, where demonic powers plot their schemes and up beyond the glorious gates of heaven, where God holds His throne. You will see how angels and demons, heaven and hell, all make their mark on us along the road and we in turn, make a

mark on them.

More than that, we will journey through the part that our choices have to play on this epic battle. And behind it all the stage is being set for the most magnificent finale of all – finding that mountain which is nestled in God’s heart.

I know the Lord will speak to you in these pages and I pray that before the end you see God come running!

Amen.

– LENÉ PIENAAR –



CHAPTER 1

IT'S TIME

Angels didn't usually talk to humans, much less guardians to the people they kept. But what about his journey with Jasmine had ever been *usual*?

Skylock raised a hand to knock on her door. He had waited ten thousand four hundred and twenty one days for this. Now he wasn't sure what he would say to her.

It was the first time she would see him – actually all she would see was the form of the scrawny teenager in baggy clothes he'd taken on – still, she would look straight into his eyes.

She doesn't know you Skylock, keep that in mind. And please, try not to act your age.

He changed his guise, adding just a little more hair over his eyes, for insurance. He had never been much of an actor.

He thumped the door.

Nothing.

He thumped it again.

You can manage waiting ten more seconds for her to cross the room. He gave a third thump despite his coax to patience.

"Hello?" Two wide eyes peered around the door, expressing every ounce of her emotions.

Oh how he loved them.

"May I help you?"

If you're going to say anything at all, say something stupid. "Ah yeah, uh... here." He stuck out a clipboard with the parcel he had

brought her.

"I wasn't really expecting anything. Are you sure it's for me?"

In all the times he'd played this scene out in his mind, she'd never asked that question.

His hands were clammy and he couldn't stop fidgeting, side-effects of this human form – of course. Apparently they produced a lot of sweat when they were nervous.

Think Skylock.

He twisted his neck to read the cast-off clipboard, "Well like, says there Jenny or something. Yeah, Jasmine Spencer, that you?"

"I guess so."

"Well there ya go." That was probably too much enthusiasm. It sounded more like a, *Tada*. This was trickier than he'd expected.

He brushed a bead of sweat off his forehead and breathed for the first time since he got there.

Her eyes were deep and kind. He'd seen that warm gaze so many times before. But they had never been aimed at him. He was melting under it. He wanted to tell her everything, to–

What are you doing? Pull yourself together.

He cleared his throat, "So you gonna take it ma'am?"

"Yes of course, where uh, where do I sign?" Her head dipped and a long strand of hazel hair covered her face. She gave a quick scribble and tucked it back behind her ear. Then she handed over the clipboard with a soft, "You take care now."

He watched the door click closed, wearing a grin he might never take off.

• • •

Cold. Always blastedly cold in the underworld, but this was ridiculous. A skin of ice was encrusting the walls of his cavern. Orgon flicked a crystal from his shoulder with a talon, daring another to form.

No doubt some human cretin on the surface was the cause of all this, wreaking havoc up there and sucking in all the energy. The shallower caves always bore the brunt. They were just expendable

underlings, there to serve their grand master's every command with silent suffering.

A demon scuttled in from the shadows, head bowed so low his panting kicked up dirt from the floor. "We has," he huffed out a white plume, "we has a problem, Boss."

"Ever a wellspring of insight, aren't you Satchwick?"

"Yes Boss."

Worthless gargoyles doesn't even recognize an insult.

The little devil was disproportionate, only three foot high with a pot belly and two pointless legs which did nothing to keep it off the ground. One had the upper hand and their rivalry made his walk a waddle. "The only problem I see is you."

"Yes Boss, if you says so Boss."

"Get on with it."

"It's, it's, it's that Jasmine, her, her--"

"Speak fool."

"Skylock, he's the problem he is."

Orgon flinched. "Didn't I warn you *never* to use his name."

The gargoyle curled into a heap. "Yes Boss, sorry Boss, I mean that awful, stenchy guardian of hers," gulp, "your worshipfulness."

"What about him?"

"He did appear to her, like a regular person. Did bring her something. Has to be important if he bringed it himself, doesn't it Boss? That's why I did come straight to tell you."

"What?"

"That he did bring her something."

"What is it?"

"What is what Boss?" Two eyes bulged.

"What did he bring her you half-grown buffoon?"

"I, I doesn't know that yet."

Orgon was itching to strangle the very last breath out of the useless mite. "Find out!"

• • •

Jasmine put the parcel on the kitchen counter. It must have

been that delivery guy's first day on the job, he looked so nervous. She wanted to give him a hug, poor thing. But that probably wasn't appropriate.

Lord, she smiled, please would You bless him today.

Her eyes fell on the parcel. There was an envelope taped to the top so she pulled out the note inside and read:

JAYJAY IT'S TIME.

Only the Lord ever called her that.

Her hand felt heavy with the message. She slumped back in her chair and her eyes paced the room trying to grasp the full weight of those two, simple words.

"It's time."

Lord, how can it be time?

Her chest started pounding.

"It's *actually* time." A giddy laugh escaped.

No wait. It can't be time, I'm not ready yet. I'm not nearly ready.

What if I can't do it? Oh no – what if I can?

She wasn't sure which thought brought more panic.

But last time–

That thought stabbed.

She propelled the box away. She didn't need this. She was just starting to get her life back together again.

That settled it.

Jasmine went back to the mundane tasks of the day trying to put it all out of her mind. She had a light supper and hoped to distract herself with a book. It was a good book but a futile attempt. Her eyes just kept bouncing back to the parcel.

Leave it alone Jasmine.

But shouldn't I at least try? Isn't that better than hiding from it?

She sighed and eyeballed the delivery, daring it to open itself. It wasn't helping. All it did was sit there, staring back at her. No matter how much she wanted to, she wouldn't open it – she just couldn't.

This was pointless. Anyway, it was bedtime.

Jasmine couldn't sleep.

'It's time,' kept running circles through her mind.

After pointless hours she was exhausted from her battle with the sheets. The clock ticked over to 03:14.

Fine then.

Jasmine armed herself with a night gown and two fluffy slippers, then shuffled through the apartment and switched on a lamp in the kitchen.

She gingerly approached the parcel. Her breathing was shallow as she took a seat beside it, giving them both time to settle.

She peeled open the brown paper to find a thin gold box. She removed the lid. Inside was a fountain pen, resting on a soft bed of cotton. It was exquisite, pearlescent white with a gold nib and delicate leaves decorating the an ebony barrel.

It's beautiful, Lord.

Jasmine bit her lip.

It's perfect.

She lifted it out. It was heavy. Then she saw the small note tucked under it. It read:

JEREMIAH 1:5-12.

She flipped through the crisp pages of her Bible until she found the passage.

"BEFORE I FORMED YOU IN THE WOMB I KNEW
YOU. BEFORE YOU WERE BORN I SANCTIFIED
YOU AND ORDAINED YOU A PROPHET TO THE
NATIONS..."

She read through the whole promise.

God had spoken – that was all there was to it then.

"So it really is time, Father."

She ran her fingers through her hair. She knew she wanted this but actually facing the fork in the road was tougher than she expected.

"Don't let me fail You Lord, *please* don't let me fail You."

The wall clock bassooned every passing second.

For the longest time Jasmine just sat there, staring at the pen, looking into the days ahead. The occasional tear rolled from her cheek. This was so far beyond her.

Okay Lord, if it is time, I may not be ready but I am ready to try.
Jasmine was beyond exhausted.



CHAPTER 2

A GLIMPSE OF WONDERLAND

Jasmine opened her eyes. Only a dim light broke the darkness. Why was she curled up on the floor? She must have fallen asleep in the kitchen.

She pushed herself upright.

"Well hello," came from her left.

She startled.

"I didn't mean to alarm you." It was an old man, peering over a pair of reading glasses perched on a more than generous nose. His lean frame was seated at her dining table, hardly a threatening sight as it was beginning to surrender under the heavy cloak of time. His eyes were a deep brown and had fixed themselves on her with a warm gleam. "Now tell me, do you feel a little better?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm so sorry, I quite forgot my manners. I'm Rudolph. It means hope," he added as if sharing something delightful. "I'm so glad you've decided to come—"

"Hang on, what are you doing in my house?"

"Such a good question." His bushy brows curled around the edges of his eyes to frame a smile. "Actually Jasmine, it is you who has just arrived. And you are more than welcome here."

Her eyes darted around the room. The table and chairs and lamp looked familiar, but this wasn't her house. There wasn't even a wall, or door, or ceiling, to make the space 'a room'.

"I have something for you," he fingered a blazer pocket. "I

know it's here somewhere," he patted down a few more. "That would be a rib-tickler, 'Hope looses Faith.' Wouldn't live that one down, now would I? Ah, here it is."

He produced a small, worn, leather book. Inside the cover was a piece of folded paper which he placed on the table. "I knew I'd kept it nice and safe for you."

He carefully folded it open. Then pinching two fingers together, in deep concentration, he lifted out an imaginary article.

"You might want to take a seat, my dear."

Jasmine wasn't as sure. He seemed harmless enough so she got up and sat across the table from him.

He pushed his glasses up to their usual roost, then cleared his throat and began to read. "It says here:

I TOOK YOU FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH, FROM ITS
FARTHEST CORNERS I CALLED YOU. I SAID, 'YOU ARE MY
SERVANT,' I HAVE CHOSEN YOU AND HAVE NOT REJECTED
YOU.

SO DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU; DO NOT BE
DISMAYED, FOR I AM YOUR GOD. I WILL STRENGTHEN YOU
AND HELP YOU; I WILL UPHOLD YOU WITH MY RIGHTEOUS
RIGHT HAND."

He extended his imagined offering across the table. She met it with a cupped hand. And sure enough, lodged in a crease of her palm was a tiny yellow ball, only slightly larger than a pinhead.

"It is a gift," he seemed quite excited about the gesture. "I call him Gilbert, it means 'Bright Promise,' and suits him rather well."

"Thank you," *I think?* She hoped to be hiding most of her confusion.

"I would be careful not to lose him. Here'wa," he handed over the inscribed wrapper he had just read from. "Keep him safe in this. I know you'll do just fine."

"Excuse me?"

"Come along. I have something to show you," Rudolph gave her a smile.

Jasmine was vertical before she looked back. He was still seated with hands set wide on the table, braced for action. He let out a slight grunt. It was all of two seconds before his legs responded.

"It takes just a little longer these days," he said sheepishly, then tucked the book in his jacket pocket.

She looked at him with new tenderness.

This is just a dream, Jasmine.

It had to be. How else did she get here?

She studied the darkness. It was a big space.

"My dear, welcome to the Hall, that's what we call it anyway. It is the place where prayers are answered, wounds are healed and most anything of eternal consequence is born. It is also the heartbeat of our little village." Rudolph stopped to catch his breath. Then he opened a door and the brightest light flooded in. "And this is Carmelton."

• • •

Satchwick was back. "I found it. I did find what Sky—" gulp, "that stenchy guardian did bring to her." He stuck his nose in the dirt, "Oh your mighty royalness."

Flattery only works if it isn't glaringly obvious, you dim-wit.

"All it is is only a pen Boss. Just a pretty thing, did look like a Pearly it did," he nodded feverishly.

No, no it couldn't be.

He'd destroyed any chance of that years ago. How could it be happening now? If she did get a pen, if she got *the* pen... Orgon turned cold.

"Don't tell me you left her unguarded."

Satchwick gulped. "I did hurry back to tell you."

Orgon grabbed him by the neck and throttled until his feet were flailing in the air. "You imbecile. That isn't a pen, it's a veritable call to war."

"Looked just like a pen to me Bo—"

Why do I bother with this baffoon? Orgon dropped the heap to the ground. "Get your miserable hide out of my face."

"Y-yes Boss, whatever you says Boss." Satchwick hobbled away with a half lame leg.

• • •

Jasmine stepped through the door of the Hall and out onto the sidewalk of a busy street. It was a bright sunlit morning. Across the road was a park with enormous eucalyptus trees. Around it were people going back and forth about some exciting business.

She glanced from one face to the next. They all wore the same optimism, as if their hearts were whistling a cheery tune. It felt like she'd just stepped into Wonderland, half expecting a tree to begin talking to her. She eyeballed the nearest one, just to be sure.

Rudolph was already a few paces down the road. She caught up with him.

"...and each has a story to tell for it. It's a beautiful sight, isn't it? The body of Christ flourishing in its calling, when the eyes can see, the hands can grasp and each part does exactly what it was destined for."

"Hey Rudolph," a young man waved from across the road.

The old man tipped the hat he wasn't wearing.

They looked so comfortable with each other.

It must be a wonderful feeling.

"And there she is," Rudolph turned into a broad alley flanked by buildings on each side. It led to a large gate with a well rusted bolt and chain. It must have been locked for years.

Rudolph walked right up to it and motioned for her to join him. She did.

Behind the bars was a garden with an oak tree in the center. It stretched out its branches like a hen covering its chicks. A pathway wove into the secrets it held and Jasmine could smell the fragrance of spring from within. Even the sun was curious about this hidden haven and dappled what it could with light. It looked like an Eden, hiding its jewels from the world.

"It's beautiful," Jasmine tried to swallow her unexpected emotion. "May we look inside?"

“Oh no my dear, the keeper doesn’t allow anyone in.”

“It’s a shame, isn’t it?” The voice came from behind them. A young man stood there. His eyes were so light they almost looked transparent. “It must be quite something inside.”

Jasmine could only manage a smile.

He had an ease about him, which made her suddenly conscious of her awkwardness.

“Where are my manners today? My dear, this is Joshua, an old friend of mine. And this here is young Jasmine.”

“Hello Jasmine,” he had a velvet voice. “You’re welcome to call me Josh if you prefer. Rudolph here isn’t one for nicknames.”

Her face felt flushed. Could they please leave now, before she made a fool of herself.

Josh smiled at her. “Had any breakfast yet?”

“Not really.”

“Excellent.”

Not really? It’s a yes or no question Jasmine.

“You two go ahead. I have my beauty sleep to catch up on,” Rudolph chuckled.

No. Was he leaving her? He couldn’t leave. She glanced at him to plead for mercy. He only gave a reassuring nod and ushered her off. She left her defenses back with the old man watching them walk away.

A lump formed in her throat.

“He has a way of creeping into your heart, doesn’t he?” Josh said after they had walked a few paces.

Say something Jasmine. Like what? Anything.

Her fingers began to fidget. She shoved them into her pockets.

It doesn’t matter what, just say something.

“Josh?”

“Yes?” His voice was deep and smooth. It sounded like nothing in the world could ever unsettle him.

All confidence drained out of her. “What is—” her throat tightened. “I mean, what is this, uh, you—” she sighed.

"Don't worry Jasmine, it will take a little time is all. But first, pancakes."

Her face was tingling, her ears burned, but somehow he had coaxed a smile out of her. She loved pancakes.

He made a right turn and headed for a street café no more than a few yards down the road. The cheery sight had a few scattered tables on a broad sidewalk. Red and white striped umbrellas provided shade to the oasis, each with 'Sam's Sweet Spot' decorating an end.

"Josh," a voice came from inside. A figure followed it out of the shadows.

He was a slightly portly fellow with bandy legs which hobbled from side to side as he came towards them. It looked like his face had caught a sunbeam and refused to relinquish it. He was wearing a white apron with the café's name on the pocket.

"So good to see you."

"Sam," Josh greeted with equal warmth.

"Hello, I'm Sam." The man looked at her and pulled his neck back, boasting not one, but two chins.

"I'm Jasmine," she found his smile contagious.

"Welcome to our little village. Take it from Uncle Sam, no matter what happens you'll be glad if you stick it out, you hear?"

He handed Josh a brown paper packet. "Your order's good to go, just like you asked."

"Thank you my friend."

Sam pronounced a blink in return.

The two of them set off again.

"Is he always so friendly?"

"Sam? Oh yes, now he is. He wasn't always that way though. Growing up he was an angry young lad, hurting really. He didn't know how to show his feelings so he used his fists instead. He got that limp from a tussle. I remember the day he hit rock bottom, he planned to take his life. It was a good day."

"Excuse me?" The words just slipped out.

"It was the day I met him," Josh smiled. "So tell me about yourself Jasmine. What makes you get up in the morning?"

The awkwardness leapt on her again.

"Me? Uh, oh not that much really."

Oh shucks, that doesn't sound good. Lord, help.

"I mean, uh, I just, you know, I just do, uh... whatever."

"Whatever?"

"Well there is this one thing, it's something I just have to write, like it's bursting inside of me," she swayed her head in child-like protest, "but I don't..."

"Don't what?"

She was suffering through his cross-examination. "It probably sounds silly," why was she telling him any of this? "I'm terrified that people might actually listen to me." *Stop talking Jasmine.*

He simply looked at her. She had to fill the silence. But how was she supposed to explain it? "It's something God showed me. I only ever spoke about it once before. I had no idea it would affect people as much as it did - I got scared."

So there it was. She'd mouthed the words. The dream was just an agony and now someone else knew it too. Somehow that made it more final. "Maybe I should just forget about it."

"And bury the talent God gave you?"

Now just a minute, what gave him the right to do *that*? She'd said it, hadn't she? Wasn't that enough? Why should she pour her heart out just for people to trample on it? Case closed.

Josh began to whistle a happy tune. They had walked into a clearing on the outskirts of town.

"Here we are," he said.

It was an open plane framed by the village on one side and a range of mountains on the other. A small stream trickled down from them.

He led her to a tree with a curved trunk which hung low over the winding water, a picture perfect spot.

"Ah, a journey well rewarded," Josh unpacked breakfast and

handed over her share.

"Thank you." She waited for him to start, then unwrapped hers and took a small bite. "Oh my word that's amazing."

He laughed. "Thought you'd like 'em."

After polishing his share, he propped himself up against the tree and breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

Jasmine wandered over to the stream. She sat on her haunches, allowing the water to trickle over her toes.

Lord, why is it so difficult to be with people? They don't get me. With You is the only time I'm... me.

She looked over at him. "Josh?"

"Hmm?"

"What, uh, I mean what made Sam change like that?" She was going to regret asking this, wasn't she?

"Love did."

She recoiled. He made it sound so simple. But love was never like that, was it? At least not with people.

"I just saw a fish," she blurted as she caught glimpse of it.

Josh opened one eye and looked at her with a naughty gleam. "You think you could catch it?"

"I've never caught a fish before."

"Well then, we'll have to change that don't you think?" He hopped up to join her.

"It's a silver one. There."

"Ah yes, he is a beauty."

Josh took off his sandals and began rolling up his jeans. "Now I'll take him from the left and chase him upstream. You wait for him here."

"You're kidding, right? And then? How do I catch him?" She wasn't expecting an ingenious plan, but at least a plausible one.

"Oh I'm sure you'll think of something," he went bounding into the water.

Was he serious?

"Well come on, we've got a fish to catch."

She waded knee-deep into the cool water, with her elbows above her ears. Something squishy was oozing between her toes and her fingers wriggled, acclimatizing to the new sensations. "Okay, where do I stand?"

"That's perfect. You ready?"

Oh why not, here goes, "Yip."

Josh started to splash the water around like a kid. It was hysterical, a grown man performing like a five year old and loving every second of it. "There he is. Catch him. Catch him."

The silver streak swished past her leg, but she was too late.

"He's coming back. Your left. Your left."

Jasmine scrambled for the shimmering target only to surface with a shiny pebble. "He's gone back your way."

"I've got him," Josh leapt left and right after the ricocheting bullet, water spraying everywhere. Then he made a desperate plunge, arms stretched, launching out in spectacular style.

He actually had it. Well, for a split second until the scaly thing wriggled free and came flapping through the air toward Jasmine.

Its tail began to wag in slow motion. She was sure she could reach it. She could catch it. She saw her own hands groping through the air and – splash.

Jasmine was on all fours, trying to take stock of the situation. She looked for the fish.

Nowhere.

Then she turned to Josh. He was completely drenched and dripping from his nose, his ears, his chin, everywhere. He looked like a puppy halfway through a wash.

He erupted with laughter and she felt the same come right out of her belly. She howled at the absurdity of the scene as the reel played highlights through her mind.

"Should've seen your face," she managed between breaths.

"Mine? You could have," gasp, "swallowed that fish whole when it headed your way."

Josh re-enacted her expression and Jasmine grabbed her

stomach for mercy. She was struggling to breathe, weeping through her silent laughter. It took a few seconds before she gulped in a huge breath and wiped the tears dry.

Oh boy, that did feel good. She couldn't remember when last she'd laughed like that.

A grinning Josh held his hand out to help her up from her perch. "We nearly had him," he said and flopped on the grass. "Oh my, that was close."

"How the heck did you actually catch it?"

"Catching it is only half the problem. You should try keeping hold of that slippery thing." He just lay there for a while, trying to recover his breath.

Jasmine could have stayed there forever. There was a silence so comfortable she didn't even want to disturb it.

"Maybe next time we should use that instead." He pointed to a fishing rod resting against the tree beside her.

"Why you, you... you knew all along, didn't you?" She thumped him in mock punishment.

His cheeks inflated in a vain attempt to contain the next round of laughter, but they were both in stitches again.

"I should've known when you came up with that ridiculous plan that I was being had." Jasmine felt the Sam-smile plastered to her face.

"Oh it was worth it," Josh peeled himself off the grass. "We'd better get you back now."

She wanted to beg him to stay.

Shucks she was all over the place today. Just an hour ago she wanted to run a mile from Josh, now she hoped he would never leave. What was it about this place?

He led her back via the outskirts of town, picking strands of grass and sloshing with every step.

It felt like home.

"Am I dreaming?" She felt silly asking that. "I'm sorry, it's just that everything feels so different here – like it's the way the world

is supposed to be. It can't be real."

Josh stopped and turned to face her. His playful smile had been replaced by a deep, searching gaze.

"This is the way I wanted it to be for you."

Her chest tightened, it was something in the way he said that.

"Life was never meant to be full of heartache and tragedy. I'm so sorry Jayjay. I'm sorry for everything you've been through. I never wanted to see you hurt."

She was finding it hard to breathe. How did he know the name only the Lord ever used for her? Why did it look like he cared?

His eyes grew more beautiful the deeper she looked. The world disappeared behind him. It was only the two of them in that moment.

"I know you," he said.

He felt close but somehow she didn't want to run. His words were intimate, why didn't that scare her?

"I know your heart, I've seen your tears, your hopes, everything – even last night, when despite all your fears, you were brave enough to say 'yes.' That is why I brought you here. It's time to leave all the darkness behind little one. You don't know the way out, but you don't need to – just follow Me – I *am* the way."



CHAPTER 3

DADDY'S LITTLE GIRL

The angel slammed his quill down.

“Why?”

He stared at the open scroll, ink still wet from the tale. Was he ever going to find it? It *had* to be in here somewhere. Where else could he look?

His eyes scanned the Storehouse of Time. One vaulted recess after the next, in an endless line, housing more scrolls than could ever be numbered – and he had searched them all. The tale of every human soul the world had known, and *still* no answers.

He was beginning to lose hope. He rolled the parchment of yet another life that only told the same story as all the rest.

Why Lord? Why?

His eyes lifted to the throne. The view was the reasons he used to love this place. The Storehouse was a vast atrium, nestled right in the heart of heaven. Two of its walls were carved out of the solid rock of the Mount of God. The remaining two flared from it like enormous buttresses, finally meeting at a grand entrance in the corner. It needed no ceiling because God Himself was a covering for all of heaven. And from down here, the throne was at its most majestic – he thought.

Maybe it was time to make peace with the fact that he would never know.

“How long have you been in here?”

Lancello turned to find Jay-El leaning against one of the

enormous golden pillars of the Storehouse.

"I don't know brother, I have lost count of—" Lancello's words were interrupted by a trumpet sounding from the Holy Mount. Outside, a roar of celebration followed.

Another soul saved.

It had been a long time since Lancello shared their joy. He took the scroll to a shelf to be stored for that great day when all men's secrets would be revealed. That used to excite him too.

"It doesn't move you?" Jay-El asked.

"Should it? Should we rejoice when a man finally chooses to perform the duty he should never have neglected in the first place? Should the angels applaud his weakness, like he's preformed some great deed by turning back to the God he should never have abandoned? I don't think so. That's no reason to celebrate." Lancello tried to release the knot in his brow. "I should hold my tongue."

"This is not how I know you brother."

If the truth be told, Lancello was scared of his own heart. He was changing. And the more he tried to stop it, the worse it got. He had never felt the need to hide before, but every muscle in him wanted to shrink back now. He looked at Jay-El. There was no one he trusted more. But he dared not drag anyone down with him.

"I have already said too much."



That special old fellow, Rudolph, was sitting on a park bench when they got back. Apparently he was lost in his little book because he didn't notice Josh's sandals slosh right up to him.

"Should I ask?" he grinned as he tucked the volume away.

"Oh just fishing," Josh said rather casually.

"Ah," Rudolph's eyebrows lifted. "You know it does strike me that there is an obvious lack of fish in this fishing tale." He adjusted his spectacles, pretending to find focus on Josh's empty hand.

"Jasmine very nearly caught a flying fish."

"Flying fish? Well now I imagine there's the problem right

there. Shouldn't it be fly fishing instead?"

"Maybe next time," Josh nudged her and a giggle escaped.

"I should let you two get on with business," Josh turned to her. "You are never alone Jayjay." He planted a kiss on her forehead.

Jasmine watched him walk away. It was a long moment before she was ready to breathe again. She felt tender. She felt loved.

Rudolph went through a ceremony of grunts before he was up on two feet. He offered her his elbow.

She tucked in.

He chaperoned her back to the Hall. When they reached it he opened the door for her. "Are you ready my dear?"

"Should I be scared?"

"Just keep Gilbert close and you'll be fine."

The minuscule seed was tucked safely in her pocket but she wasn't sure that was any comfort. It didn't matter. She was feeling brave. She took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The door closed behind her.

She was alone in the darkness.

There was only one spotlight shining a white circle on the ground. She approached it, one deliberate step at a time. A soft squeaking cut through the silence and brought with it a flood of childhood memories.

Houdini.

He had been her best friend in the whole wide world.

He was on his running wheel which had never done the rounds without a slight wobble, but he never seemed to mind. Houdini never seemed to mind anything. He would always let her talk for hours and play any pretend game she liked.

Jasmine sat down beside her old friend. She put her hand through the door and the silver-gray hamster scuttled up her arm and sniffed around her neck. It tickled.

Houdini got his name from repeatedly escaping his cage. Jasmine could never figure out how he did it, but time and again she'd find him in the bedroom or scrambling across the kitchen

floor. She'd get into trouble if she wasn't the first to find him. Mom would squeal something about a rat and dad—

She didn't like this memory anymore.

There was a loud crash which echoed through the Hall.

Jasmine jolted.

Then there was another.

She buried her friend under her shirt like so many times before. "It's okay, I'll take care of you."

"Don't make like it's all my fault woman." The rage in her dad's voice came billowing out of the darkness.

Jasmine began rocking back and forth.

"You were there too, remember. I didn't do it alone."

His words were followed by a few more thuds.

Her insides began to tremble. She stroked Houdini and rocked all the more. "Je-e-esus loves me this I kno-o-o-ow, for the—"

"Do you think I *wanted* a kid at 19?"

"B-i-ble tells me so, little ones to Him be-long."

His screams were getting louder. She pressed her ears closed but even her singing couldn't drown it out.

"Heck no – she wasn't *my* mistake. You were supposed to take precautions. Or at least get rid of it!"

Make it stop. Please make it stop.

And it all became a dizzy muddle of sounds and memories and an unbearable ache.

A few determined strides and a slammed door. That was the last time she ever saw her dad. All that was left was the sound of her mom's sobs.

It was Jasmine's fault. All of it was.

That thought twisted her insides in a vice-grip. She couldn't take this – she couldn't be this.

Jasmine brought her friend out in a cupped hand. She gave him a tender kiss. "I wish I was like you, Houdini. I wish I could also escape."

What are you doing girl? Pull yourself together. That was more

than twenty years ago. You were only five. It doesn't matter anymore. It's done. Who cares anyway?

This was pointless.

Jasmine got up, dusted herself off and found the door.

The street outside was quiet. Even Rudolph wasn't there. She was glad because she wasn't in the mood for company now. She walked, going nowhere in particular, only staring into the black hole of her heart.

So dad left. You still have God. You'll always have Him.

He was her Father now. The rest didn't really matter.

Her dad was probably better off without her anyway. Their family was fine until she came along. Maybe if she wasn't in the way, if she was never born, it would have saved their marriage. Then mom would have had the life she deserved.

It had always been a web around her and the more she wrestled against it, the more tangled she got.

I should get out of here before these people get too close, before they see who I really am – before anyone gets hurt.

• • •

Orgon pursed his lips. The air was suffocating. Just being here was an insult. A different kind of demon roamed these deeper labyrinths of the underworld.

You'll pay for this Satchwick. Had to turn your back at precisely the wrong moment. Fool.

He descended the staircase. The skeletons buried in these walls used to be his trophies, now they mocked him.

A cowering flame marked the entrance of the chamber. Orgon sucked in the sultry air. He suffered a lingering bow and went inside.

When he looked up again, he was facing his old throne. The stalactite pillars that flanked it had grown. They looked more like fangs now. Tambone had added an enormous claw for a backrest. It curled over his head, pointing accusations at whoever faced him. Something else was different, it made the throne more imposing,

but what?

"I bring a message... master," the last word was drawn from Orgon's throat like barbed wire. "A girl in my sector has become a problem. Her guardian manifested. Brought her a pen and a promise."

Only an incessant drip broke the silence. Orgon was forced to tell the worst of it.

"She was taken to Carmelton Village."

Tambone's breathing got deeper. It sounded more like a rumble now. "Who was?" Two words, handed over like an armed warhead.

"Jasmine Spencer."

Orgon waited for the taunt. Nothing came.

Tambone lifted a single claw.

A decrepit looking creature came trudging in from the darkness. His skin was creased, like a rhino's hide. He was bent over double, with a labored gait under the weight of a huge volume on his back. He reached the throne and shuffled around until the book faced his master. He was used as a tabletop.

The Atlas was a record of every promise spoken over those humans in his division. Every intention of God he was meant to derail, or life he was meant to destroy – if it was prophesied, it was in there.

"Jasmine Spencer," Tambone had found the page and read. He slammed the Atlas shut and dismissed the bearer. "You knew about this."

"I know that book like the back of my hand."

A drop landed on Tambone's forehead and Orgon couldn't help watching it snake its way between the scales on his skin. It dropped off his chin. It was cold down here too.

"You should have destroyed her at birth."

Had my throne for thirteen measly years and you think to teach me how its done? "You suppose I didn't try?"

"You failed."

Orgon's jaw locked. *Wipe that smug look off your face.* "She is no ordinary prey. Her guardian is a warlord. And she wouldn't be

in Carmelton if Satchwick had only–”

“You send that fool because you’re too scared to face Skylock yourself.”

Orgon flinched.

“You are a coward. He was your ruin.”

“She’s already broken. *I* did that.”

“Then finish her, or I will carve another crevice down your face to match the one Skylock left there.”

Orgon’s fist clenched so tight his own talons dug into him.

“Mark my words, I will bring her down to dust and then–”

“Prove your boast.”

Oh I shall. And then I will take back my throne and all that guardian has stolen from me – and more power besides.



CHAPTER 4

YOU'RE MINE

Orgon stood outside the benign little village. Cute country cottages with hedges around. And Tambone thought he couldn't handle *this*? Jasmine couldn't hide here. Carmelton had the same weakness any place had – humans.

Satchwick reached the mound with a grin smeared across his face. "I has been telling her Boss, telling her she does need to get away from this place before they gets hurt by her."

"Where is she now?"

"That way, just walking, nowheres to go."

"And her guardian?"

"I hasn't seen him in a bit."

Orgon smelled a trap. Just maybe Skylock was fool enough to leave her side. He grinned, relishing the thought of time alone with Jasmine. It had been too long. "Force her back into the Hall."

"Boss?"

"Promise her she can change her destiny there. Then get out of my way."

• • •

Lancello's veins were charged. It had been a long time since he'd climbed this crystal staircase. The truth be told, something inside him was reluctant to come. But the throne-room was the only place left to look for answers.

What would Father think of his questions?

He stared at the Mount of God, as if seeing it for the first time.

Two dramatic features graced its face, that breathtaking waterfall which launched off the peak in slow motion. After a sheer drop, it crashed into the Mount's transparent rock and cascaded down its formations until it reached the river. There plumes of fine mist dispersed the water's sweet scent into the air. Either side of the river stood the Tree of Life, with its impressive branches reaching out in every direction. Below the river its roots were knit and above it formed one vast canopy.

Lancello aimed himself at the stairway leading straight up the face of the Mount, disappearing behind the sweet mist.

What if God did not welcome him? What if he'd been asking things an angel shouldn't ask?

His legs felt heavy.

Had he been questioning Father's judgment? Had he... *sinned*?

The thought sank. The stairs clung to his feet, refusing his advance. Did he even dare to approach the throne with his doubts?

How could he expect Father to receive him? Father would know all the thoughts that had plagued him.

The ancient trees at the base of the Mount gave way to giant jagged sculptures of rock, engulfed in flames that felt to be burning through Lancello now.

Maybe he should leave, go quietly, and not offend God's righteousness. Maybe he could—

A wave of warmth washed over him as he reached the final ring of rocks which bowed towards God's throne, forming the walls of a vast basin, filled with a lake of clear blue water.

He was at the summit, staring at the flaming white throne of the Almighty.

His throat clamped shut. There was no turning back now.

Lancello trembled as he approached and took a knee on the solid crystal waters. He didn't dare to speak.

"How long have you been searching for your answers My son?" Father's voice was tender.

Just being there made a wave of warmth rush through him. It

set the world right way up again, and made his shame all the more acute. “Too long my God.” Why hadn’t he just come here from the beginning?

His heart thumped through the silence. He had never meant to displease Father.

“There is a girl upon the earth, Lancello. Her name is Jasmine Spencer. I would have you be her guide.”

Lancello’s eyes shot up. “You want *me* to help her?” But she was on the *earth* – he’d never even been to earth. She was human – he didn’t even like humans. He was the last angel in all the heavens for such a task.

Oh no, he was doubting again.

Lancello bowed his head. “Yes Father, it would be an honor to go... if You want me to. What must I do?”

“She is a tender soul and I have called her to a great work. The enemy knows this. Help her find the truth amidst their assault of lies.” Father brought out a scroll and handed it to Lancello. “There is another thing I would ask of you, My son.”

Lancello prepared himself better the second time. He put one hand to his heart, “Anything.”

• • •

Jasmine was trying to tune out the memories the Hall had stirred. But each new thought ached like a knife lodged in her chest and the following one gave it a twist.

I’m done hurting. I’m tired of this.

She kicked at the dirt.

Didn’t Rudolph say people could change their destiny in that Hall? Maybe that was the answer.

Jasmine had an idea.

She was out of breath by the time she reached the Hall. She didn’t care about that. She didn’t want to be this person anymore.

It ended, today.

She was going back in there.

She would face her dad, her mom, her memories, whatever it

took to end this – one way or another.

She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

It clunked closed behind her.

It was dark inside, completely dark.

Where's Houdini?

She took a few steps into the abyss.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

Her veins were thumping from the run.

Okay, calm down girl. Breathe.

She took in a few shuddering breaths. Tension mounted in her muscles with every step. All she could hear was the sound of her own panting.

“Hello?”

The word echoed back to her.

Is anyone here?

The Hall felt colder than before.

“Dad? Are you here? We really need to talk.”

Nothing.

Just relax Jasmine.

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

Something in the darkness moved.

The breath leapt back in.

There was a noise.

She froze, listening for another clue.

“H... hello?”

This was a bad idea. Time to get out of here. She took a step backwards, afraid to turn her back on the darkness.

“Hello indeed,” the voice was gruff. It shuddered through her.

Her whole body turned cold.

Who said that?

Something brushed past her.

What was that?

Her breathing was loud.

“I've been waiting for you,” the voice was behind her now.

She forced herself around but every muscle was in spasm. She

looked for somewhere to hide but the darkness was too thick to see anything.

“It’s been a long time. Too long.”

What did that mean? She felt ill.

“You were only a girl then.”

She knew this feeling. Why did she know this feeling?

“Look at you now.”

All her hairs stood on end, feeling watched, feeling hunted.

“Have you forgotten all our special memories?”

She started to feel dizzy, like there was a fog in her head.

“I haven’t,” he came closer. “Not even one.” He was only a foot away when his face took shape.

Her heart stopped.

“You do remember.”

Gramps? No, it couldn’t be him – he was dead.

“Can’t forget your own grandfather, can you?”

She turned cold, knowing what came next.

He was right up against her, his breath on her neck. A calloused finger brushed down her cheek.

Everything inside her wanted to explode, to run, to die.

“You’re *all mine*,” he whispered into her ear.

An involuntary whimper escaped.

“Nobody cares what I do to you. No one ever did. Even your own daddy turned and ran. You know why? Because you deserve it – all of it. No one will even hear you scream.”

Oh she wanted to scream, but she couldn’t. She was rooted to the spot. Paralyzed. Lame.

Jasmine squeezed her eyes shut.

He thrust her to the ground.

Her head hammered against something.

Then there was only darkness.

• • •

“There you are,” Lancello had found him on a boulder near the edge of a cliff overlooking the village. He swooped down to

land. "Finding you was trickier than I'd expected. No street signs up here, are there?"

Skylock was pacing. He was angry. He didn't even seem to notice the arrival.

"Shall I come back another time?"

The guardian looked at him. "It's a good thing I'm not God."

Lancello frowned, "Yes I'm guessing that's so."

"If I were, I would wipe them all out. Every last one of them."

"Who is them exactly?" Lancello sure wouldn't be fool enough to take him on, that angel had far too much brawn.

"They deserve it. What match is a five year old girl to a demon's strength? What chance did she have?"

Demons, ah, of course.

"And do you know what the worst part is?"

"I probably don't."

"Watching. Just standing there like you don't have the power to repay her father for the lifetime of pain he's causing her. Or enduring that devil's laughter as he plants one cruel thought after the next into that man's mind... knowing each word is cutting through her spirit like a blade."

"This really does seem like a bad time--"

"And that was only the beginning. Seven years. Seven years that demon had her grandfather for a pawn before I could step in."

Father aren't there 10 000 angels better suited to this task? I have no idea what to do now. "You just let me know when you're all done teaching them a lesson, or whatever it is you guardians do." Lancello turned to leave.

"You're a long way from home scribe." Venom drained from Skylock's eyes. He seemed to be actually looking at him now.

"No one more surprised than I."

"What message brings you all the way here?"

"Actually I'm here to speak with Jasmine. Apparently I'm to be her guide. Though that baffles me more than it will you. Father tells me the enemy wants to harm her. For some rea--"

Skylock just flew off, right in the middle of the sentence.

Okay, that's just peculiar. Not to doubt You Father, but if that brute of an angel is having trouble with something down here, I'm not sure I can add much to the solution.

• • •

A sudden blow slashed Orgon's ear and lodged into his shoulder. The force of it pushed him to his knees. *Skylock.*

"How dare you touch her."

Orgon spun out from the blade. *Couldn't give me five blooming minutes alone with her, could you?*

The guardian's wings were spread, sword drawn and fury filled his eyes. He looked angry, almost evil.

He grinned as a though found him. "You're too late, guardian."

The guardian's eyes narrowed. His shoulders braced.

"You missed that same terror-stricken look she wore as a child." The exhilaration was intoxicating.

"What have you done devil?"

"I just reminded her not to believe in your fairytales of hope."

Skylock unsheathed his second sword.

Orgon drew out two blades of his own. He'd beat merciless spikes into them, to return an over-due favor. "You didn't think I'd come unarmed again, did you? I want to see your face when you realise you can't stop me. And all that's left is me and her and my wildest dreams."

Orgon launched, thrusting his blades at the guardian.

Skylock swooped to the right.

A back-handed swipe brushed just past his pretty nose. *Close call. Next time you won't be so lucky.* He stormed again.

Another dance step and the guardian escaped.

Coward. Stand and fight me. Orgon clenched his jaw. *I have you now.* He blazed in behind a wild assault of stabs and slashes.

Their weapons clashed like two titans.

Orgon would have his throne.

Every blow met a blade until one ripped into soft tissue.

Take that guardian.

Then he felt the sting cut down his side. He tried not to show the pain. "It will take more than that—"

Another blow hacked into his left shoulder.

He grimaced. Memories flashed through his mind, of him grabbing the oozing wound on his face and Skylock towering over him. Not again. Not today. He summoned his rage and threw everything into a final onslaught.

But his left arm was lame. The wound was deep.

Whatever happened next, Orgon found himself on his back, with the whole weight of that guardian bearing down on him.

No. This was wrong, all wrong.

He struggled to get free. But the jagged edge of his weapon was trapped by Skylock's dripping blade. He wrestled against it. But he was pinned.

He wrestled again but the blade pressed against his neck now.

He froze. But he still had his tongue. "It feels good doesn't it? All that rage running through you. The power to make me suffer – any way you like."

Skylock's veins thumped from taught muscles. Excellent. He was tempted wasn't he?

"Give in to it. Make me pay for my sins. Feel what it's like to be your own god."

Oh that would be a sweet victory. Forget defeating a warlord in battle. If he made one fall books would be written about him. He would become the stuff of legend.

Skylock's eyes bore a red glow.

Take on the darkness. "You know I deserve it. It would be justice. Let me go and I will only inflict more pain and suffering than she has ever known."

"The Lord will judge you devil."

Orgon was shoved loose. He scampered to safety. "You haven't won guardian," he spat in the dirt. "She is still mine. She can't escape me now."



CHAPTER 5

A FEATHERED NESI

Jasmine's head was throbbing.

"I don't think she's... oh no wait. She's waking up. Her eyes are opening. Are you feeling okay?"

Jasmine began to make sense of the blurry brown hair and wide hazel eyes peering at her from half a foot away.

"We better get her something to drink."

"Yes, I think a cup of tea will do very nicely, thank you treasure. Poor dear." Jasmine was scooped up and held against the breast of the motherly figure beside her. She was rocked.

A younger lady walked in with a tray of tea and cookies.

"Here'wa, have some tea and you'll feel much better," the maternal figure offered.

Jasmine tried to pull herself up straight.

They were in a cozy bedroom with a bay window and floral curtains pulled wide. The afternoon light streamed in.

"How do you take your tea, dear?" the older lady inquired. Her hand was hovering over a china tea cup with a matching milk jug. "Do you take milk?"

Jasmine nodded, more because it seemed appropriate than because she could actually remember at that moment.

"One lump or two?"

Where am I? Her head felt full of fog.

"Well, I'll just add the extra one for good measure then, shall I? I'm Nan," the older lady offered along with the cup and saucer.

"And I'm Tricia," the younger one added, still looking at her with concern. "That's a nasty bump you've got there."

She felt her forehead. *Ouch. What the heck is going on?* "Oh, I'm uh, I'm Jasmine." *Take the teacup Jasmine.* "Thank you."

"How is your head feeling treasure?" Nan asked.

"It's, uh... it's fine, thank you."

"Well Jasmine, welcome to my home. And it will be yours for as long as you need to stay here. This is your room. Mine is just down the hall and Tricia lives right next door, so there's plenty of good company."

Jasmine held onto her thumping head.

"Does it hurt? I think I've got just the thing for that," the older lady left the room.

Tricia put a hand on Jasmine's knee. "It can be a nasty place that, can't it?"

What place? What's going on?

The older lady was back. She plopped something in Jasmine's tea, "That ought to do the trick in no time dear."

"Where am I?"

"Why you're in Carmelton treasure."

There was a light tap on the door. "How is she?" It was a man's voice. He peered around the door with concern.

Rudolph. His face brought with it all her memories of the Hall, Houdini, her dad, her grandfather. It all flashed past in an instant.

She felt nauseous.

"She'll be alright, just needs a little rest I think." The motherly woman said and ushered them all out. She peeped back at Jasmine. "There are clothes in the closet and you let me know if you need anything, treasure. I'll see you in a bit, alright?"

The door clicked and Jasmine was alone.

She disguard the teacup and grabbed a pillow, hugging it tight until she was curled into a ball. She began to tremble.

"I'm so sorry," the words were barely a whisper. But they came from deeper than she knew they could. "I'm sorry I wasn't

good enough. I'm so so sorry." She deserved all her grandfather had done. She was always the problem. It didn't matter how she wrestled against the fact, she couldn't get free, not in a lifetime of trying.

I was wrong Lord. You can't use me. I can't do it. I'll just fail You and that would be worse than if I never tried. I'm so so sorry.

She rocked until she sobbed, until she slept.

• • •

Sunset on planet earth. Lancello had expected less. Actually he didn't know what he expected.

He pulled out the scroll Father had given him. At least this made sense. If there was one thing he could do like few others, it was write with the eloquence of a poet.

He put his rendezvous with Jasmine out of mind and untied the parchment. A clean scroll just waiting for his mark. Yes, this is what he was born to do. He would make Father proud.

A Beloved Betrayal



— AN UPPER ROOM — JERUSALEM 30AD

“Judas has already been taken by Satan, My Son. He will betray You tonight.”

Oh Judas, Judas, what have you done? Jesus mourned.

“You have loved them well My Son.”

John watched as Jesus stood from the table after the meal and removed His outer garment. He was different this evening. The dark cloud which had been stalking Him for days had found Him. John felt uneasy.

Jesus filled a basin with water and wrapped a cloth about His waist.

“What’s He doing?” Andrew leaned over to whisper to his brother. Simon Peter said nothing, his stare glued to the Lord.

Jesus approached Phillip, knelt down before him and took hold of his ankle. He gently removed His disciple’s sandal.

There was a palpable tension in the air. Jesus poured water over Phillip’s foot. The others exchanged glances.

When Jesus had finished washing both feet, He dried them off and moved to Andrew. He did the same with his. No one dared to say a word.

Surely Jesus wasn’t going to do that with all of them? Peter

was uneasy. His Lord dabbed Andrew's feet dry and came to kneel before him, like the servant he'd never had.

"Lord, are You washing *my* feet?"

"What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." His words bore a gentle authority, as if the whole universe agreed in silent chorus. There was no useful reply but Peter's discomfort pressed him to try nonetheless.

"You will never wash my feet."

Jesus looked at him with eyes that searched right through his soul. They wore more kindness than ever before, if that was even possible. "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

Oh no, he'd made another mistake. Well then, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head."

Just the corner of Jesus's eyes bore the hint of a smile.

"If you have bathed you need only to wash your feet and you will be completely clean, and you are clean." His gaze went down the row to each of them, stopping finally at Judas before He dropped His eyes. "But not all of you."

Tonight would change the course of all their lives. For Peter it would be a very dark night. But an end far worse than his waited for Judas's soul. It was too late for him.

Jesus wiped Peter's feet and moved on to the next disciple, doing the same with all the others until he got to Judas Iscariot.

Judas sat back, a smug look waiting to see what his 'master' would do with him. The enemy's voice had already penetrated his thoughts, curdling his sympathies to disgust.

"Not much of a king is He? Promises of rule and power and kingdoms, and what do you get for all your hard labor and sacrifice? Nothing."

Jesus knelt down in front of His beloved betrayer. He removed his sandals and tenderly washed his feet.

Judas would never see that all of this was for *him* too.



CHAPTER 7

HOME SWEET HOME

Jasmine placed her knife and fork side by side. “Thank you, Nan,” chicken had never been so tender. She wrapped the sweater tighter around her waist. She was glad they were alone.

“You were hungry weren’t you treasure?” Nan had the kindest blue eyes. They seemed to twinkle a little. “Make yourself at home, I’ll be back in a bit.” She collected the dinner plates and went humming into the kitchen.

Jasmine put a log on the fire. Then she huddled under a knitted blanket on the couch. Nan’s warmth seemed to permeate everything in this place. She felt safer now, especially knowing she was going to leave this place.

There was a tap on the door.

Jasmine jolted.

“Come in, it’s open,” was offered from the kitchen. “Your timing is perfect as ever, Mr. Fraser.”

Nan appeared with a tray of three steaming mugs. “Doesn’t our patient look better?”

Rudolph was just behind her. “Indeed,” he perched himself down on a nearby chair and adjusted his spectacles.

Jasmine tucked the blanket in around her. He didn’t seem to notice that.

“Young madam, after a day like yours I believe there is one thing that just might lift your spirits,” he held up his mug. “You are about to experience the very finest hot cocoa in all of Carmelton.”

He swallowed a sizable gulp.

"Now Rudolph, you'll burn yourself," Nan said.

He didn't notice that either, and went in for a second gulp.

Nan chuckled.

Jasmine took a sip too. The molten chocolate warmed her all the way down. "Oh my word, that *is* good."

"What did I tell you? Best there is," Rudolph winked.

"Now you two, the only thing special in there is a heap of love and maybe just a tad of my favorite chocolate."

Everything about Nan's manner, and her food, and her home felt like a great enveloping hug.

So this is what home was meant to be.

Jasmine sipped her hot cocoa, trying to swallow the lump in her throat.

Silence followed.

Was there was an elephant in the room? "What... uh," she shifted in her seat. "What happened in the Hall earlier?"

Nan looked at Rudolph like she was hoping he would answer that one.

"My dear, that Hall is," he cleared his throat, "a peculiar place."

She wrapped herself a little tighter.

"It reveals what is on the inside of you. Things you may not even be aware of. It may be truth, it may be a lie – the Hall doesn't shape it, or sift out the good from the bad, it only exposes it."

Jasmine's face felt flushed, "So it's real then?"

"It is to you. It reveals your core beliefs, and hopes, and fears."

"So the Hall didn't create any of that. It was already in me?"

Nan's eyes hadn't left her, "Would you like to talk about it treasure?"

Jasmine fidgeted with the edge of the blanket. "I..." how was she going to get any of this out?

Calm down girl.

Jasmine looked into Nan's eyes but she struggled to hold their gaze. It was like they were looking straight through her.

She took another sip to win her time.

Her chest tightened up.

"Take your time." The tenderness in Nan's voice only made it even harder to speak.

Oh no, it's happening again, isn't it?

Jasmine liked them. She was beginning to care. Worse still, she was beginning to want them to care.

It always started there.

The urge to open up to them would get stronger and stronger. But how could they like her? Still she would hope. And if they won her trust, she might not be able to hold it in. She would share – probably too much. That's when it got scary. Knowing if her words had brought her closer or chased them away was always the hard part. Then the pain set in. That sinking sense that showing anyone her heart would never be okay. She would have to hide again, make it stop, make it safe. And it would all end up a tangled mess. It was always a mess.

Getting close to her was like a time-bomb. It had to explode. Someone would get hurt. It always hurt. She tried to let it be her instead of them.

People were better off without her.

Don't go there. Just change the subject Jasmine. You're leaving anyway.

"It's a lovely fireplace," was the first thought to pop out.

"Nancy, I don't suppose you still have that album of Jeremy here somewhere?"

"Why yes I do, it's just next to you, third from the top."

That's a lovely fireplace? Really? Couldn't think of anything better?

"Jasmine, you'd have liked Jeremy. A good man he was. Passed through here, how long's it been now?"

"Must be three years ago already," Nan helped him.

"Can it be that long? My goodness I believe you're right dear. Jeremy was something of a gifted carpenter you see. But by the

time we met him those days were long since behind him. It was many years before that—”

Jasmine took a deep breath, tucked her heart safely back into its shell. If Rudolph was right then running away wasn't going to help. If the Hall only exposed what was already inside her, then she was only going to take everything with. She didn't have to decide now. So she just listened to Rudolph's story.

“...and his boy had fallen ill. A bad case of the flu they thought at first. The boy was hospitalized, just for a night's observation, but Jeremy decided to stay on site to finish the job. He got a call from the doctor the next morning, something about a complication. He rushed to the hospital, but he was too late.”

Rudolph's lip started quivering. He paused for a sip.

“The man was shattered. He blamed himself for everything. That same day he threw down his tools and swore never to use them again. Soon he started drinking and took the long, slippery road downhill. It wasn't too long before he had no one to care for and nothing left to lose.”

“The poor man carried all that guilt for years,” Nan said.

“By the time we met Jeremy he was a worn soul. He had done his worst to punish himself.”

“So what did you do?”

“Oh no treasure, it's not what we did,” Nan assured her. “God met that man all on His own.”

“Stanger was here at just the same time. Stanger the Lion Heart,” Rudolph added with a smile. “The boy was born with Palsy, but nothing could dampen his spirits. Wanted to be a preacher, he did. Why, his mom believed that he was sent to her straight from heaven and she well might have been right. I think he was sent here to touch us, not the other way around.”

“He was such a brave boy,” Nan pulled a tissue from her sleeve.

Jasmine was scared to ask.

She dabbed her cheeks and went on. “When Jeremy first laid eyes on the boy he completely broke down. Just upped and

disappeared. Five days that man was gone before we saw him again. You see, Stanger was the same age his boy would have been by then – ten years and just as blonde. He told us later he'd wept for two days up in those mountains. But I'll tell you this much, when he returned he was a changed man."

"Do you know what 'Jeremy' means Jasmine?" Rudolph asked.

"No I don't."

"It means, 'God will set him free.' "

"And He surely did," Nan added.

Rudolph opened the album to show Jasmine a photograph.

In it was a beautifully carved sculpture of a roaring lion's head. It had a majestic mane flowing down to two paws. They formed asymmetrical arm rests, flanking a well cushioned seat.

Jasmine gasped. "Oh my goodness. It's actually a wheelchair."

"Isn't it simply beautiful?" Nan applied the tissue again.

Jeremy carved the boy a wheelchair?

Rudolph turned the page to reveal another photograph, this one of a man bending over the creation. He was placing a small, contorted boy into his new, custom-built throne. The boy was giving his wildest roar, fingers stretched ridged in delight.

Jasmine tried to laugh, but it hurt too much. It was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. An ache gripped her heart. She'd never seen a father, or any man for that matter, do something quite so beautiful.

"Stanger was so proud of it he slept in it for a straight week." Rudolph said. "Every time his mom tried to take him out, he just gave her a little roar. She simply didn't have the heart to take him out. That boy came alive like he never had before. This might sound silly, but I think he finally had a way to show on the outside what was hidden on the inside of him all along."

"What ever happened to him?"

"Stanger only had another four months to enjoy his new chair. Then Father came to fetch his precious boy and take him home." There was silence as Rudolph extracted his handkerchief.

Jasmine delved into her hot cocoa, trying to hide her own quivering lip.

Rudolph closed the album and placed it back on a pile next to his chair. "Well my dear, it's been a long day and I'd best be off."

He got himself upright and tipped his would-be hat. "Sweet dreams to the both of you. Nancy, it was a treat, as ever."

"Let me walk you to the door," Nan offered. She ushered him out with some whispered words between them.

Jasmine dove for the tissue box. She was into her second one by the time Nan returned.

"Are you feeling quite alright dear?"

"That was a beautiful story."

"I suppose you can see it still gets the better of us, even after some time. Now I do hope you get some good rest tonight. If you need anything you just ask, or better yet, make yourself at home."

"Thank you Nan – for everything." It sounded better in her head than when she said it.

"You're welcome treasure." Nan took the tray to the kitchen.

Jasmine ambled to her room. Today had been half dream half nightmare. Still she wasn't sure if she wanted to wake up.

Lone **Suffering**



◆ HADES ◆

GATHERING OF THE DARK LORDS

Deep within the bowels of the earth where nothing dared to venture except the creatures who called it home, was a labyrinth of caves and caverns. This was Hades, a kingdom of lost sons, of fallen stars, of all those who followed the blinding light of Lucifer. They pursued forbidden secrets, lauding themselves as the masters of their own destiny – gods in their own right – and setting themselves as the enemies of all things pure and righteous.

Symbols were everywhere in these underground caverns. They held timeless secrets like proud bastions of power. And power was the privilege of a very few. Six to be exact. Kings they called themselves. A brotherhood of dark lords who built themselves thrones, and hailed themselves the great and infamous Dominatrum-RexOrdo.

They waited in a dim room, lit by only six small flames burning above six spherical crystals which threw hideous shadows on the arched walls behind them.

The black onyx slab in the center of the room was its greatest trophy. It had been hewn from the realms of men, in the land of Havilah, by the River Pison. It stood now as a monument to their greatest victory four millennia before, the day their sovereign master had taken dominion of the earth from the hands of men.

The flames leapt up, fanned by a plume of smoke. It dissipated to reveal their sovereign overlord – Satan himself.

The dark lords were cloaked in blackened capes soiled by the blood of babes, all bar Satan, who was donned in red.

He had once been called Lucifer in the realms of heaven, but that was a long time before.

But he bore no resemblance to that creature anymore.

Dark Lord Sodalitus, master of hidden secrets and keeper of covert plans, brought from beneath his cape a weighty scroll. He unrolled a portion and began to read:

**En darken tyre, et gohn be lajhr.
Fron swagen dist begets at heir.
Et hevens bigdt, ont wagenstra.
Mases wejn dog mejt ves prah.**

This language was as ancient as the tablet itself, formed at their second council. Its secret script had served the Ordo for four earthly millennia, a proud boast that unlike mortal men, God could not sever their ties by the confounding of tongues.

The scroll's keeper said, "RexSux."

Gravollum, the sixth king by rank, answered in raspy tones, "VestMitrah."

The scroll's keeper moved on. "RexPento."

"GonAgor," Quodius, the fifth king, was passed.

"RexQuovo," the fourth had his turn.

"MetVisprah."

They continued until every one had been tested.

"Sovereign master, all are exposed in your light," the scroll's keeper tucked his parchment back into hiding.

Satan turned to Zerothustro without a word. He was the lord of the realms of terror.

To look at him was to feel as though you were being swallowed into an abyss. It sucked all the beauty out of you and devoured you into its belly of paralyzing fear.

He sat cloaked in shadows, revealing only the two gaping holes he used for nostrils. They released a sickening stench. For hands two protrusions covered in thick hide could be seen from his sleeves. They locked together with large black claws which stood in for fingers.

"We are ready," Zerothustro reported.

Satan's snarl broadened.

"Let us crush Jesus tonight." Tyrufestax barked. He didn't care for talk, "Why wait when He can be destroyed with a single blow?"

Sodalitus, the keeper of the scroll, glanced at his sovereign master who gave a nod to approve his interjection. The dark lord of conspiracy began his lesson in the subtler arts of power.

"There is more to be had here than only the destruction of the Man. Yet make no mistake, destroy Jesus we will. Do you not see all that can be had by one carefully crafted act?"

All were silent.

"Can you imagine the incalculable pleasure of knowing His Father's torment as we take Jesus's flesh apart, bit by agonizing bit? Who would rush such a death?"

Tyrufestax began to snort like a bull itching to storm.

"And forget not the watching eyes of men. If we slaughter the Son of God on the very day of the passover feast, have we not destroyed every hope of their promised Messiah? Secure His death through His own priests and we have the Jews as well.

Which of them will dare to hold fast to Him in the face of the accusing cries of the Sanhedrin? Will they not hate Him also? Our master's plan is cunning brothers, be patient."

"Time for talk is over. Spare Him nothing." Satan pounded the slab so hard it extinguished every flame.

◆ THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE ◆

The streets seemed to close in on them at every side as they made their way through the city. Their Lord, a Man untroubled

even by the raging seas of Galilee, was now consumed by some deep distress. What was it?

John glanced at Peter. Maybe he would have the nerve to ask Jesus. But Peter's features revealed his own set of troubles.

The band of twelve men passed through the city gates with only the sound of loose gravel underfoot. John knew where Jesus was leading them. He always went to the Garden of Gethsemane when He wanted to pray, especially at night when no one was around.

John was right, Peter was busy with his own troubles. So busy that he didn't even notice them passing through the Kidron Valley. He could not shake off Jesus's words. "I tell you the truth Peter, tonight, before the rooster crows you will deny Me three times."

How could that be? How could Jesus think such a thing of him? Surely He knew that Peter was more devoted than the rest of them put together. He would never betray Him – never.

They entered the familiar garden.

"Sit here while I go and pray," Jesus said and motioned for Peter and the brothers, John and James, to follow Him.

The garden was quiet, too quiet Peter thought. All he heard was the sound of their footsteps and his own shallow breathing. It was a bright moonlit night causing the giant olive trees to cast unsettling shadows on the ground. Occasionally one moved, or at least he thought it had, until he swung round with his sword ready, but there was nothing.

"My soul is extremely sorrowful, to the point of death," Jesus confided in little more than a whisper.

"Stay here and watch with Me," He asked His dear friends and walked the last twenty yards alone.

You can count on me Lord, I will keep watch. Peter swore in his heart. No one was getting past him tonight. He squeezed the sword's leather grip in his hand and took post, watching the entrance of the garden almost without a blink.

John's eyes had not left Jesus as He staggered away from them. Why did He look so frail, so tormented? And what did He mean, "I leave the world to go to My Father?"

He watched Jesus slump to His knees at the foot of a large olive tree and start to pray. John couldn't bear seeing Him like this, so he buried his own head in his arms.

"Can't we do something?" James asked his brother, feeling just as helpless.

John didn't have a reply.

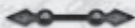
Well, I am doing something. Peter thought to himself.

They waited for a long time.

The minutes ticked by slowly as Peter watched the garden gate. Even the shadows grew tired of taunting him. He used every trick he knew to fight off his heavy eyelids. The evening moon could only keep his attention for so long, and counting stars had worked for a while until a cluster of them blurred together. He focused on the gate again, reminding himself that he was man enough for this task. But every passing moment felt more like an endless hour, and his head grew heavy and began to nod.

No, he had to stay awake. He turned to John and James for company but they were already asleep, typical. They didn't have the stomach for this, but Peter wasn't that weak. He blinked a few times, forcing his eyes to focus on the path, the same path, for hours. Time ticked by uneventfully, but Peter was strong. Yes he was stro—

He jerked his head up when he felt it nod off again. *Stay awake Peter.* He was determined, to stay, awake, and...



Jesus's chest was gripped with a stabbing pain. It was difficult to breathe but He forced air into His lungs. All His dizzying thoughts swirled around this one impossible task before Him. He didn't know if He could do it.

"Oh Father. If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me."

Every fiber of His flesh was screaming against what lay

ahead, telling Him to stop this, to escape it with just one word to Father. His body began to shake from the pressure within Him. *If there was any other way, I know You would spare Me this Father.* But He knew there wasn't.

"You know no man can bear my hand," a voice cut into Jesus's thoughts. It was Zerothustro, the dark lord of terror.

So the enemy was here then.

Father, be with Me now.

Zerothustro strode in under the veil of darkness, flanked by a company of bloodthirsty underlings. The pack closed in around Jesus catching the scent of His distress.

They were like wolves looking for a weak spot, a flinch, a fear, anything that gave way under pressure. One doubt was all they needed to pour their paralyzing poison into Him.

"Tonight we make every inch of You suffer." Zerothustro paced around Him in a demeaning circle. He spoke deliberately slowly, giving Jesus plenty of time to absorb his words and enough to think His own.

"There is no pain known to man that I will spare You. Just think about it – every torture You have ever watched as a distant, unaffected, unyielding God – will be poured out on *You*. It seems the wheel does turn after all."

The tension showed in Jesus's face. Veins pulsed in His neck and brow, but there was a steady focus in His eyes.

"Do You think we cannot torture You beyond what You can bear? Do You think we will show You a morsel of mercy, even when You beg for it?"

Jesus was unmoved.

Zerothustro gave the signal and hundreds of demons attacked as one. They pounded Him with every ounce of hatred they had collected over centuries. They bombarded His mind with images of the torture they wanted to carve from His flesh, hoping to drown Him in fear.

The onslaught went on and on, steadily draining Jesus of all

His strength to resist. After a relentless hour had passed He was on all fours, heaving desperately for breath. His clothing clung to Him like a second skin, dripping with sweat. The violent urge to give in twitched through His muscles, but He would not.

His hands clasped into fists and He cried, "Father. Not My will, but *Yours*, be done."

At the sound of that call, an angel appeared beside Jesus. He shone like a blazing pillar of fire, blinding the dark lord completely.

Zerothustro scrambled for the darkness and all he heard was the distant yelps of his cowardice pack. They were halfway to Hades already.

Jesus collapsed and the angel caught Him. As he did, the love of Father rained down on them. The angel did not let Him go until the presence lifted off again. Then he gently lay his Lord's body down.

One dark lord had been disarmed but a new shadow skulked at the edge of the garden. His eyes glowed crimson, itching to deal his own helping of torment.

But Jesus hadn't flinched a muscle. Was He dead?

The leaves began to rustle as the Lord lifted Himself from the ground to stagger back to His disciples.

They were sleeping.

"Could you not watch with Me for *one* hour?"

John woke from his dream. He shook his brother by the shoulder, but sadness was already etched into Jesus's eyes.

"Watch, and pray that you do not fall into temptation." It was all He said before He left again.

"Asleep already?" the waiting shadow asked. "Such a shame Your men don't really love You. And that after all these years."

The sly sympathies of Dark Lord Quodius, ruler of the realms of rejection and isolation, had snuck in for the second joust. He fought his battles alone and made sure his victims did the same. In the quiet hours of the night when only darkness was a friend,

then he would draw near.

Like a python, he would slither his way around his prey and begin to squeeze the noose tighter and tighter, until his victim was suffocated in hopelessness.

"All they care about is themselves. But I don't need to tell You that, oh wise One, now do I? How is it You hope for affection from such frail creatures as these?" His tongue did a few rapid flicks. "And what do You think – their ways will change? Man is fallen. How can they ever be made pure?"

Jesus turned His head to seek His Father's face, ignoring the new taunter.

Quodius took on the challenge.

"Is it fair of Your Father to send You? What sort of request is that from Someone who pretends to love You? Surely You can see it. Would *He* leave the comforts of glory? No. Yet He sends You to do His dirty work. You have given it all up for nothing. Will You let Yourself be tortured as well? For what? For your Father? For these wretched men? Look, oh Son of God, they sleep again." He hissed in triumph as the disciples nodded off, on queue.

"Father if this cup cannot pass away from Me, except that I drink it, Your will be done." With that cry, dark beads of blood began to drip from Jesus's brow.

"My, my, the lonely pseudo-saviour will die even before He is killed. This is a very disappointing end. I was so hoping You'd manage to suffer a little more. Was it not a careless miscalculation to take on the frailty of flesh? I'm curious, did You imagine You would escape human corruption when You clothed Yourself in its weakness? No, You will find Yourself the mockery of heaven and earth when You fail. Just think of it – the King of Glory rotting in an earthen grave."

Jesus staggered to His feet and joined His friends. "Sleep now and take your rest." He would have to go on from here alone.

Peter woke with a startle and jumped to attention, hoping to disguise his fault.

"Behold, the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners." Jesus looked down the path as torches revealed a detachment of soldiers marching toward Him.

"Oh the sweet victory." Quodius couldn't resist one last shot before slithering off. "Here comes the troublemaker You nurtured as Your very own little lamb. Hoping to save him were You?"

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

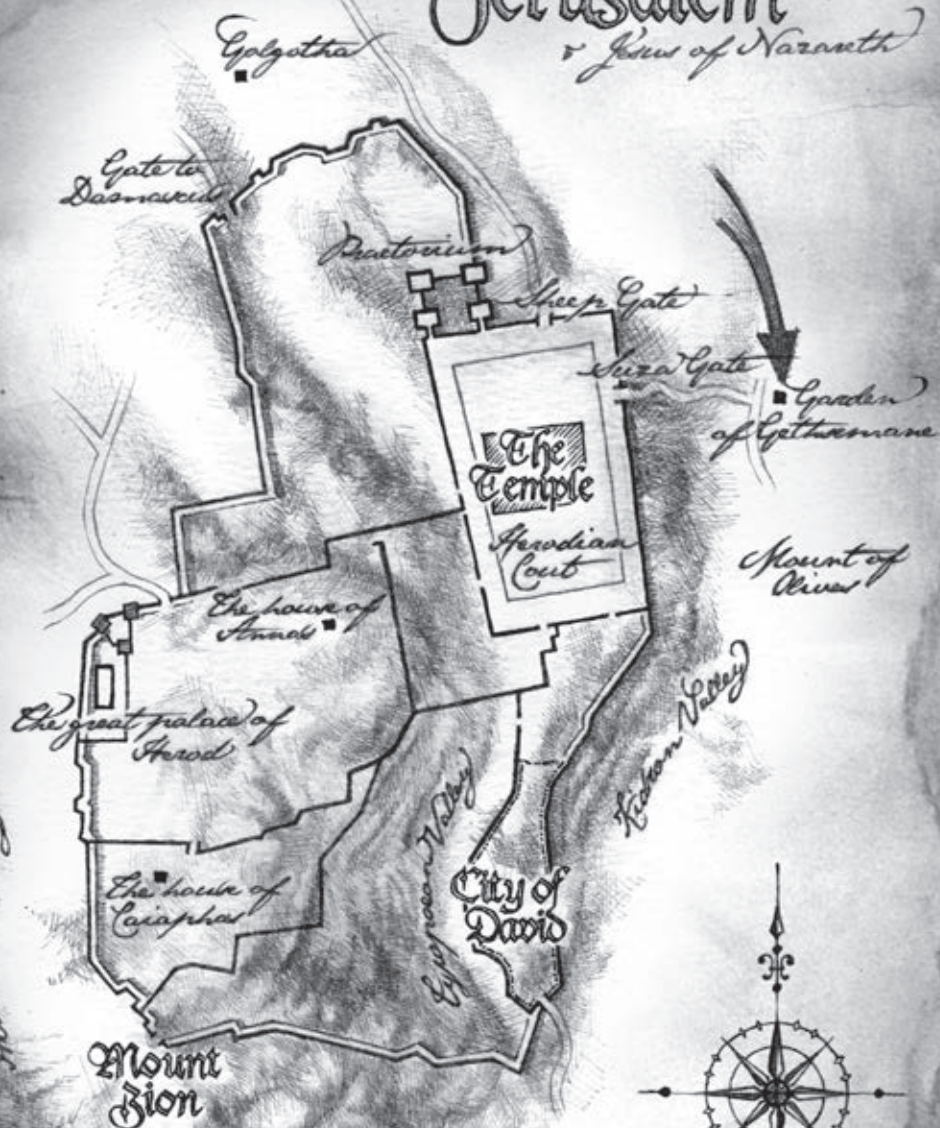
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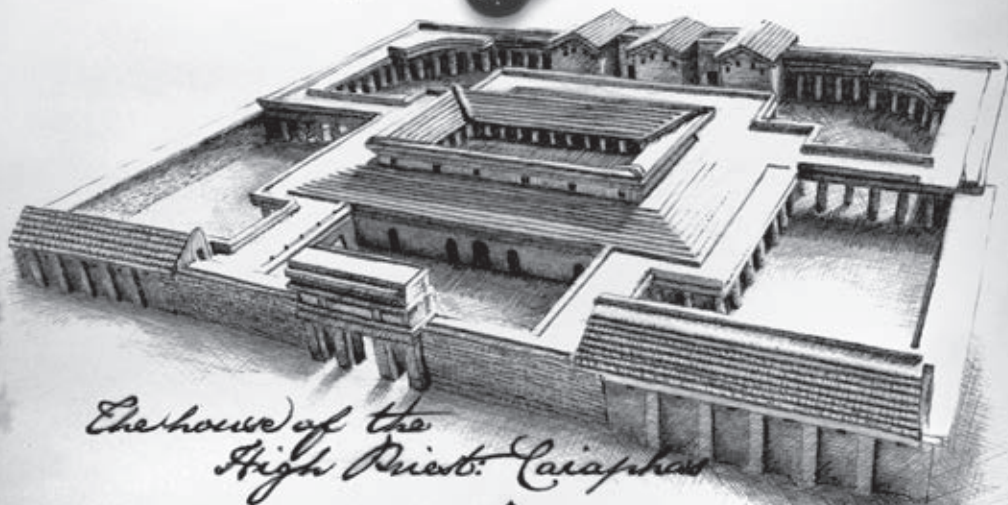
Jerusalem

& Jews of Nazareth





Destiny **Bound**



*The house of the
High Priest: Caiaphas*



JERUSALEM

— THE PLOT OF THE PRIESTS —

“Send for the Sanhedrin.”

“At this hour?”

Barak peered back at the question from the dark shadow of his heavy brow. He didn't bother to grace it with an answer. He was a large figure, with a broad neck, well disguised by the beard which he had worn since reaching manhood. His burly frame,

authoritative voice and deep set eyes were enough to silence all faint hearted challengers.

"Let them know we have already sent a detachment of troops to fetch Him. Our Man will be delivered within the hour. And make haste, He must be tried before dawn."

"But that is against our law—"

"I know the law!" Barak strained for control, "I know the law Mashek, but these are dire circumstances. It is surely our duty to do what is necessary to preserve God's holy priesthood." His mouth donned an attempted smile which his eyes refused.

Mashek left to fulfill his duty.

The chief priest stood fingering the seam of his white linen tunic, in deep thought. Their plans were finally coming together. Caiaphas, the high priest, would be well pleased.

This rebellion had troubled them for too long, filling the minds of the masses with insidious garble and undermining the authority of the priesthood. This Man Jesus was arrogant enough to think that He could disrupt thousands of years of tradition, saying things like "You have heard this, but *I* tell You that." Who did He think He was?

They were only just rid of that baptizing locust eater the people had gone out in their droves to see — as if that wasn't bad enough. But this Galilean was proving to be an even bigger problem. The whole city was talking about Him already and not just the city, but all the Jews had flocked here for the feast. Jerusalem was swarming with worshipers.

What if this Jesus was carving some devious plot to overthrow the priesthood? He had already thrown the temple market into chaos. Who knew what was next? All He wanted was to steal their power.

The rumor was spreading that He was more than a prophet. Some spoke of Him as the return of Elijah or even — Barak snorted in distaste — that that homeless Man, was the Messiah?

Ridiculous.

And what of this latest spectacle of His, strutting into Jerusalem on a donkey, through the Eastern Gate no less. It would be laughable if it didn't smack from here to heaven of the fulfillment of prophecy.

The people had fallen for His charade. They were singing His praises as if He was the Messiah Himself. Were they blind? If He were a king then where were His purple robes, or His crown, or His fortunes, His armies or His mighty temple of praise? How exactly could this Man deliver them from the oppression of Rome? And if He were their king, didn't anyone realize that the priests would be the first to know it and hail Him before men?

No, only peasants and fools could mistake *Him* for the king they were waiting for.

Yet only this evening the gift of providence had lent the priests a helping hand in destroying Him. One of Jesus's own followers had agreed to hand Him over. A satisfying end indeed. Now all they had to do was secure His guilt at a trial.

For that, Barak needed a fool of in consequence to do his dirty work. He was pacing the long stone corridor, searching his mind for the right minion when providence lent a second hand.

"Teacher, can I be of any service to you on this memorable occasion?" Inbal arrived with his head bowed.

Barak looked down at the scrawny Levite who always seemed to worm himself into moments like these.

"You have association with common men, do you not?"

"If it is of service to you my teacher."

"Good. Find someone who holds offense against Jesus and bring them to the palace. He must have enemies, somewhere."



Judas's hands were sweating as they crossed through the Kidron Valley. He kept pace with the commander of the guards, propelled forward by the rhythm of soldiers' strides. The air was thick with tension. It swept him up into a mission which had ballooned beyond his control.

"You're a rich man Judas, the world will finally give you the respect you deserve. Your dues have paid off at last." Satan's voice continued to ring in his mind, not ceasing since the thought of wealth had first laid hold of him.

They arrived at the garden where his Lord had so often come to pray. Judas was sure He would be here. A final stomp of soldiers' boots brought his nervousness back to mind. He stepped past the front row of flaming torches. When the shadows took shape again he was facing Jesus.

"Hail Master," Judas greeted Him with a brotherly kiss, as he so often had.

With his ear right beside Jesus, he heard, "Do you betray Me with a kiss Judas?"

The words resonated through his entire being, as if they had been shouted from a mountain top. He pulled back and a hand thrust him out of the way.

The guards moved in to seize Him.

Peter's knuckles turned white seeing them lay hold of his Lord. He stormed in, swiping at the head of the nearest soldier.

His cry sparked a chain reaction of chafing metal through the ranks. Two seconds later, ten swords were aimed at his throat.

"Put away your sword." Peter heard Jesus command. But wait a minute, why was Jesus looking at him?

"Shall I not drink the cup My Father has given Me? Or do you not think that if I asked it of Him, He would immediately send Me twelve legions of angels to defend Me? But how then could the scriptures be fulfilled that it must be this way? Permit even this."

Peter lowered his sword and watched Jesus bend down to collect an ear from the ground. Was that all his vicious assault had accomplished?

A young soldier named Malcus stood clutching his head as blood poured down his shoulder. Jesus removed his hands and cupped the wound with His own. Instantly the ear was mended.

A gasp swept through the soldiers' ranks and they staggered backwards, gripped by holy terror.

"Have you come out against Me with swords and sticks to take Me like a thief? I preached openly in the temple daily and you laid no hand on Me, but I tell you, this was done so that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled."

"Seize him." Commidus shouted and his men fell back into step. They bound Jesus and marched Him off as ordered.

Judas didn't notice them leaving. All he could hear were those words, "Do you betray Me with a kiss?" going round and round in his mind.

What have I done? Oh no, what have I done.



Peter stood in the garden alone, the others were missing. Adrenalin was still coursing through him when he looked down at the bloodied sword, molded to his hand. He threw the weapon to the ground.

The body of floating torches was making its way over the brook, towards the temple gate. He had to follow, but how? He couldn't cross the Herodian Court, not without being spotted.

Peter raced around the temple and through the lower city, hoping to catch the guards again on the far side. When he got there, he heard the stomping of soldiers' strides on the bridge far above. They were headed for the upper city.

◆ THE PALACE OF KING HEROD ◆

Laughter could be heard from all corners of the palace and only the merriment of harps and flutes threatened to drown it.

A servant girl emerged from the southern wing, straining under a sorely overloaded tray to replenish their stocks.

She chose to make her route back via the eastern colonnade, as she always did. It was the exact twin of the one on the western side of the palace, but in her mind she had always imagined some invasion would take them from the Western city wall when the world was this dark.

She hurried as fast as she could through the sixty-five columns that flanked her journey.

"Make haste Manessa." she was coached by Ben-Ami, the head servant. "Herod will soon be calling for more wine."

Herod was not a patient man, especially not when he was entertaining guests of influence as he was now. They packed the banqueting hall and besides that, more were strewn between baths and fountains and the beautiful grove at the heart of the palace. Every pleasure money could afford was laid at their feet.

One of the guests eyed Manessa as she passed along the corridor. She picked up her pace pretending not to notice.

This was a mad world, where the poor were cheap commodities, bought and sold at the whim of the rich. One day she would be free of her chains of bondage, if not in this life then the next. That was all that kept her going.

But there was a new hope harboring in her heart these days. She'd heard rumors in the city. People were talking about the Man from Nazareth as if He were their Messiah come to save them from Rome.

Was it too much to hope for?

She reached the northern wing of the palace and stopped when she came to the head servant.

"Ben, do you think this Jesus really *is* the Messiah? Do you think He is our King?"

"The only thing you should be thinking about are those forty platters waiting for you in the kitchen."

Ben was right. Thinking was an unhelpful habit for a servant girl. She was better off just doing as she was told.



Every shadow had turned from foe to friend, concealing Peter from the guards. He kept his distance as he followed them to the house of the former high priest, Annas.

Jesus was marched inside.

He waited in the shadow of a mansion nearby, afraid to go

any closer. His eyes kept scanning nervously, searching for faces to hide from. But the streets were deadly quiet, so he turned his attentions to what was going on behind closed doors. A loud smack was followed by, "How dare you answer the high priest like that."

He tried to still his heaving chest to listen more closely. Indiscernible murmurs were all he could hear. Soon Jesus was marched out again.

Peter froze, trying to become invisible. He waited for the procession to move off a few yards before falling in behind them.

It was deep into the night when they reached the palatial house of the ruling high priest, Caiaphas, son-in-law to Annas.

A group was gathered there in the street. The soldiers marched their Captive through it and into the arched doorway of the palace. In all the noise Peter managed to slip in undetected, blending into the ranks of the servants and spectators inside.

He spotted the company disappearing through the entrance to his right and followed after them. An astonishing scene faced him in the adjoining courtyard. It was brightly lit by flaming torches, mounted on the nearly forty pillars which surrounded the enclosure. There was a full assembly of the Sanhedrin, seventy men including chief priests, elders and scribes, Sadducees and Pharisees alike. All were arrayed in their stately garb.

This was a trial.

A chief priest with wide jaw and dark beard made an imposing presence in the front of their line. Peter knew his face well. More than once he had come to Jesus in questioning, trying to catch Him out by skillful words. Every time he tried he had left again in shame.

A large gathering of spectators flowed in from the front courtyard and lingered a safe distance from the Sanhedrin.

Jesus was shoved into the clearing between them.

"Behold the high priest of Jehovah's court, Joseph Caiaphas." The hefty priest motioned behind him.

All eyes turned to watch the shadows releasing a figure as it strode over the mosaic tiles. First to escape the darkness was the hem of an exquisitely embroidered white tunic, which almost reached the ground. Then a sash girding his waist in purple, red and blue embroidery, finished with threads of gold. It was long enough for its ends to be draped over his left shoulder. Finally, his head was wrapped in a turban of fine white linen. A golden plate on his forehead glistened in the dancing torch light to complete the scene.

Caiaphas took his seat prepared on a raised platform.

Barak waved Jesus closer and a soldier thumped Him from behind, to expedite the order.

"My cousin says it's against our law to hold a trial at night." Peter overheard the words of a woman standing behind him.

"Really?" another asked.

"And how would he know that?" a third joined in quizzically.

"He works for the palace guard and a friend of his heard someone talking to someone. He said there's also another law that forbids trials during the festival or something. This man Jesus, he says, they've been after for a long time. He says they want to kill Him, because He's a liar."

A few voices gasped.

"What did He lie about?"

"Uh, well, I suppose—"

"Well I heard that He's the leader of a band of rebels—"

Peter moved off to escape the conversation. This entire scene was becoming more unnerving by the minute. He found a fire and warmed himself beside it. Staring into the flames his mind began to drift.

What if they were going to kill Jesus? And what if they weren't happy with just taking Him? Maybe they were after the others as well? He rubbed his hands together in self-comfort.

A lady stared at him across the flames, unnerving him still more. "You were also with Him," she was finally certain.

"Woman, I don't know Him." he insisted under his breath and withdrew to hide himself in the crowd. He slowly regained composure, to listen to the trial's proceedings.

Jesus stood in silence. One by one the priests examined Him trying to force Him into self-accusing words, but He said nothing.

The more they tried the less they achieved and the more visibly annoyed they were becoming. They called on every man who would bring witness against Him but could not find even two who agreed.

"Is there no other who can witness the words of this Man?" Caiaphas wanted to bring the trial to a close. The evening sky was already losing its stars and their opportunity was slipping away with it.

"How many witnesses do they want?" the man next to Peter spoke as if they had known each other for years. "They bring a Man to trial and after spending an entire night questioning half the city, they still want more. Isn't it obvious He's innocent?"

"Be silent man." a whispered rebuke came from his other side. "Are you a Jew that speaks against the Priesthood? You would keep your peace and your tongue if you had any sense."

"I saw this Man preaching. He is no villain." the unnamed friend put his case forward.

"Let them be the judge of that. When you wear an Ephod your opinion will matter."

Peter noticed a scrawny messenger whispering to the overbearing chief priest, Barak. Whatever he said instantly ironed out the deep crease dividing his forehead.

The messenger was given the stage, to speak.

"Lord Caiaphas, chief priests and holy members of Jehovah's high court," Inbal, that inconsequential Levite, attempted his most official tone. "I have here two men who *personally* heard the words of this Galilean. There can be no doubt of His crimes."

Barak breathed a sigh of relief.

"Then show your witnesses." Caiaphas demanded.

Inbal bowed his head and took a step back to make room for the men. Two questionable characters appeared in his stead.

"Tell the court what is your business with this Jesus?" the high priest asked.

The taller of the two, the one who was nervously scrunching the life out of the filthy sash in his hand, was first to speak.

"I, your holiness, I am Dar." He slapped his friend on the chest, "and this is Tim, uh, Timothy, your holiness. We come from Joppa for the feast." He smiled as if he thought he deserved some praise for his noble act. Or maybe it was just an opportunity to boast the fact that he still had more than half his teeth.

"Yes, but what have you against this Man?"

"This Fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple and rebuild it again in three days.'" Dar held up the right number of fingers.

The dark lord of deception seized his opportunity. Sodalitus worked in those who sought ambitious ends without care for their means. He had long plucked the strings of would-be usurpers and all who fed their lust for power. He offered them great reward for a meager price, that of a soiled conscience. A fine trade it was.

"How dare He." Sodalitus's words infused the high priest with indignation. *"Destroy the glorious temple? God's holy temple? Cut this traitor down and teach every challenger a lesson by it."*

Jesus watched Caiaphas being twisted by his own hunger. Fierce ambition was a treacherous friend, it lead all too many into the clutches of evil.

"Do You answer nothing?" Caiaphas cried. "What is it these men have said against You?"

"Put an end to this, now." The dark lord's voice demanded of the high priest.

Caiaphas rose from his seat and pounded fist to palm. "I place You under oath of the living God – tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus's gaze slowly lifted to meet his new position. "It is as you say. Nonetheless, I will tell you that after this, you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

"Blasphemy and lies." Dark Lord Sodalitus exploded.

Caiaphas grabbed the hem of his robe and ripped it. "He has spoken blasphemy. What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, you have all heard His blasphemy."

He turned to his council saying, "What is your verdict?"

Few would mistake it for a question.

"He is guilty of death," came the unanimous reply.

Peter watched the crowd close in on Jesus. Those words suddenly gave them license to beat and spit upon Him like dirt. "Prophecy Master, who struck You?" they jeered.

Peter couldn't bear it. He turned to hide from the sight and the growing fear within him.

This can't be happening.

He made for the door, but as he crossed the courtyard another woman pointed to him saying, "This man was also with Jesus of Nazareth."

Peter became dizzy with panic, "I swear to you I do not know the Man." His heart was pounding. He had to get out of there. He sped for the darkness, head twisted back as he ran, until he felt a heavy thud against his shoulder. It spun him about.

"Mind yourself man."

"I, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to," he mumbled in confusion.

"Surely you were with this Jesus. Listen, your speech betrays you. It is that of a Galilean."

Peter began cursing and swearing at him, "I tell you the truth, I do not know that Man."

Jesus heard those words. He looked up just as the rooster made its morning call. His eyes locked with Peter's for a short eternity, until He was pounded by another hand.



The priests had withdrawn into an inner chamber to plot the rest of their plan, when suddenly the doors flew open.

"I have sinned. I have betrayed innocent blood." Judas cried. He could no longer escape that piercing question or the burden of guilt that was killing him.

"What is that to us? See to it yourself," Barak dismissed the miserable sight to make his own penance. "And take your remorse with you. It is no matter of ours."

Judas threw the money on the ground, wishing he could cast off his burden just as easily, but nothing would save him now.

The lord of darkness, once a friend to aid Judas's rise to riches, had viciously turned on him. Now his injections were merciless accusations placing the Lord's blood on him alone.

"You vile hypocrite, pretending to be His friend all the while you meant to lead Jesus to the slaughter. And what did He ever do but love you? Do you imagine God could forgive such a sin? No. The flames of hell wait for worthless traitors like you."

Satan tightened the noose of despair around Judas's neck. The burden of it made his vision fail.

Judas stumbled for the door, feeling his way like a blind man. His dark master had one last demand of him, that he make an end of his miserable life.

Inbal watched Jesus's betrayer stagger out the door. True enough, Judas had handed their Man over, but Inbal deserved some credit. After all, he had secured His judgment. It wasn't easy to find someone who had a useful grievance against the Nazarene. But then he didn't need to. Every man had his price, it seemed. His eyes dropped to the silver coins scattered on the floor. It was a profitable night indeed. He broke from the group to collect the loot.

"That is blood money," Mashek corrected him.

"So it is, and what of it?" Inbal said untroubled.

"By law it cannot go back into the treasury," Dagan educated him, as if he didn't already know.

"Tomorrow we will decide how it is best used." Barak settled their spat and held out a hand for the sum. "We have more important business now. Bring the Prisoner. We make for the Praetorium."



HADES

A GRAND ASSEMBLY

The great assembly was hushed.

A foot began to stamp the ground, once, twice, three times. A second foot joined in, in time. Then six more, and another fifty, until it swept through them all, spreading like an untameable fire. The regular throbbing shook the ground until the walls of the colossal cavern began to crumble. The pace became faster and faster until the rhythm was lost in chaos and every demon began to shriek and scream hysterically.

Hundreds of thousands of them were packed together so tightly hardly a fragment of rock could peep out between them. Some hung like bats from the ceiling, others crept into crevices in the walls perching on anything that gave the slightest foothold. Still more were jammed in below, beating themselves and each other as the excitement overcame them.

This was the gathering of darkness, the Grand Assembly of all the forces of Hades, or as some would call it, of Hell. But Hell was a word that doomed its victims to a hopeless fate – and theirs was anything but that. No, Hades would have its revenge, it would rise from the ashes, they would see to it.

That thought fueled their madness.

"Silence." a deep roar rumbled through the ranks, turning them mute in a moment.

An uncapped pyramid towered in the center of the cavern. The voice had come from somewhere near its pinnacle where a beast stood. He looked much like a man, if men could grow to

twelve feet tall and wear blackened scales for skin. The assembly had their eyes fixed on him, all waiting.

His barrel chest took in a breath and he roared, "Who alone dares to challenge the One who calls Himself the *only* true God?"

The horde let out a roar and the chanting began. "Sa-tan. Sa-tan. Sa—"

"Who will save us from the tyranny of the One who is unworthy even to be named among us?"

"Sa-tan. Sa—" they made themselves drunk with the endless chant.

"Then prepare yourselves to meet the serpent, the saviour."

The mass of demons scrambled for grime and stale excrement, anything they could scrape from the cave's floor to smear themselves with.

Satisfied that all were coated in mire, the dark creature gave his final cry, "Our great and sovereign master has come!"

There was an explosion as the sound of a thousand ill-tuned instruments tore through the cavern. Flashes of light allowed only glimpses of his enormous bat-like wings which spanned the entire enclosure. When the dizzying effects subsided, a silhouette materialized through smoke and flames atop the pyramid.

Awe hung in the smog around him.

Their battle had begun four millennia earlier. Since then, the horde had only seen their sovereign master at Grand Assemblies, of which there had been but a few. And even then his image was only a shadow drawn by dancing flames. The rest of what they knew of him was murmurs and myth.

"Brothers," the enormous shifting-shadow of a dragon spoke. "Too long have we groveled in the dirt and suffered in this pit, while God flaunts His riches and glory. But the time has come to take back what belongs to us!"

The horde began to shudder with excitement.

"Did I not tell you He would fall into our hands and that we would carve our revenge from His flesh?" Their sovereign master

raised a defiant fist. "We stand ready to tear down the gates of tyranny, to destroy everything He has built! We stand at the end of an age. Tomorrow, a new world will rise under our command! He may have written the beginning — but *we*, will write the end!"

The horde lost themselves in mad excitement.

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.
 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
 He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.
 And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.
 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
 He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.
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 He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.



CHAPTER 10

MIDNIGHT MEANDER

Jasmine shot up. Her heart was racing. The sheets were wet but she felt cold. She was being hunted in her dreams.

Where was she?

Oh, of course yes, Nan's house.

She couldn't close her eyes now.

There was a blanket at the foot of the bed. She grabbed it and threw it over her shoulders, then headed quietly down the passage for some fresh air.

She pushed on the back door and it squeaked. She stopped, then tried again, slower than before. It moaned the same.

Sherbet. I'll wake Nan at this rate.

One quick jerk did the trick, but the bottom hinge clattered loose. Jasmine looked down the passage. Did Nan hear that?

There was soft snoring from her room.

Great, she had the door open. Only now, it was dangling on a single hinge.

Just excellent.

She managed to prop it back up in its frame. She didn't even want to think about how she was going to fix it now. Jasmine took a seat on the steps of the porch and huffed out a breath.

The evening air was crisp so she wrapped the blanket tighter around her shoulders. This would be the perfect time to sneak out.

"So it was you."

Jasmine startled.

"Sorry, did I scare you?" Tricia headed over in her night gown.

"That's okay." *So much for that plan.*

She took a seat next to Jasmine. "I get some nights when I just can't sleep either. And, I heard a commotion out here."

Oh embarrassing. "I think I broke the door."

"Don't be silly, it's been like that for ages. Nan says it reminds her that life down here will always have its little niggles, so she refuses to fix it."

Jasmine smiled. That sounded just like Nan.

"What's up?" Tricia asked.

"Just a bad dream."

"Is your head alright?"

"Pretty good if you're talking about this," Jasmine touched the knob. It was still tender.

"And what about your heart?"

Jasmine looked at the girl. Why would she want to ask that? "It's okay."

Tricia hugged her legs and stared into the garden. "I went through the Hall too. It was more like a hell really," she nudged Jasmine.

"I don't know what I'm doing here Trish."

"You're here to heal. No one comes to Carmelton by chance."

Jasmine turned her face away.

This doesn't feel much like healing.

"I nearly gave up," Tricia said. "I was ready to just walk away. But there was something Nan said to me that..."

Silence.

Jasmine looked back at her.

Tricia's eyes were welling, "It changed my life."

"May I ask?"

"She told me a grain of sand has to be *inside* an oyster if it ever hopes to change," a tear trickled from her cheek. "Isn't that beautiful? We're nothing but an annoying little piece of dust. But in God's hands we become a priceless pearl."



Orgon's left shoulder was torturing him. *Damn you Skylock.* He stumbled into his hovel. Somewhere in this blasted place, *ah there it is.* He pulled out the bandage and strapped his arm to his side. The rest could wait.

He collapsed.

"You will never beat him."

"How dare you?" Orgon searched his chamber for whatever fool had the audacity to stalk him.

"I've been watching you," a lean figure took slow paces out of the shadows. He knew this dauntless watcher, everyone knew Rasqueet – or was it that Rasqueet made it his business to know everyone else? His hands were clasped behind his back.

"What gives you the right?"

The slightest smirk crossed his face. "Tambone will have what's left of you torn to shreds when he hears of your failure."

Orgon clenched his fist, "Come to taunt me, have you?"

"I have a proposal for you," the watcher's words were slow and measured.

"I don't need your help."

"No, you're doing fine licking your wounds all on your own."

"What do you care?"

"Oh I don't," a corner of his mouth twitched. "Let's just say certain powers' interests temporarily align with yours. Parties influential enough to restore you to your rightful throne." He eyed the cavern like he was too good to touch anything. "You could benefit from my offer."

"In return for?"

"Does it matter?"

He was right, Orgon didn't care what it costs to tear Tambone off his high horse. "What do you want me to do?"

"Kill Jasmine Spencer."

"And how do you propose I get past her guardian?"

"Is that yours?" Rasqueet pointed just above Orgon's shoulder.

He felt something wet and cold dangling there. He gave it a tug and it tore loose. *Don't flinch.* "It used to be," he tossed his ear aside, trying to look casual about it.

"A lot of things used to be," Rasqueest turned and made for the exit. "Leave the guardian to us."

"And what if I refuse?"

He stopped in his tracks. His shoulders swelled as he took in a breath. "Even you are not *that* foolhardy," he didn't bother to look back. "Be here tomorrow night. Be ready."

• • •

Skylock landed on the cliff next to him. He looked a mess. There was a gash in his right thigh and his armor was smeared with the evidence of a tussle.

"Apparently your day did not improve. But I suppose I should see the other guy before I say anything."

Skylock gave him half a smile, "He asked for it."

"You are very obliging brother."

The guardian took a seat and shared the view. A few lights shone in the village below and the sky boasted all its stars. It was quite a sight. Heaven didn't have nights like these.

"I've never seen such darkness," Lancello said.

"You've never been to earth?"

"This world is for the fallen. I never had a reason to come until Father sent me. I have to admit though, it has a strange beauty I can't put my finger on. It's not the darkness itself but those tiny specs of light resisting it – it moves me."

"You should write."

"I though I had taken it up," Lancello chuckled. "Not sure what am I doing down here though? Couldn't Father just send you to talk with her?"

"I don't have your fancy words. Besides, that devil gets under my skin."

"Yes, I might have sensed some rather strong emotions from you earlier. Forgive me for saying this brother, but something

seems out of place. Why does the girl have *you* for a guardian? Aren't you above that station?"

"I asked to be."

"But warlords command armies and fight raging battles and grand things of that sort."

Skylock seemed amused.

"So why the choice of such a modest vocation?"

A muscle bulged from the guardian's jaw. There was a lot behind this story, wasn't there?

"I have all night," Lancello pretended to make himself more comfortable.

"It started long before Jasmine. I commanded a legion. We guarded a revival lead by a young preacher, Marshall. He was on fire for our God. We fought many battles for him, and won them all. The enemy tried everything. But that much victory cracked the door open to pride."

Lancello saw pain in his eyes, "Please go on brother."

"I don't know why I ever expect them to play fair. The enemy brought a mentor into Marshall's life, a man he really admired. He started to mimic the man and think he was becoming somebody. They couldn't bring him down, so when they saw he had taken the bait, they tore down his idol."

"I'm guessing you couldn't protect him against that."

Skylock winced. "It broke him. Marshall didn't know that his mentor was hiding a sin all that time. He thought God had let that sin trap him after 30 years of faithful service. It made him question how safe his own life was in His hands. He began to believe that God might betray him. So he betrayed God instead."

Lancello felt his face flush.

"He didn't just turn from God, he ran to the worst of sins, boasting of his evil just to spite the One who had only ever loved him. But Marshall couldn't see that anymore. God had been good to him and he spat in His face."

Lancello's jaw locked. Wasn't that just like men? Selfish, blind

fools. They were there only for what they could get from God.

Skylock looked to be struggling too. “I couldn’t watch that. I returned home angry, confused and disillusioned with men. I spent days in meditation. I didn’t know if I could continue to defend people capable of such betrayal. I don’t want to imagine how Father felt.”

Lancello wondered what he might be tempted to do witnessing such a sight. “I fail to see why that would make you choose to be this girl’s guardian brother.”

The tension on Skylock’s features eased. “I was walking in the Ruby Valley, finally sure that I was done with men when I heard Father’s voice whisper to me, like He was sharing a secret. He was creating a new life and He wanted me to witness it. He showed me all His plans for this new one, how He would make her, who she would be, what the enemy would try to do to her – He showed me everything. To this day I can still hear the excitement in His voice...” emotions surfaced with the words. “She was special. She was fragile. I was drawn to her in a way I can’t explain. I had to be a part of her journey. I had to *know* her, to protect her. I was knit with *this* one, as if Father had fashioned a child just to heal my broken heart.”

There was a silence so thick it felt like time had stopped. Skylock took a breath before he got more out.

“I flew to the throne and threw myself at His feet. I begged Him to let me be her guardian... and Father said *yes*.”

The way he said that last word pierced Lancello’s heart.

“That wasn’t just the day Jasmine was made. It was the day I was reborn.”

An Appointed Way



The Praetorium

JERUSALEM

— A ROMAN TRIAL —

Two birds were pecking at crumbs caught between the large stone slabs of the Roman road. They took off into the crisp morning sky as the sound of footsteps crunched ever closer.

The path carried a band of determined men to the fortress. The company was led by a stately brotherhood of priests, all

donned in white robes. Marching in rhythm behind them was the palace guard. The bound and beaten Captive was held in the center of their ranks. Finally, the tail of the procession was formed of lay men, thinning in number until only few stragglers were left trying to keep up.

They came to a grand staircase flanked by two enormous towers. The Roman fortress was a monument to Caesar. Set right in the heart of Jerusalem, it was an ever present reminder that another 'god' had staked his claim on their holy land.

Their arrival was greeted by a pair of armed and plated guards. "What business have you here?" one asked.

Barak wiped the sweat from his brow, wanting to restore his stoic air before he began. "We have brought a Traitor for the governor's hearing."

The guard marched to another, who relayed a signal to the men holding the entrance. They were allowed to pass.

Barak walked through one of the stone archways and into the belly of the fortress, the Praetorium it was called. It served as a barracks to the Roman army. It also housed the quarters of the governor and more importantly, the Hall of Judgment.

From each of the fortress' corners, robust towers reached for the sky. They made a man even the size of Barak feel small. This was the most imposing structure in all of Jerusalem, besides the temple, of course.

Nine guards were stationed at posts around the square. All the entrances were sealed shut, except one, the way into the Hall of Judgment.

Barak turned to the Roman captain, "We cannot enter for the festival is at hand, but call the governor to us that we may speak with him."

Commidus set a soldier on the mission with just a nod. The man took tidy steps into the hall.

Aside from the towers, the fortress itself stood five levels high. It boasted three tiers of balconies, each finished with arched

balustrades which ran the full circumference of the square. Nothing decorated the raw stone which stood bearing its brute strength.

The Roman ruler appeared on one of the balconies above them like a jewel glistening in the dirt. Everything about the man exuded the air of one who had found the pinnacle of life. He wore a substantial signet ring and a cloak heavily embroidered in gold. With one hand he leaned over the stone ledge to greet the morning assembly.

Pontius Pilate scanned the crowd and found the Prisoner surrounded by temple guards. "What accusation do you bring against this Man?"

"If He were not an evil doer we would not have brought Him to you," Barak opened their account.

Pilate was not impressed, "You take Him and judge Him according to your own law." He waved them off and turned back to more pressing matters for Rome.

"But lord, it would be against our law for us to put anyone to death. We come to you for greater justice."

Pilate stopped. Why would they want to execute Him? Surely it had to be an offense of consequence then. He turned back to study the gathering with renewed interest.

"He teaches new teachings," Josephus, another chief priest, offered a limp lashing.

"He was misleading the entire nation, He speaks false doctrine and teaches disregard for our holy laws," Barak said. "He even forbids giving due tribute to the great Caesar, calling Himself Christ, a King!"

Pilate was troubled. Why would they ask for the death of their own King? He withdrew to the Hall of Judgment and summoned Jesus to him.

The hall was designed to bring the hearts of proud men low. Imposing vaults made a high ceiling, ascending from pillars which lined its passages. When the guards ushered the Prisoner

in, their footsteps echoed through the stone-cold cavity. It offered no mercy only exposure.

The guards left Jesus in Pilate's presence and withdrew to keep the door. The two of them were left dwarfed by the expanse. Pilate looked curiously at the Prisoner, bound by ropes and battered already. His clothes were stretched and torn by unfriendly hands and bruises were forming on His face. Yet He stood so calm, so undisturbed.

"Are you the King of the Jews?"

"Do you ask Me this question of your own, or did the others tell you this of Me?" Jesus asked it only that Pilate might perceive what was pressing on his heart.

"Am I a Jew? Your own nation and its chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done for such a thing?"

"My Kingdom is not of this world. If it were, My servants would fight that I should not be delivered like this to the hands of the Jews."

"Are You a King then?" Pilate asked again. Somehow his Prisoner's presence, in rags though He was, radiated a contained authority such as he had not seen in all of Rome.

"You say that I am a King and rightly so, for that I am. To this end I was born and for this cause I came into the world, that I should testify to the Truth." He paused to look into Pilate's soul and added, "Everyone that is of the Truth hears My voice."

The words hung in the spaces above them. They served only to intensify the trouble now laying hold of Pilate's heart.

"What is truth?" He had sat a lifetime in the company of philosophy and learning and seen enough endless debate to know that purity and truth were a mist no man could lay hold of. They were just vapors some unenlightened souls sought to exhaustion. But they would never find them, for they did not exist beyond a cruel fantasy.

No, this world was a labyrinth of complexities, of dualisms and theories as numerous as there were men. The only common

bond was the burden of strife. The strongest survived and truth vindicated none. That was the way of the world.

He'd had enough of this senseless trial and made back for the gathering. "I find no fault in this Man at all," he announced to the growing masses now gracing the enclosure.

"But He is a trouble maker, He causes division amongst the Jews by His teaching."

"He stirs our people to break our laws."

"We have even found Him inciting a revolt."

On and on, Barak and his band lashed accusations at Jesus.

Pilate finally turned to Him. "Do You say nothing? See how many things these witnesses have brought against You."

He marveled at Jesus' silence. He was even beginning to like this Man.

Jesus looked across the faces of His accusers. Their master had them bound more tightly than the ropes which held Him now.

"He has spread His lies all the way from Galilee to this place."

"Where does this Man come from?" Pilate demanded.

"He is a Galilean."

What? Was He from Herod's district? "Then take Him to Herod for judgment." Pilate had Jesus handed back to the temple guards and he withdrew to private thoughts.



Jerusalem

30AD

Joseph Caiaphas

THE HIGH PRIEST'S HOUSE

THE UPPER CITY
For the wealthy classes only



THE LOWER CITY

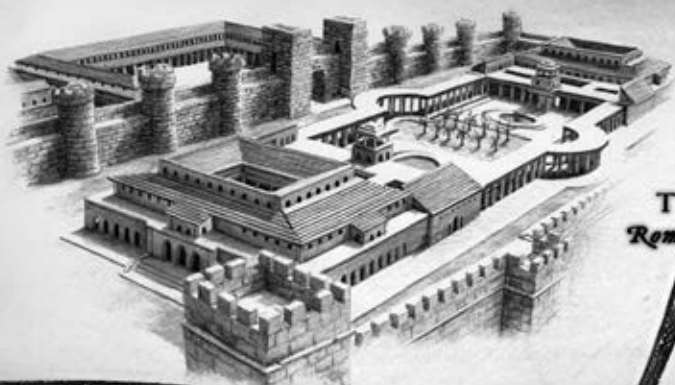
THE GENTILE COURT
OF THE TEMPLE

Built by Herod the Great

THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

Place of prayer





THE PRAETORIUM
*Roman Barracks &
Hall of Judgment*

**KING HEROD'S
PALACE**

GOLGOTHA
Site of the crucifixion



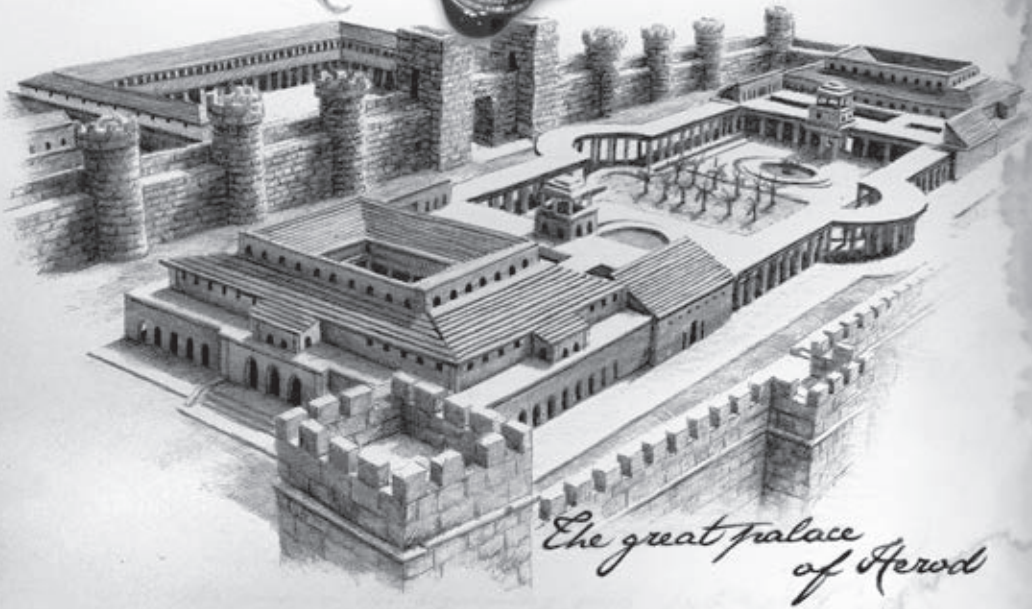
THE HOLY TEMPLE

THE KIDRON VALLEY
*Runs between the Mount of Olives
& the City of Jerusalem*

**THE GARDEN OF
GETHSEMANE**
Where Jesus is arrested

XII

Trial & Error



*The great palace
of Herod*

JERUSALEM

— A JEWISH TRIAL —

At last! he thought, as he put on his robe and made his way to the banquetting hall. Herod had been eager to see this Man since first hearing the rumor that He was John the Baptist, come back from the grave. Of course he was glad that this Jesus wasn't the man he'd had executed - that would have been inconvenient.

He walked past the bath as a soft haze of steam rose off it. How long he had hoped to catch a glimpse of one of the miracles he'd heard so much about. Blind eyes seeing, lame walking, ah but the sight he most desired to witness was a dead man raised back to life. Now that would be something.

He entered the banqueting hall saluted by his rugged men of war, all sworn by an oath to his keeping. They served to fortify his sanity and without them he would go nowhere. Calmed by the sight, he sent for any guests who wished to join him for this unexpected reception.

Herod made himself comfortable on his favored couch and sought his servant impatiently for something to soothe his parched lips. He grunted at the delay when a tray finally appeared.

Only three of his guests could be roused to join him. The rest were still feeling the effects of the previous evening's wine and song. It had been a memorable feast indeed.

"Bring Him," Herod waved a heavily jeweled finger.

A soldier saluted and summoned for the Prisoner.

A new, unseen dark lord nestled in beside Herod for his turn in the fray. Vularisor was a vulgar dark lord, bathed in depravity and fat from his flaunts with all manner of indulgent desire. He draped himself like a shawl around king Herod and began to whisper thoughts of delight into his ear.

The caressing promise of ecstasy was all that kept the tetrarch's inner torment at bay. But such thoughts were reigned in when Jesus arrived.

Dark Lord Vularisor could hardly bear the sight of Him. "*You have not so much as looked upon a woman before, have You?*" he scoffed at Jesus' purity. "*No man has lived until he tastes the sweet milk of love. It's not too late,*" he launched his temptation straight into Jesus' mind.

Vularisor motioned to Manessa, the young Jewish girl waiting on Herod with a platter in hand.

"Are her curved thighs not perfect? Even You must have

dreamed of the ecstasy that awaits a man beneath his lover's silken sheets."

Jesus did look at Manessa, but He saw the frightened young girl, once an innocent virgin sold into slavery. Her beauty had made her one of Herod's many trophies. But despite the world she was thrust into, her tender heart had retained its faith in God and its hope in a better day.

"Ask it of me and I can have You released in a moment," Vularisor continued. *"Say the word and her body will be Yours to ravage until You've had Your fill."*

He was a formidable dark lord. Not for his strength, nor even his cunning, but the intoxicating power of his lure. None could bring men to their ruin like him.

Jesus wasn't taking the bait.

"What a waste," Vularisor had to laugh at the battered Messiah holding Himself so pure and unspoiled. Too clean for the belly of pleasures and luxury was He? Well if He chose suffering and torture over the pleasures of the flesh, then it could be arranged.

He pretended to ignore Jesus after that, to resume tickling Herod's privates, just to nauseate Him.

Herod wore a grin as he examined Jesus from head to toe. He had to admit that was disappointed by the sight. He had expected Him to be taller and frankly, more impressive.

"Are You the Man of miracles?"

Jesus looked back without so much as a word.

"I asked You a question."

Silence.

"You will not speak? Do You see this splendor about You? From this palace I have the power to give You wealth in a moment," he snapped his swollen fingers, *"or condemn You to Your death."*

He took an exotic fish from the tray of delicacies. Holding it by the tail, he threw his head back and slowly lowered it to its

doom. As he crunched on it a stream of sauce escaped to trickle down his chin.

"You see, I have all that I please and nothing is withheld from me. So show me a miracle, Jesus." Herod cleaned his teeth with the tip of his tongue.

Is this the Jesus everyone is talking about?

Manessa was stunned, struck by the thought that she might actually be facing their Messiah. Was it possible? Her heart wanted to leap with that hope.

Herod's words left no impression on his Prisoner.

"Go on. Prove to us that You too have the power to perform Your bidding at will."

Herod licked the sauce from his fingers and then motioned for one of his mighty men, who grabbed Manessa by the arm, drawing his blade to her neck.

She squealed, causing Herod obvious delight. "I can take her life. Show us if You are able to bring her back again."

Manessa held her breath. The cold blade pressed against her skin as she looked at Jesus' to plead for help. But His eyes were untroubled. No, it was something more than that, something beautiful. A wave of the strangest peace came over her as she looked at Him.

"Do You refuse?" How dare this Man make a fool of him in his own palace, in front of his own guests.

"He is a false prophet," the High Priest Caiaphas stormed in with the Sanhedrin on his tail. "He stirs nothing but trouble."

How interesting, Herod mused. So this Jesus had even made Himself unpopular with the priests. He gestured for his man to release the girl.

She collapsed with the clatter of silverware.

"He is no friend of the Jews or our laws."

"He threatened to tear down the temple."

Soon the priests were launching a barrage of complaints, seeing they had a sympathetic ear in Herod. It was impossible to

decipher one accusation from the next, until Barak's deep voice broke through them all. "He makes Himself greater than the Great King Herod!"

Herod was stung by mention of the name which had always hung as a shadow over him. How could any man's legacy equal that of his father? Who had reigned longer, or held power against like odds? Could any man build structures of more magnificence or inspire more terror in his subjects? It was the measure he would always fall short of.

Herod stood up with ceremony and the accusations died down. Silence dramatized his slow strides toward the Prisoner.

"Do You think You are greater than he?" He circled the Man, examining Him from every angle. "Are You king of more wealth than all the land from Damascus to Elath? Or do You have a fortress of more repute than Massada's rocky ledges?" He pretended to dust a speck from Jesus' shoulder. "What claim do You have to such authority when his own blood stands before You with the keys to his kingdom?"

Herod looked for clues, maybe a wince of weakness or a hint of hatred. He saw only a steady confidence staring back at him. He took a step closer and lowered his voice. "Do You come to challenge me with an army? Do You think You can defeat the mighty hand of king Herod?" His heart raced uncontrollably but he hoped to be holding a ruthless air.

Barak smiled at the questions of a kindred spirit. "He is no king, only a peasant and a fool."

Herod gave a hearty laugh. He turned to his guests and announced, "Well then, if He wishes to be a king, let us bring Him a robe that we may bow down and worship Him."

A soldiers brought a cape and draped it over Jesus'.

Herod raised his wine goblet. "Hail the mighty King of fools!"

He took his seat and reached for a grape, waving his brutal soldiers on. What good fortune, there would be entertainment this morning after all.



CHAPTER 13

BY THE BOOK

"This is beautiful," Jasmine said, her hands clasped around the frost-bitten bench. Fields of wild grass stretch out in front of them. The range of mountains beyond was set on fire by the sun.

"Sunrise reminds me of His new mercies every morning. I have been coming here for fifty three years. Not one of those days have I left without it."

She looked at Rudolph. His face bore the evidence of a lifetime of smiles. She hadn't noticed that before.

She was glad she had decided to stay. Still, her own smile was short-lived. "Do I have to go back into that Hall again today?"

"No my dear."

That was a relief.

"You don't *have* to do anything." He looked at her as though he had just said something worth writing down.

"You make it sound easy," she drew a pattern in the ground with her toe. "But we can't always choose can we? Sometimes things just happen to us."

Rudolph pulled a small book from his pocket. It had a leather binding and a thin brown cord, tying it closed. It looked like he'd been using it for decades. It was over-stuffed with loose bits of paper and nick-nacks peeking out between the pages.

"This is my story Jasmine. Every bit of it. Every day I get up, and I put one foot in front of the other. Every word I speak, every single thing I choose to do, or leave undone, shapes its pages.

You are right my dear, there is so much in here I did not choose, things that happened I could not control. But whether I fought, or forgave, or rose above it, or gave up – these things *I* chose. They were my sacred right and the only parts God will hold me to. And one day I will lay my head down for the very last time, and there will be nothing more to write. I want this little book full to the brim of all the things I hold dear. And every choice I make every day, is in that hope.”

He tucked the book back in his jacket pocket.

She tucked the pearl into her heart.

• • •

“Stinker, you has a funny nose,” Satchwick said. He never did call him Gashwen, was too big and fancy that name.

“You want me to jab you with this right now?” Stinker pointed his stick right at his nose. “Make yours look even funnier?”

He tried to look at it, but his one eyeball did that twitching thing like always.

“You owe me big. I is only gonna fix this ‘cause you has a debt to pay up.”

“You mean with that Dempsy boy? I didn’t mean to make a mess that time, Stinks. ‘Sides, if I hadn’t done it, who’d you have to ride all this time? I thinks I got you promoted is what I did.”

“Promoted? Is that what you call it when your knees shakes so much it makes you leak? You just–”

“I don’t got knees.”

“–gave me the job ‘cause you couldn’t do it.”

“How can I helps it if I is just scared always? It’s what I is.”

“You is supposed to make *them* scared Satch. A spirit-of-fear isn’t meant to *be* scared.”

“You knows I had him all twisted in fear ‘fore you did get there. I softened him up is what I did.”

“You calling me a wuss now?” Stinker did have his stick in Satch’s face again. “Way I ‘member it, Boss Orgon was ready to give you a pelting ‘fore I saved your tail.”

"We is a team is all," Satchwick gulped.

Stinker gave him a mean look and went back to carving the tip of his stick. "Boss told me you's in big trouble if you doesn't get a hold on Jasmine today."

"You did speak to Boss?"

"Course I did. Else why'd I be here? Think I don't got better things to do than save your hide again?"

He would know why Boss looked so funny then. "And?"

"And what?"

"Didn't Boss look spooky to you? Wasn't he all wrapped up in bandages like he was a mummy or somethings?"

"Oh that, I hear it's the new thing, all the rage with the who's who and all."

"It's not 'cause he got beaten up again by Skylock then?"

"Satch, sometimes I has to wonder where you gets all your crazy ideas from."

"Sorry Stinks," he was always the clever one.

"That's better."

"So what's the plan with Jasmine?" Satchwick asked.

"You leave that to your 'ol pal over here. I has a brilliant plan."

He wanted to know so bad.

Stinker just whistled like he didn't even see it.

"Come on Stinks."

"You want to know?"

Satchwick nodded.

"We is gonna be sneaky sneaky. Just you watch. We is gonna get her where she's not expecting us. 'Cause then she's not protecting us either, now is she?"

Stinker made them plans so sneaky that even Satchwick couldn't figure them out. "But why would she want to protect us?"

"Ahem, uh, 'cause, uh... it doesn't matter if you doesn't understand why. We is gonna have her is all."

"Stinker, has I ever told you, you is a genius?"

"Not enough Satch, not nearly enough."

• • •

“You’re very quiet my dear,” Rudolph said.

Jasmine couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d said. It hit a nerve. “I know I’m still young but I’ve always had this sense that time is passing too quickly. Like I might blink and my life will be over. What if I get to heaven and my journal is empty? What if I wasted my years? I’m scared of that Rudolph. More scared than I am of anything inside that Hall.”

“It’s never too late to change the future. Why not take today to write something memorable in your story?”

She bit her lip, “I can try.”

Rudolph smiled, “Well then”, he began his two minute ritual of getting to his feet. Then he lead her back to the Hall.

Jasmine took a deep breath and stepped inside.

Her foot landed softly. She was on a lush, fawn, cut-pile carpet. In front of her, a long and broad passage stretched out, lined with portraits.

Breathing came easier.

The passage lead to a door on the far end. It was already open. But Jasmine was more drawn to the picture on her left. She knew the man.

His gray hair was brushed back to reveal two kind eyes that seemed to be asking her a question – *the* question.

The plaque beneath it read:

A. W. TOZER

1897 - 1963

She’d always thought of him as the friend she would never meet. He had a way of putting into words exactly how she felt about the world and more importantly, the Lord.

He was a thousand times the child of God she would ever be. But he had left a mark on her life and it made him feel familiar.

She walked to the next one. She didn’t know the face, but everybody knew the name Martin Luther. Her nose was right up to the portrait, studying his features.

What made him so different? I wonder if those who knew him expected him to change world history?

She walked thoughtfully over to the next frame. It was of a Chinese figure, with his hair swept to one side.

WATCHMAN NEE

1903 - 1972

A modern soul with the heart of the ancient saints. Jasmine had long admired his walk with God. He was a small man with enormous faith – enough to suffer false accusations, decades of imprisonment and even die for his Lord. Millions of lives had been touched by him. She was one.

The next picture looked like a Rubens painting. It was of a stately Samuel Rutherford. Jasmine didn't know much about him, except that the old saints she so admired, all admired him. What more did she need to know?

These are all great men of God.

She looked down the line. Kempis, Austin-Sparks, Simpson, Watts, Wesley the list went on.

She stopped at each of them. How many had suffered shame or hardship or even offered their lives to pursue God in a world that hated Him? A world that would never understand them.

What was it? What did they know? What did they have? What made them able to pack a short life so full of significance?

She'd reached the door on the other side but she didn't really want to leave them.

•

Lancello heard her in the passage. He fidgeted in the seat. *How to look human* – there was a challenge. He folded his arms. No, that was uninviting. He hung them next to his side. That was simply peculiar.

“Here she comes brother,” Skylock said.

Ah yes, he could rest his elbows on these cushioned arm-rests and balance his fingers against their twins. *That will suffice.*

She appeared through the door, gaping at the ceiling in

apparent awe. Lancello looked at it. Had he missed something?

It was a circular atrium, five stories high, with a domed, lead-glass window for a roof. It was supported by seven wooden pillars, each the trunk of a tree. Below that were four tiers of galleries, lined floor to ceiling with books.

Apparently humans were easily impressed.

"Oh my word," she was looking at the books now, running her fingertips along their spines. "It's impossible."

She hadn't seen Lancello yet.

"You can't be serious, these are all out of print." She pulled one off the shelf and dusted it down.

"Dust and moth destroy man's handiwork, not God's."

She startled and spun round. "Who said that?"

She looked right through him.

"Brother, you do know you first need to materialize for her to actually see you," Skylock said.

"Oh my, yes I think I missed that step. Sorry, I am new to this. She can't hear me now can she?"

"Not until you appear to her."

"But she heard me a second ago."

"Because you wanted her to."

"Is that how this works? Well now I'm in a fix then aren't I? I can't exactly appear out of thin air – that won't look very human."

"Think of something."

"Not helpful Skylock." Lancello cleared his throat and tried to sound casual, "I did."

Her eyes bounced around looking for him. She held a book for a would-be weapon as she disappeared behind a sculpture in the center of the room.

"There's your window."

Lancello appeared just as Jasmine came full-circle. "Hello Jasmine."

"Oh, h... hello. I didn't see you there a minute ago." There was a quiver in her voice.

"I do get that sometimes." *So what happens next? I can't very well ask Skylock while she's looking at me.* "Are you looking for something in particular?"

"No, I don't think so. This library is incredible. These books are classics, some of them hundreds of years old, more. They changed Christendom, got people imprisoned and beheaded for their faith. The few I know are impossible to find – I tried." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "But I guess you know that."

"I'm glad you like it. This collection accounts for *all* the greatest saints since the beginning."

"Surely, not all of them?"

"Every last one."

"Even–"

"No exceptions."

Jasmine looked suitably awestruck. "What I wouldn't give to spend the rest of my life reading them."

"Life is too short for that, I would know," well it sounded like something a human might say, didn't it?

"Have you read them *all*?"

"Call it something of an obsessive hobby."

She hurried over to the seat next to him. "May I?"

"Be my guest."

She sat down. "Are they amazing? Of course they are. But I mean, they truly *knew* Him, didn't they? Even though they were down here they were halfway to heaven already. They had that *other* wisdom, didn't they? Could they stay in it, or was it only glimpses? And how did they get there?"

"My but you are full of questions." She reminded him too much of himself. "Tell me what you mean by 'other wisdom'?"

Jasmine tucked the same strand of hair behind her ear again, "Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. It might sound silly."

"Please I'd like to hear how you have come to know of it."

She seemed self-conscious. "I don't really know how to describe it. I only felt it once but–"

Skylock put a hand on his shoulder, "Give her time. She has never told anyone about this."

Jasmine started to fidget with her book. "I was fasting once, and praying up in the mountains. I like the mountains. It's quiet there. And one time God visited me." She looked up at him like a startled fawn.

"Go on."

"I mean, not like in person standing there, but His presence was there like I had never felt it before." Jasmine's lip started to quiver. "I felt His love for me and all I could do was weep. He showed me things about His heart – I'm sorry, I don't have the words to explain it – but it was love. I saw His love."

Lancello was stirred by her tale.

"His presence was with me after that. It hung on me like a thick blanket, for days. Whether I was awake or asleep or in prayer, it didn't matter. He was tangible. He was there. It was like I could feel His feelings and think His thoughts. I was so close..." Jasmine began to weep.

He glanced at Skylock.

The guardian simply smiled back.

"In that place everything was so different. I saw the world more like He does, I guess. Isn't that what they all had? Isn't that the place they knew?" Jasmine dropped her head. "But I lost it. Why did I throw it away so cheaply," the words were barely a whisper.

Skylock's eyes looked even more pained than hers did.

"You want to return to there, don't you?" Lancello asked.

She was unable to hold back the tears.

"And you believe these books would show you the way?"

She nodded.

Lancello had not expected Jasmine to be anything like this.

"I'm sorry, I'm not usually this honest with anyone. I don't even know your name."

"I am Lancello."

"That's a nice name," she took a deep breath and wiped her

cheeks dry.

"These men and women were no different from you. They were just as fraught with sinful, frail mortality. Man is made of dust, nothing more."

"But can't even dust be made into a pearl?" she looked like she was pleading with him.

Lancello was beginning to like her. "Your answer isn't in these books. You must find it the same way they did."

He thought she might look more impressed by his wisdom. Maybe he wasn't clear enough.

"Every spiritual journey is taken in the deepest recesses of the heart, not in the pages of another man's story. For it to be your truth, it must be *your* journey. There are two foes a man must overcome to find that place Jasmine. He cannot defeat either, and yet he must be found the victor of both." He stood and walked to the nearest of seven doors lining the library. He turned the knob and held the door open for her. "Are you ready to face the first?"

Jasmine took a deep breath and walked through the door. Lancello closed it behind her.

"That was rather cryptic, the riddle about two foes and all," Skylock said.

"Too much? It sounded so good in my head."

Skylock thumped him on the back, "You did good brother."

"She's no ordinary girl, is she?"

The guardian's eyes gave a knowing smile.

"I have a feeling this is not the simple meet-and-greet I had anticipated. What else should I know?"

"A demon has been assigned to destroy her."

"The one you tussled with yesterday?"

"His name is Orgon. He is desperate. We can't let—" Skylock looked to the skies.

"What is it?"

"Father is summoning me to the throne. Look after my girl until I get back." He flew off.

Excellent. Jasmine is now safely in the hands of a quill-wielder. I shall parry every onslaught with my mighty feather. Who ever thought this was a good idea?

• • •

“You ‘member the last Grand Assembly Stinker?” Satchwick did ask while they was waiting for Jasmine.

“ ‘Course I does. Who ever forgets those?”

“Well, I has been wondering all about what master did say that day.”

“You mean Boss, doesn’t you?” Stinker did glare at him.

“No, Stinks, I mean Sovereign master, Sata–”

Stinker stuck his hand over Satch’s mouth so fast. His eyeballs looked everywhere around them. “Satch, you can’t just go around doing things like that. We’ll both be in for it. What if one of them spies is about, hey? What if a watcher hears you talking about things we isn’t supposed to talk about? What you gonna do then?”

Satch gulped.

Stinker let him go.

“Sorry Stinks.”

“Now stop being silly like that and get yourself ready ‘fore Jasmine gets here.”

Satchwick breathed in to ask when she was coming.

“Don’t you even think about it.”

“But–”

“Not another peep,” Stinker did give him the hairy eyeball.

He did huff it all back out again.



CHAPTER 14

TIME TO *Slide* SIDE

Jasmine stepped through the library door and into a small, clinical room. A steel table stood in the center of four bare walls. They were interrupted by only a mirror in front of her and a door to her left. An unwelcoming chair waited on her side of the table.

It's cold in here.

"Sit down," she heard a mechanical voice.

Okay. She settled into the icy seat. A small speaker was mounted in the corner of the room, above her right shoulder. It was ignoring her now.

Have I done something wrong? She pinched her hands between her knees. Her breaths were shallow.

The door handle squeaked open. A short, paunchy man in a dark charcoal suit came out. He wore a white shirt and a tie that had probably begun its life as some shade of green. A circle of dark hair framed his bald patch. Thick rimmed glasses distorted his eyes from view and under his left arm he carried a pile of untidy papers and a file. He placed his load on the table.

"You is Jasmine Helen Spencer, is you not?" He flipped through some pages.

"Yes," he made her nervous. *Calm down girl.*

"I see," he peered over his glasses. "And you lives at 58 Randmond Crescent?"

"Yes?" Was it the parcel? Maybe it had been delivered to the wrong person. What if she wasn't even meant to be here? What—

"Does you have any next of kin, Jasmine Helen Spencer?"

"Yes." Why did anyone else have to get dragged into this – whatever this was?

He eyeballed her as if she'd already gotten the answer wrong, "And who is that?"

"Uh, I have a mother and I, I guess that's it."

"You guess?"

"No, no, I'm sure."

"And your father?"

"I don't know."

"Either you has a father or you doesn't. So which is it?"

"I haven't heard from him in years." She shifted in her seat.

He studied his notes again, stopping to read something for a moment. Then, as if he'd found what he was looking for he asked, "So what brings you to Carmelton?"

"Excuse me?"

He leaned over the table. "I did ask, what makes you believe you has a right to be in Carmelton, Jasmine Spencer?"

A lump formed in her throat. "I, I, I'm sorry, I didn't know that was a problem. I mean I just got a parcel and–"

"A parcel?"

Why did you have to go and say anything about that? "Well, I got a parcel and the next thing I knew–"

"From who?"

"My... Father?" That sounded better than saying 'from God' didn't it? And it was a version of the truth.

"So you *does* know your father then."

"No, no I didn't mean–" *Oh gosh.* She'd already forgotten that she'd told him about her dad. This was a real mess.

"We doesn't tolerate liars here in Carmelton you know."

"Yes but, well yes, I'm sure you don't but–" she deflated. Maybe he had a point. She knew she didn't belong here, she didn't deserve to be with these people.

"You is going to have to leave, immediately."

“Are you throwing me out?”

He fingered his collar for air. “No I isn’t. Y-y-you just has to go on your own.”

“But what if I don’t want to go?”

He gathered his papers in a hurry and made a bee-line for the door, slamming it closed behind him.

That was odd.

“What does you think you is doing Satch? Get back in there and finish off on the job.” Stinker did scream under his breath.

“I can’t. She did ask if I was chucking her out. If I says yes, then I has broken God’s laws of free choice. If I says no, then she wants to stay.” His eyeball did start to twitch again. “What is I meant to do? Just looking at her makes me want to leak, Stinks.”

Stinker did shove him out the way. “Fine then, I’ll do it. But you owes me even bigger.”

Jasmine sat watching the door. There was a commotion behind it before the handle squeaked open a second time. Another fellow arrived. He was bent over a little, with a long face and narrow shoulders. His suit was a dark brown, or maybe a hint of olive.

“Ms. Spencer, you will have to excuse my colleague, there has been a complication.” The way he looked at her was unsettling. And he didn’t stop wringing his hands. “I is Inspector Gash.”

He held out a limp hand. When she shook it, his fingers were like icicles. It sent a shiver down her spine.

He lifted one leg to perch himself half on the table. “We has reviewed your file and I think you will be agreeing to do what is best for everyone.” He left a long pause. “You of all people will understand, Ms. Spencer – what with your histories and all – that we has the interests of our citizens at heart if we ask you to quietly leave our happy village.” His top lip lifted into a rather disturbing sort of grin.

“You has seen that Mr. Rudolph is frail, the poor fellow. I for

one feel especially full of concern for him. He does so hope in you, Ms. Spencer. I wouldn't want to feel responsible for what could happen to him if he suffered another disappointment, at his age and all, would *you*? Why we even fear—" he stopped his mouth and took a breath. "We fears the worst. And our precious Ms. Nan, such a dear lady. Has so many young'ns to take care of. We really hates to burden her with more. She doesn't have the heart to turn you away, you know. Now there's no need to disturb our happy village any more than you already has. Ask yourself this question, does you really think you should be wasting their time?" He looked at her for a long while and then stood up again.

"I appeal to your conscience Ms. Spencer. I know you will do the right thing." A wind slipped out with the words and he gave another odd looking grin.

With that he left.

He was right. She should have left last night already. She was just a burden, wasting everybody's time.

But the thought of leaving hurt. She didn't want to go.

Can't this time be different Lord? Can't I stay?

You know it's best if you leave them Jasmine – stop thinking about yourself – think of them.

A noise behind her spun her round. The door had flung open. The library was howling under a gale-force wind. Books were blown off the shelves, sliding over the floor with pages flailing violently in the whirlwind.

She scrambled to save what she could. With a small pile in hand she searched for a safe place to rest them. It was hopeless. She had to stop the wind.

Jasmine scanned the room and saw the open door, it had to be coming in through there. She staggered for it, inch by inch, fighting the force of the wind. She leaned into the tempest when her legs gave way on a loose mat. It sent her thumping into the sculpture in the center of the room.

Get up girl. You have to save these books.

She managed to crawl past the mat on all fours. Books were flying by on every side. This would destroy them.

“Lord help.”

She clawed all the way to a pillar and clung on for dear life as the storm increased. Her feet were swept out from under her and she was left flapping like a flag.

I have to close that door.

“Jasmine,” she thought she heard a voice. “Jasmine let go.”

“What?”

“Let go.”

No, the door was in front of her, she had to get to it.

“I can’t,” she screamed to whoever was there. “Help me close the door.”

She began to lose her grip. One hand slipped off. The other couldn’t hold and she thumped into the sculpture a second time.

Her eyelashes were stuck to her eyes. She held up an arm, trying to defend herself from the chaos. With the other hand she worked herself up again, but she was powerless against the pummeling forces.

Don’t you dare give up.

She dug her nails into the floor boards, inching her way forwards. She had made only a foot or two when a heavy volume connected her in the head.

Jasmine opened her eyes. The world was quiet, except for the throbbing in her head. She touched her brow. *Ouch! You’re making a habit of this, aren’t you?* There was another lump, just next to the other from the day before. *So I’m collecting them now.*

Books were scattered like debris everywhere.

Inspector Gash was leaning against a door frame, staring at her. He looked suitably unimpressed. She could almost hear his, “Well now we both saw this coming, didn’t we?”

This is my fault. The longer she stayed around these people the more damage she was going to do. *What have you done? No one*

can replace a collection like this.

Lancello approached with a pile of books in hand, quite unaffected by the state of the room. He put them down next to two neat piles already collected on the floor.

"You don't belong here Jasmine."

Lancello shot the inspector a glance. "Is that *yours* to decide?"

The little man's confidence melted, "She knows it's true."

Jasmine looked back and forth between them. Her accuser seemed certain there was only one choice to make. She agreed with him and yet she desperately wanted to stay.

"What do I do?" she asked Lancello.

"Courage Jasmine, this is your journey."

The inspector began to tap his foot.

"Mr. Gash, I mean inspector--"

"I'm glad you've made the right decision."

"Well I--"

"Think it's time you left. Yes, exactly."

"No actually, I don't think I want to leave just yet. Thank you all the same."

"You'll live to regret this," he gave a snort and slammed the door of the interrogation room behind him.

Jasmine felt more relieved than she did guilty.

Lancello was collecting books like nothing of much consequence had just happened. "We call that wind Máhim. He takes pleasure in bringing confusion and doubt and destruction."

Did he just personify a whirlwind? How odd. Jasmine collected a few titles of her own.

"Another door is waiting for you."

She shot him a glance. Was he seriously going to let her wreck another space?

Lancello opened the book in his hand, and read:

TWO DOORS DO A PILGRIM FACE,
ONE OF JURY, ONE OF GRACE.
PROMISE HIDES BEHIND THE TRUTH,

BEHIND THE OTHER, LIES THE PROOF.
TWO DOORS OPEN, ONE MUST CLOSE,
NOW CHOOSE, DEAR PILGRIM, WHICH OF THOSE?

"So everything that just happened here, it was all a test?"

"More like a war of wills. The door that let Máhim loose, it's closed isn't it?" He pointed to the one inspector Gash had just slammed behind him. "That was your choice, and your victory."

Jasmine didn't think victory would feel like this. "Was he the foe you were talking about?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"So who is the other one then?"

"Would you like to find out?" Lancello walked over to a new door and opened it for her.

• • •

"Hasn't you had the question too Stinks?"

"I isn't talking to you."

"But Stinks, think about it--"

"Satch, I has no idea what you is talking about but you better get one thing straight," he stuck his finger in front of Satch's nose. "You did make the mess in there. I only tried to clean it up – got it? I isn't gonna take the rap for this one. I didn't let Jasmine get away – you did. I is going straight to Boss to get my side in first."

"You hasn't, has you?" Satchwick asked again.

"What is you on about now?"

"What master did say back when--"

"Not again Satch. You want to know what makes me smarter than the likes of you?"

"Yes please," he nodded.

"I doesn't ask silly questions, that's what."

"But--"

"Put a sock in it Satch."



CHAPTER 15

LITTLE CINDERELLA

On the other side of the door Jasmine found a bright summer's morning over a patch of lush grass. A young girl fluttered past. She looked as carefree as a butterfly, with arms waving through the air as if the whole world was a playground.

She wore a red and white spotted dress tied at her back with a ribbon. It swished with every movement. Her hair did an adorable flick at the shoulders and the rest hung as a fringe, over two would-be eyebrows.

Delicate fingertips brushed a tuft of it aside in a gesture that would mature into something quite beautiful one day, or so Jasmine thought.

There was a man there too, in blue jeans, a t-shirt and a well worn cap. He was sawing the branches of a fallen tree. He worked feverishly. Two men wouldn't have kept up with him.

The little one danced closer saving her most dramatic swirl for the finale.

Jasmine had to smile.

Cinderella finished her dance and took a moment to recover from the dizziness.

The man was still sawing.

She was deflated.

"Daddy look," she did her performance a second time, throwing even more effort into the sequence. This time she tumbled over.

Daddy hadn't stopped.

The little one picked herself off the ground and tried to dust a grass stain from her ball-gown. Then she was off, probably to perfect her pirouette.

Jasmine turned back to the man. He was tireless. He just worked and worked, like a machine. Judging by the debris in his wake, he'd been at it for a long while.

Cinderella made another approach.

"Look Daddy. Look here," she showed off her newest feat.

He didn't notice.

"Look Daddy," she did it again.

"Not now Jasmine, I'm busy."

It felt like a blow to the gut.

Jasmine's heart had to find its rhythm again. She looked closer at the face under the cap. *It is him*. She stared at her dad like it was the very first time.

What was driving him so hard? Was he scared of something? Did he need to prove himself? To whom? For what? No one could keep up that relentless pace.

She was surprised by her compassion. She'd never thought of her dad as just a man before, someone who could be haunted. Maybe there were reasons he had left – reasons she'd never even dreamed of – reasons that had nothing to do with her at all.

Little Jasmine twirled again.

"That can't be me."

"Why not?" Jasmine startled at the voice beside her. She didn't realise Lancello was standing there.

"Look at her. She's so carefree, so *adorable*."

Cinderella left daddy in peace after that.

"She's already learning to face life alone," Jasmine was hit by an unexpected flood of memories of those days. "He never stopped, did he? Always chasing something, or running from something," she crossed her arms, "from me."

The little one fluttered by again. She had discovered a white

butterfly and was skipping after it with a girlish giggle.

Jasmine felt her heart ache. If only she could have known the truth back then, how different things might have been.

"It's easier to see it from the outside, isn't it?" Lancello said.

She smiled at the girl. "I thought I was in the way of all the important jobs he had to get done. In the way of his happiness, in the way of—" the words got stuck in her throat. "Oh my word, I *still* think I'm a burden to everyone, only a problem that gets in their way."

Jasmine began to feel dizzy as scene after scene flooded through her mind, challenging everything she had ever thought about herself.

• • •

"That wasn't too bad hey Stinks?" Satchwick rubbed his butt cheek. He did think Boss was gonna kill them.

"Speak for yourself," Stinker looked funny. One eyeball was blue and round like a golf ball, even bigger.

"You're a snitch is all, telling Boss I was the one did let her go."

"I was only telling the honest to goodness truth—"

"You was meant to have my back in there is what."

"So what you gonna do now you is a free agent again?" Satchwick asked.

"Think it's funny we got booted from the job? I is going to find me someone else to ride is what and *you* isn't coming with me."

"Good, then I doesn't have to share it. I is the one that did find it so I is gonna keep it - all to myself."

"What you find?"

Stinks wasn't going to believe this. Satch pulled the Pearly out slowly, "Tada."

Stinker's good eye popped out a bit. "Ooh, that a real one? Where'd you swipe that from?"

Satchwick knew he wasn't supposed to swipe Faith Pearlies from peoples, but they was just so pretty he just couldn't help himself. Satchwick did draw on the ground with his toe, feeling

too guilty to tell.

"You took it from Jasmine, didn't you?"

He nodded.

"And you did have it with you in there with Boss just now?"

It was nice to have Stinks look at him like he was clever too.

"You little devil. We is in there, getting a pelting for letting Jasmine off the hook, and you is hiding her Pearly the whole time." He gave Satch a hard thump, "Didn't know you had it in you."

Satchwick's chest popped out. It wasn't every day Stinker said such a nice thing like that. Pearlies wasn't easy to find. Just wait till he got a look at the cave.

"So where is we gonna hide it?"

Satchwick was grinning, "Follow me Stinks."

• • •

Jasmine hadn't said a word since they had returned to the library. Lancello was no expert in reading human emotions, but she looked troubled. Skylock would probably know what to say now. He didn't.

"I'm not sure what to believe anymore. What's true, what's just been a lie all this time?"

Father, how do I help her?

His eye fell on a broken mirror on the floor. It must have come off the wall when Máhim swept through there earlier. He collected it and held it up in front of Jasmine.

"Can you see yourself?"

She nodded.

"But does it look like you as you truly are?"

"Not really."

"A reflection is only as true as the source. Your father was a man, Jasmine, a broken man. He could no more offer you a true reflection of yourself than this mirror can. You simply asked the wrong Father to show you who you are. Your Heavenly Father would have told you the same thing He told you on that mountain you long to return to."

Jasmine smiled, "You think so?"

"You are the one who said that dust can become a pearl. Another door is waiting for you."

"Lancello," she hesitated. "What if let Him down?"

Her words touched a nerve. She was a human after all. She probably would let Him down. Didn't they all? "He is calling you, even though He knows exactly who you are. The only true question is will you answer Him?"

"Thank you Lancello," she smiled.

He opened the door and she went through.

She was on the mend.

He had done Father proud.

Lancello took a seat to finish the other task Father had given him. He rolled the scroll open again and continued to write:

HADES



THE PLOT THICKENS

Deep within the bowels of Hades its supreme overlord was taking stock of their progress against Jesus, the Christ.

"Dark Lord Zerothustro nearly killed Him with fear," he said as he shifted one of the pieces on the board in front of him.

It looked much like a chess board, only vastly more complex as it mapped out the territories of earth. At its center was a little speck named Jerusalem. Around that he'd packed a mass of dark figures in elaborate formations.

The plan was well under way. Dark Lord Quodius had made his move too, showering Jesus with plaguing doubts in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The back of Satan's hand swept a collection of pawn-like disciples to one side. They had meant nothing in the fray, unless you counted a sliced off ear.

Satan himself had secured the most critical move, Judas the Iscariot betraying his own Master. He grinned, enjoying the memory of the pain in Jesus' eyes.

He flicked Judas' isolated piece off the board.

The plot was still balancing on a knife's edge. Vularisor had failed completely, not even a trace of lust could be extracted from Jesus. And Herod was a limp king, they could not trust him to complete their plan.

Satan's attentions turned back to his most powerful tool, Zerothustro. He would have to secure Pontius Pilate. He moved his piece in place.

"What is it?" he demanded, without turning to face the shadow stalking him from behind.

Sodalitus had been caught out again. Just like the watchers under his command, the clandestine dark lord could make his presence entirely undetectable – but not here. Nothing worked against the author of deception.

"Speak or I will remove your tongue."

Sodalitus materialized. "Sovereign master, Zerothustro can only secure a death sentence through the Roman Governor."

"Have you come here to school me?"

"No master," Sodalitus recoiled, "but have you considered His immortality?"

"Speak your mind plainly."

"Even if we can get Him on that cross, will He actually die?"

"Pierce Him and He will bleed like any man." Satan moved a final piece. He had Jesus cornered and alone.

"Check mate."

A True Reflection



— JERUSALEM —

The hem of Peter's garment was soaked with the anguish he had wept into it since dawn. If he could only have been half the man he thought he was.

He was so lost in his pain that a mob of people swamped him before he even thought to escape.

"Kill Him," a voice rang out.

Peter turned stone cold. Where could he run to? There were temple guards on every side. But none of them so much as looked at the sorry heap mourning his sorrows. They were set on a mission, dragging their Prisoner to His final fate.

Peter had to take a long hard look at the Man. No, it couldn't be. It simply couldn't be Him.

The crowd marched past as Peter sank back into a heap, trying not to imagine how Jesus' face had become so marred.

Oh, if only his miserable life could be ended right there. He wept even more bitterly than before.

...

What is truth?

Pontius Pilate paced the echoing corridors of the Praetorium. He was judge for the Roman Caesar. He set the sentence of life or death, guilt or freedom on a man. All power was in *his* hands.

But it was reason alone that cast the verdict – not truth.

Truth was just the vain imaginings of simple hearts to throw a net of sense into a sea of confusion. What truth was there to be sure of? Was one man's word worth more than the next? No. Was it not the rule of the strong that exalted itself above the rest? Was it not the iron fist which made the law and by it the truth? And who would dare to prove him wrong, but that he had an arm stronger than his foe? And if he should prevail, then in its place a new law would stand proudly as its own truth.

How could any man claim to know all that could be known, understand all that could be understood, or lay a pattern by which all men could say they now know such a phantom as *truth*?

Yet these questions, which had not troubled Pilate since his youth, would not leave him now. He was caught in the turmoil that one glimpse of the Galilean's eyes had stirred. Why did it feel, if only for an instant, that something as steady as truth could be grasped?

"Sir," his trusted general interrupted his thoughts.

"What is it Titus?"

"Herod has returned the Galilean."

"His sentence?"

"He cast none, Sir."

Pilate heard the commotion and went out to meet them.

A great multitude of Jews had gathered to fill the courtyard. Pilate saw the High Priest Caiaphas among them. He knew then that they were determined to have their way. Next to him was the familiar band of temple guards, holding – Pilate had to examine closer, yes it was Him – the same Prisoner, only now badly beaten. Blood stains covered His brow and lip and the swelling had transformed His features.

Pilate summoned the attention of all. "You have brought this Man to me as a deceiver and one who misleads your people. And indeed you know that I have examined Him. I have found no fault in this Man concerning your accusations and now neither

has Herod. For I sent you back to him and still nothing deserving death has been found in Him."

The priests moved among the crowd sowing their intentions into every mind. "Have Jesus crucified," they said, "ask for Barabas to be freed."

"I will chastise Him and then release Him."

The crowd erupted at once shouting, "Away with Him," and "Release to us Barabas instead."

Barabas? Would they rather have the freedom of an infamous murderer? What madness had taken hold of these people? "Do you want me to release Barabas or Jesus, who is called the King of the Jews?"

The crowd demanded the same a second time.

Pilate looked to the Galilean who still made no protest, so he summoned Titus.

"Scourge Him."

The King's
Coronation

— HEAVEN —

Each slash of the guard's whip drew out an involuntary moan from Jesus. The sound echoed down every passage and through every hall in the Praetorium, finally escaping and soaring up to the ears of heaven.

There was silence there. Not even a whisper broke the tension. The angels stood frozen, like statues, listening to their Lord's cries. He was suffering. They were all suffering with Him.

Fourteen.

Michael counted and winced at the sound.

Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen.

He heard Jesus' flesh rip with that blow.

Eighteen. Nineteen

His fist clenched tight around the butt of his sword. How much longer did this have to go on for?

Twenty. Twenty one.

Again the tearing of flesh.

Twenty two.

He waited. There was a long delay before Jesus cried out in agony. Michael heard a few of his brother's swords chafe against their sheaths — he knew the feeling!

The lashing seemed to go on and on and on, forever.

Twenty nine. Thirty. Thirty one. Thirty two.

Be done already. He couldn't help counting, or gnashing his teeth with every blow.

Thirty five. Thirty six. Thirty seven. Thirty eight.

Who could bear it?

The loudest groan of all was followed by deathly silence.

• • •

The barracks door burst open as Brutus and Quintillus entered, each gripping an arm of the now limp and lashed Prisoner. They threw Him to the ground and Brutus arched his back to bellow through the barracks halls, calling the entire garrison to gather. They had brought some amusement for the men.

Lucilius, the clown among them, fled out the door bumping into Fabius as he did. Their breastplates clipped and Fabius grunted, "You'd better keep running you fool."

Horatius stomped his way through the ranks of soldiers and came to face their prey. He lay on the stone floor with a pool of blood forming around Him.

With his arms crossed and a smirk donning his weathered features, he said, "So this is the King of the Jews, huh? Should have known He'd be a pathetic sight."

The others laughed.

"A robe for a King," Artorius announced, and brought his full-dress cape to the approving jeers of the men.

Quintillus wrenched Jesus' garment off to let him drape the robe over His shoulders. Lucilius returned with a crown he had fashioned from the branch of a thorn bush. Near two hundred voices roared their approval.

"My king," he gave a mocking bow. Then he shoved the make shift crown of thorns onto Jesus' head.

Fresh blood trickled down His face in four competing streams. Lucilius finished his masterpiece with a sturdy rod. He placed it in Jesus' hand as a monarch's scepter.

Horatius began to feel the dizzying effect of Dark Lord

Tyrufestax clouding his mind. The dark master of the realms of hatred and war was tapping into a lifetime of anger.

"Hail the King of the Jews!" Brutus said.

All bowed the knee, all but Horatius. Rage had him. He swiped the rod from Jesus' hand and pounded Him with it, over and over and over again. Each blow drove the thorns deeper into His skull, until the entire garrison was triggered by the sight of the scarlet spray. They stormed in to take their share.

Jesus was thrown from one to the next, beaten, spat on and cursed. He did not resist a blow, nor recoil from a strike.

Horatius finally stumbled loose from the fray, splattered with the blood of his victim. He collapsed exhausted, as his puppeteer cast him aside for stronger arms to finish his bidding.

...

A scarlet trail lead from the soldiers' barracks along the long, stony corridors, back to the Hall of Judgment. There, the drenched robe still hung around the King's shoulders.

Pilate needed to turn away as his trusted nerves abandoned him. How did that Man even find the strength to stand?

"Behold," Pilate addressed the crowd, "I bring Him to you that you may know that I find no fault in Him." He hoped that their first glimpse of the sight he had just witnessed would appease their thirst for blood.

"Behold the Man!"

A spontaneous groan rippled through the crowd as He was brought to view. Some jerked their heads away in shock, others covered their gaping mouths. Only a few of higher calling held their pose without so much as a flinch.

Simon Magus was one of them. He was a powerful sorcerer, a chilling figure, well acquainted with the sight of blood and torture and sacrifice. They attracted him like a fly to droppings. There was always something to be gained at times like these. That 'something' was a secret power only an elite few could wield. Never had there been more on offer than today, with this

Man, this Jesus of Nazareth.

The burly Chief Priest Barak, spotted Simon Magus gliding through the crowd. The sorcerer's beard was long and silver, with just his chin accentuated by a gray patch. His eyes were dark beads that cut through everything they saw.

Barak's hair stood on end at the sight of him. What was it about that man that made his presence so potent? He was drawn to it. He wanted whatever strange power the Magus had.

When he found himself again he was standing but two feet from the lean, sinister figure, not sure how he had woven his way through the crowd. His mouth was dry. How should he open his account?

Magus' hungry eyes were locked on the sight of the blood cloaked Christ when he said, "Barak, see that He is crucified."

How did he even know the chief priest was behind him? Barak tingled with a thrilling kind of fear.

"Crucify Him," he called out with the full effect of his voice.

It sparked a chain reaction and soon the crowd was swept up in the hypnotic chant, "Crucify Him, Crucify Him."

At that moment, a young attendant appeared with hurried steps down the long balcony towards his governor. He skipped over the crimson river and stood near hoping to be permitted an audience. The shouting crowd did nothing to settle his nerves as he stood rigid, waiting. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead and he tried his best not to stare at the bloodied Prisoner.

Pilate summoned him, already agitated by the nuisance.

The attendant spoke with a quiver, "Governor, I bring a message from your wife. She says, 'Have nothing to do with the blood of this just Man, for I have suffered a great deal because of Him in a dream.'" He breathed in air for the first time since his arrival, then swiftly escaped with a trot.

Pilate looked back at Jesus now more troubled than before.

We must finish this, Barak thought. He began to move through the crowd saying, "Demand the release of Barabas.

Destroy this Jesus, He is the enemy of our God."

"Who shall I release to you?" the governor tried again to win the sympathy of the crowd, stirred by the caution of his wife.

Barak bellowed on queue, "Barabas."

The multitude followed him.

"And what shall I do with Jesus, who is called the Christ?"

"Crucify Him. Crucify Him!"

"Why what evil has He done?" But Pilate's protest was drowned out by their determined chant. Every effort to bring reason was cast off. He was making no ground. "You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him."

"We have a law," Caiaphas retaliated. "By our law He deserves to die for He made Himself to be the Son of God."

Pilate turned cold.

He strode back to the Hall of Judgment.

What manner of Man is this who distresses my wife's sleep and so vexes the chief priests? He is famed a King and now also this, the Son of their God. Even my own mind is troubled by Him. Yet the Jews are a fervent people. If I insult their God they will surely turn on me.

He summoned for Jesus again, determined to finish this trial. The Prisoner shuffled in slowly.

"Where are You from?"

Jesus finally arrived, but said nothing.

"Will You not speak to me? Do You not know that I have the power to crucify You and the power to release You?"

Jesus looked straight at him, though His face was now so marred it held no resemblance to the Man Pilate had met that morning. "You would have no power against Me at all unless it were given to you from above. Therefore, he who handed Me to you has the greater sin."

Pilate's mind was set. He could have nothing more to do with this. He strode again to the courtyard, forgetting his dignity.

"I will release Him."

"If you release this Man you are no friend of Caesar. For whoever makes himself a king speaks against the great Caesar himself." Barak was launching his final onslaught.

"Shall I crucify your King?"

"We have no king but Caesar." They screamed for blood until the sound was deafening and Pilate feared a riot was at hand.

He called for water.

An attendant drew near with a cloth over his shoulder and a hefty bowl cradled in his arms.

Truth, what good has truth done this Man?

Pilate dipped his hands into the clear water and the image of his mother came to mind. They were words she'd spoken when he was only a boy, words which had been with him ever since. "My boy, promise me that you will be a just man one day."

He smirked at the thought of how simple that request had seemed at the time, before life had twisted all sense out of shape.

Lifting his hands to the air he said, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Man. You see to it."

Simon Magus seized the opportunity. "His blood be on us and our children," the sorcerer shouted.

The crowd made no protest and his smirk turned into a broad grin. These blind fools had no idea how he had just cursed them.

Dark Lord Sodalitus was no less pleased. He had used the Magus to play his trump card and by it gained a victory of epic proportions. The first curse was in place. Now the scheming dark lord turned his sights to an even more diabolical plan.

XVIII

The Summit



JERUSALEM

Simon of Cyrene came whistling along the road. He'd woken up with a skip in his step this morning. And why not, after all it was the Passover Feast. They were in the holy city of Jerusalem, the sun was shining, what could make this day any more perfect?

He was headed for the Sheep Gate where the temple's white stones stood glistening in the morning light. The only blemish on this scene was that colossal chunk of rock they called a fortress. But that was Rome, they were never subtle.

He brushed the thought off and whistled his merry tune.

A roar of voices pierced the sky and he thought it might be a celebration. But on the second pass, he realized it was coming from the Praetorium. There had to be a riot there.

He quickened his strides.

Before he could reach the fortress, Roman soldiers emerged from the entrance and cleared a path through the throngs. They ushered a prisoner out and another just behind him. Both were marched down the stairs, bound and ready for execution.

Simon studied them. One seemed resigned to his fate, though gripped by terror. Perspiration glazed his features and he was oblivious to the crowd's stares. The second man was not so content to surrender. He wrestled with the guards who were happy to meet his challenge with force.

Simon didn't like the sight of violence so he turned to leave. That was the moment he saw it – the image that would forever be seared into his memory.

The form of a Man emerged at the top of the stairs, though barely that. He was dressed from head to toe in a sheet of blood. Tattered shreds of cloth hung on Him, heavy with gore. Through their scars, gaping holes revealed the devastation of His flesh.

A cross of weighty beams had been cast upon Him, burdening His shoulder. The remains of the wooden monster dragged behind His unsteady plod.

He reached the staircase and with faltering step planted a foot on a stair below. He winced as the wood imposed itself on His wounds.

Simon could not suffer the sight and turned to hurl out the contents of his gut.

Then a loud crash, repeated thumps and a deep groan of pain brought the surrounding commotion to silence. Simon turned to see the scarlet heap now lying only eight feet away from him, pinned under the wooden beast.

The Prisoner struggled to lift it off His frame only to collapse again.

An impatient guard kicked Him. "Get on with it," he ordered, as if added incentive was all the Man needed.

Then a soldier grabbed Simon saying, "Carry it for Him."

"No, no, you don't understand I—" he tried to protest but he was dealt a heavy thump. The blow threw him down and he collided with the ground, nose buried in the sand.

Spitting dry chalk from his mouth, he saw a single, fresh drop of blood set into the soil just inches from him. Slowly he lifted his gaze to meet the eyes of this Stranger. He braced himself for the plea of mercy he would need to endure.

The face he found was unrecognizably disfigured. His whole being jolted at the sight, yet not because of the horror of it, but the expression of steady resolve in those eyes. The Man's inner

calm, settled amidst such mutilated features seemed to turn the world on its head.

Simon shook his mind clear and stood to heave the wooden log off Him.

"Go on then," Quintillus plucked Jesus back to His feet and stood staring at Him in disgust. His top lip lifted in annoyance at the scarlet mess now coating his hand. He wiped it clean on Simon's tunic and then motioned for him to get going as well.

Simon placed the timber on his other shoulder and tried not to notice the blood it smeared there too.

They moved up the hill at the sluggish pace the beaten Man could muster.

...

The Magus brought his brew to boil in the darkened upper room of the house. Blankets had been used to seal out the light and the lower level was guarded by six apprentices, men eager to learn the art of magic. All he needed now was that one final ingredient. There would never be another opportunity like this one, not again, not in all the world.

Where was it? Why hadn't it arrived?

...

The Praetorium was covered in a ghostly silence when Pilate sent for his scribe. Not five minutes later, Annat, an apologetic looking man with indifferent features, appeared to receive his orders. He scuttled off again with the governor's judgment of a 'Jesus the Nazarene' to be carved on wood.

As he shuffled down the corridor his eye fell on a strange sight. There, in the entrance of the now abandoned Praetorium, was a large priest bent over the stone floor. He watched a while until his eyes made sense of the scene.

Had the whole world gone mad on the same day?

Annat dipped his head and darted off. He hadn't seen that. He hadn't seen anything.

Barak swung round. He could have sworn he heard footsteps

in the Praetorium's halls. Someone was watching him. What would they think of a priest collecting gore off the fortress' floor?

He had sworn he would do anything to learn the secret of Simon Magus' power, but this was a step too far.

What did the magician need *Jesus'* blood for? Surely *any* blood was just as good. After all, it was the Passover. Lambs would be sacrificed in the temple today.

If the magician wanted blood, a priest knew exactly where to get more than he needed. Barak was decided. He made for the guard's tunnel which joined the fortress to temple's courts.

...

"Oh Jesus, save Yourself from these men," a woman threw herself to the ground at His feet, bitterly pleading with Him.

What? Simon of Cyrene stood rooted to the spot.

Could this disfigured, tortured Man who's cross he was carrying be Jesus? The Nazarene? But just days ago the whole city was singing His praises, calling Him a prophet of God, the Messiah come to save them. Now He was being dragged off to His execution? What had happened?

"Even now He's still trying to discredit us," one pharisee complained to another as they walked past Simon.

Only then did he notice how many priests and scribes and holy men there were around. What was going on here? Who was this Man? And if Jesus was the Messiah, did the prophets not teach that He was destined to become their King?

...

There was a heavy knock on the door.

"Who disturbs us?" came an unwelcoming reply.

"A servant of the true master."

A few moments of silence followed and Barak began to think he had the pass-phrase wrong. Then the latch was loosed, and a face appeared to study him up and down. He tried to peer through the door to see what they were hiding inside but it was too dark to see.

"Were you followed?" the unfriendly doorkeeper demanded.
"No."

"Good," and he took the vile of sheep's blood.

"The magician said I may enter and—" the door was slammed before Barak could finish.

He grunted in irritation and knocked again.

None bothered to reply.

The keeper carefully carried the cloth-covered parcel up the stairs and a secret knock announced its arrival.

"Who disturbs us?"

"The keeper of the chalice."

Simon Magus opened the door only wide enough to grab the cup. Then he slammed his door closed as well.

At last. If this worked — no, when this worked — he would be more powerful than the Pharaohs of Egypt. He unveiled the treasure — the very blood of the Christ — this was the moment he had waited a lifetime for.

He set it in a cradle suspended over the brew, completing each detail of the sacrifice exactly as he was commanded by his ghostly guide.

Dark Lord Sodalitus was well pleased watching the Magus perform everything to the letter. He would make a most useful puppet in time.



CHAPTER 19

THE BELLE OF THE BALL

What is his business here?

Skylock locked eyes on Satan without saying a word.

Faced with the devil on one side and Father's throne on the other, he knew one thing for sure, he had been summoned here for one reason only – Jasmine was in trouble. That dragon only ever came to accuse God's people.

"You boast of Jasmine as if she were something special. But she is feeble, press her and she will betray You," Satan said.

Someone needed to teach him better manners in Father's presence.

"Her devotion holds only because You hide her behind *his* blade." Satan's claw aimed straight at Skylock.

He clenched his jaw, trying to suffer in silence.

"Remove her guardian and let us see what faith remains."

"Go Satan, and do what you have determined. Skylock will not defend this blow. But you cannot have her life."

Skylock shot a desperate glance at Father.

Satan grinned. "It's too bad Skylock. I hear you're fond of the girl." He put his nostrils an inch from the guardian's. "Watch closely, this is going to hurt."

The devil left.

Skylock stood in silence.

Father didn't have to explain.

He didn't need to ask.

Twenty five years before he'd stood exactly here, his heart aching to defend her. From that day to this, he had done so with all his might. He was back again, his heart burning again. He could never have imagined how strong his bond with her would grow. Hearing that he could not defend her now—

This would be as much a test for him as it was for Jasmine.

Skylock bowed his knee. Only Father loved her more than he did, "Let all things be as You will them my God."

• • •

Jasmine had stepped through the door into what looked like a large closet, or a backstage dressing room, with rails of clothing on every side.

A peacock green, feathery, fluffy, something-or-other, peeled off its hanger near the door, demanding her attention.

"Exotic," she said under her breath.

Then she spotted an old cap. It made her think of her dad, which brought a smile, that was a first.

There was every imaginable outfit from tatty jeans and biker's leather-and-chains to cocktail dresses and nightgowns.

A red dress caught her attention.

She looked away. What else was there?

Look at these owl slippers, aren't they a hoot.

She wasn't so much interested in them as she was trying to ignore that dress.

It kept calling.

Fine then, but just a quick look.

Jasmine pulled the dress from the rail. It was exquisite. Of course she would never have admitted to it, but the sight thrilled her right down to her baby toe.

In the secret places of her heart, places even she didn't visit, she longed to be Cinderella and leave some man breathless at the sight of her. But it was an impossible hope. The thought brought nothing but a deep ache, so she left it buried. Longing for it would only be a torture.

She bit her lip. So why did she want to try that dress on quite so badly? She was going to regret this, wasn't she? She scanned the room just to be sure no eyes were lurking about. If she was the only person who ever saw this, how bad could it be?

Just as she put a toe in, it felt like someone was behind her. She spun round, nearly toppling off the leg she was hopping on.

Oh stop that Jasmine! Don't be silly, there's no one here. She dismissed the chill running down her spine and slipped it on. Her fingers fumbled with the zip. The sooner she could get into this silly thing, the sooner she could escape it again.

She took a deep breath.

Come on now, just try to be objective, okay?

She approached a mirror from a blind side, looking at anything but her reflection for the moment.

Jasmine squeezed her eyes shut.

You can do this.

Or could she?

She started from the bottom, where just her curled toes peeked out. Her eyes followed the fabric's soft, flowing lines to the perfect hug it gave her waist and a sweetheart neckline she had thought she hated, until this moment.

There was a pang in her heart as it dawned on her – she looked like Cinderella.

Her eyes were watery. She took a long blink and when she opened them, she saw a note stuck to the mirror's frame.

Dance with me.

She smiled. How would it feel if some man left a note like that wanting her? She did a twirl in the dress, imagining that moment.

"Will you dance with Me Jayjay?" she heard in her heart.

It knocked the wind clean out of her lungs.

Lord... do You... are You asking me?

Her heart was hammering, hoping as much to hear a 'yes' as

to find out she was only dreaming.

Everything inside of her came alive.

A door squeaked and she watched it slowly swing open, making a light clunk as it met the wall. She stalked it and peered through. There was no one on the other side, only a large room with heavy drapes on its rows of windows. A sweet melody filled the open spaces between.

It's a ballroom.

Her mouth went dry.

Just as quickly as the thrill had found her, the world closed in on her again. She couldn't dance. She didn't know how to, she didn't belong here. She couldn't find air. No one could want her. Why was she even in this silly dress?

I have to get out of here.

Her fingers were already tugging at the zip.

• • •

"Be here tomorrow night", he'd said. "Be ready," he'd said. Orgon was sick of waiting here like some, no-good lackey. It was too quiet. What took so bloody long anyway?

"Where is he?" A shrill voice pierced the silence.

"Right this way Mon-Fektus."

Rasqueet arrived with an even taller, gaunt figure. Orgon had heard of the infamous Mon-Fektus, if any of it could be believed. He wore a robe and held a whip, clasped behind his back as he approached.

"*This* is what I have to work with, this rag?" He eyed Orgon while his top lip curled up. Then he lifted one end of a bandage like it was contagious. "Is it even in functioning order?" His whip slapped against Orgon's wound.

He winced.

Mon-Fektus poked at him a few more times.

Do that again and I will end—

"I suppose this oozing catastrophe is the handiwork of that warlord I hear so much about. Our little prodigy has special

protection. Made a right mess of you, now didn't he?"

I'll make a mess of you. Orgon wanted to spit in his face.

Mon-Fektus pulled an orb out from under his robe. It was emerald and looked like a crystal ball, if crystal balls could hold bolts of lightning.

"Kneel," he commanded.

This will be the last time. Orgon sank to the floor.

"Orgon, fallen underlord of Hades, you are hereby ordered to destroy Jasmine Spencer. You have one chance, and one only, to end her miserable life. Use it well. Do you commit yourself to this pledge?"

"I do."

"I do master," Rasqueet made his first contribution.

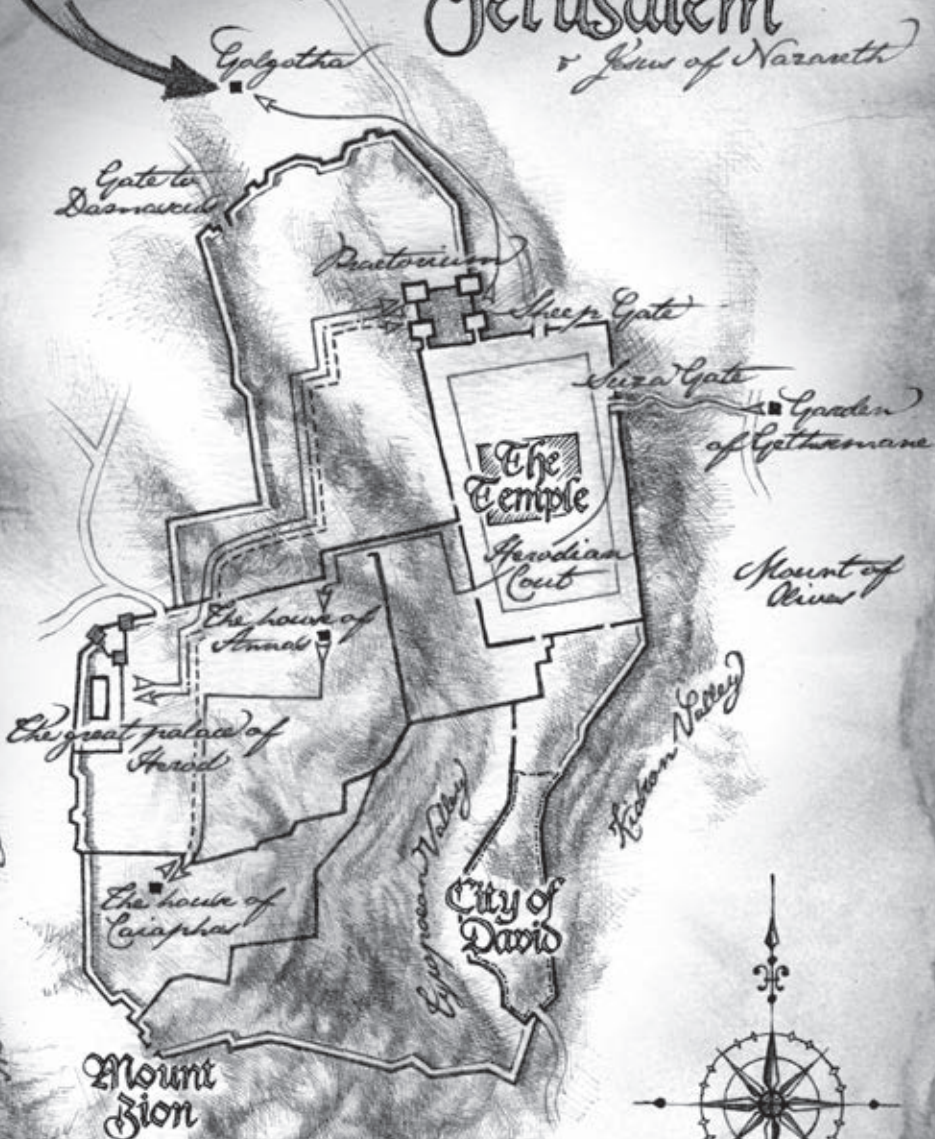
Orgon grit his teeth, "Yes *master*."

"Then receive the power of your dark overlords and do what you have pledged." With the orb in one hand, Mon-Fektus sank a talon from the other into Orgon's forehead. It burned like a hot coal searing into his hide.

His body began jolting as if he was having a seizure. The current surged through him like a hundred bolts of lightning, until—

Jerusalem

& Jews of Nazareth



The Great Pursuit



— JERUSALEM —

Jesus stumbled once more, landing on all fours with a heavy thud. He could only lift His eyes enough to see an unending path still ahead of Him.

He summoned every ounce of strength to force Himself to stand. His muscles refused, they had succumbed to the merciful hope of death. But it was too soon. He asked His limbs again, but they only quivered and collapsed under Him.

Father please, hold My life in this vessel till My work is done. His jaw clenched tight, His eyes took aim and wavering legs lifted Him like a newborn stag.

"I'm coming," He said to the goal set before Him, "I *am* coming."

Lancello put down his quill. Something was out of place. The atmosphere had changed, the presence of darkness was tangible.

He darted through the library door and found the closet inside – empty. He ran through the next door and found the ballroom – also empty. Jasmine was in trouble.



CHAPTER 21

FACING SHADOWS

Stinker was whistling.

“You notice nothin’ strange ‘bout Jasmine?” Satchwick asked him.

“Doesn’t know what you is talking about.”

Satchwick huffed. “Then I isn’t telling my secrets either.”

“You don’t got none.”

“How does you know?”

“Cause you has a hooter that doesn’t stop hooting is how. You can’t keep a secret if you can’t keep quiet.” He did stick his schnoz in the air and stomp on.

“Stinks, how can you walk in such deep ponderings without even thinking about it?”

“About what?”

“About them Pearlies.”

“You has got a real thing for them, doesn’t you? Smuggling one past Boss gone straight to your noggin’, has it?”

“How does you think they is made, Stinker?”

“That’s easy, they’s like eggs, they just pop out.”

“So then why is some so small and some so big then?”

“They just is.”

“You doesn’t think they is proof of people’s faith in God then? ‘Cause I did notice that when we pester people a lot, they makes more Pearlies.”

“You think you is very clever about all this, doesn’t you Satch?”

"I saw a broken Pearly once. You ever seen half a Pearly Stinks? On the inside they is made up of lots and lots of teeny lines, like layers they is."

"I knew that. So what?" Stinker kept whistling.

"So," Satchwick hopped in front of him to look him in the eyeballs, "I is thinking the big ones is big 'cause they has more layers than the little ones. They just takes more thing happening to collect all them layers. That's what I think."

"And then they pops out finished. It's what I said."

"You doesn't think it's strange that every time we lose a fight with one of God's people, a Faith Pearly pops out?"

"Why should I? 'Sides, it isn't *every* time."

"Exactly what I was thinking too. What if that *is* how them big Pearlies is being made. What if the ones that doesn't pop out is just getting bigger and bigger all the time? What if we is pestering them on the outside and all the while they is growing a Pearly on the inside?"

"What is you getting at Satch?"

"Maybe we is actually making people have faith more. Maybe *we* is making their Pearlies grow."

"Ridiculous."

"Think about it Stinks. If we doesn't fight them, then their Faith Pearlies grow without trouble. But if we does fight them, then the Pearlies grow even faster. So it doesn't matter what we does in the end Stinks. We always ends up losing."

"Now you listen here Satch, I has had enough of this. You know what a thumping we'll be in for if Boss find us out."

Satch nodded.

"Good, then sock it already. I isn't taking another step 'till you tell me where we is going with Jasmine's Pearly."

Satchwick did smile. "It's just over there," he pointed.

"What? The middle of nowhere?"

"I is a genius. Nobody does look for a Pearly in a place there's no people – pure genius."



Jasmine ran through the park, then down the narrow street until she escaped the village. Even then she didn't stop. She just kept on running.

The world was growing dim until a blaze of light streaked across the sky, followed by the threatening of thunder.

She crossed the open field and reached the river bank. The sky lit up again.

Jasmine didn't flinch.

She ploughed through the waters with the heavy dress dragging behind her. She wasn't about to let it stop her. On the far embankment the river loosed its grip and she flopped onto the rocks on the ridge.

She set off again and the clouds broke open, determined to stop her. Nothing was going to stop her. Jasmine slipped on a rock, but hardly cared she'd cut a knee. The ground was turning into pools of sludge, grappling to trip her heels and after the third stumble her speed was broken.

Pushing herself up from the mud, she saw some overhanging rocks just ahead. She crept under them for shelter.

"Jayjay, what are you running from?" she heard the question in her heart.

She winced. She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to feel this pain anymore. She crouched deeper in the darkness but it wasn't deep enough.

The rain was coming down in sheets. Another rod of fire stretched across the sky. It burned the sight of the village into her mind.

"Jayjay, what are you hiding from?"

"Just let me go," she scrambled out again.

Jasmine strained for speed, pouring all her strength into a desperate escape. Her lungs burned, her legs cramped up, but she wouldn't stop. Pain was her only ally now. She ran until she couldn't go on. But she wouldn't give in. She couldn't do this anymore.

A gorge in the mountain finally brought her to her end.

The rock-face set itself in front of her, an immovable foe, denying her hopes of escape. It had always been there – always.

Her muscles gave in and she slumped to her knees, defeated by it, defeated by life, defeated by everything.

Another bolt of lightning hit the mountain side. The sound was almost deafening.

“Here I am,” she said, daring it to aim this time.

“*Jayjay, what are you running from?*” Father’s question called out to her a third time.

Every muscle tensed. She coiled into a rigid knot, as a spasm expelled the truth from the deepest corners of her heart. “Me,” she screamed, with every ounce of strength making a final revolt. “Okay, I’m running from me.”

• • •

Orgon looked at his hands, electricity almost visibly surged through them. This was addictive. Life and death were at his mercy now. Since Mon-Fektus had touched him, he felt like a god walking the earth. He had plans for all this power.

He found Jasmine in a heap up in the mountains. She was mumbling something between her pathetic sobs. He didn’t care where her guardian was. Even Skylock couldn’t stop the beast he had just become.

His hatred of her boiled. Half of him wanted to torture her, mutilate her slowly, so that she suffered through every unbearable second – as he had suffered because of her – no, far, far worse. The other half was possessed by a madness that could never wait that long. She had to die, now.

The madness won. That power within him surged. The mass of darkness set itself on her. It had control. Orgon charged, straining for speed.

She looked straight at him, “Oh God help – *please* help!”



CHAPTER 22

ONE DARK NIGHT

“Where is Jasmine?”

Lancello heard the voice as a vice-grip crushed his shoulders. It was too late.

Skylock’s face was just inches away, “Where is she?”

“I couldn’t find her. I was looking, I heard a noise and her screams – but I was too late.”

“Tell me where she is brother,” he was shaken again.

“Over there,” he motioned to her body, lifeless on the ground. He had failed Skylock. No, he had failed Father. He was so sure she was on the mend and so intent on writing a masterpiece that he didn’t think–

What have you done Lancello?

How would he ever face Father after this?

“Oh Jasmine,” Skylock’s voice cracked through this thoughts. The agony in his tone was enough to stir a stone to tears.

I’m so sorry brother.

Skylock had Jasmine in his arms, his tears running down her cheek. Each one he tenderly wiped from her face.

She was gone.

Skylock kissed her on the forehead.

Lancello ached.

• • •

“This is it Stinks, you is gonna love it.” Satchwick lead the way. The cave was cold and mucky.

"Tell me that dripping isn't you leaking Satch. This is no time to be losing your nerve. Satch?"

"I isn't doing it."

"What is we doing in a cave anyways?"

"Want to know why we has to give them Pearlies back to Boss every time we find one Stinker?"

"You is gonna tell me isn't you, no matter what I say?"

He nodded. "It's so we never get to see this." Satchwick rubbed Jasmine's Pearly in his hands until it did start to glow like a glow-worm. He slowly opened his palms to show Stinker.

He did love this next part. Another Pearly nearby started to glow also. Like they was good friends, they always beat in time. Then another one did light up. After that they was all awake – his whole mountain of throbbing, happy Pearlies.

"I did bring you little guys a new friend," he smiled and put the Pearly on the heap.

Stinker's jaw was almost at the floor. "Is this every Pearly that ever hatched?"

"No Stinks, it's just the ones I collected."

"What? You? All of these?"

Satchwick nodded so much his lips flapped.

"Not possible."

"Well then how does you think I got such a heap?"

"Easy, you did steal them."

"From every person I has been riding since having them Pearlies was outlawed."

"What?"

"I always liked them Pearlies. And I only wanted one. And then there was another one. And then I didn't stop."

"Wait a minute. First of all, you mean to tell me that you has been collecting this lot for over two thousand years already?"

Satchwick nodded.

"And every person you ever rode hatched a Pearly?"

"Not every one, but I did try," he smiled.

A drop of sweat did run down Stinker's forehead. "You has got to be the nicest devil that ever there was."

Hey, hang on, "I isn't that nice. I made them suffer too. And 'sides, who cares if a Pearly or two hatches? They is just pretty things is all."

"And *that* one?" Stinker pointed to his hugest one.

"That's Vanessa."

"Great, now he names them too."

"No, it did come from a girl called Vanessa just 'fore she was—"

"Never mind. I doesn't wanna hear it. These things has gone to your head Satch. They has made you soft and I doesn't like it one bit."

"See what I has been trying to tell you all this time, Stinker. People is making far more Pearlies than we is ever supposed to know about."

"So what? It doesn't prove nothing."

"What if it does?"

"Like what?"

"Master Satan said we was to—"

"I told you Satch, stop—"

"—stop them Pearlies from ever being hatched."

"—talking about them forbidden things."

"Cause they is the reason—"

"You is just going to get us in a whole heap of trouble, is all."

"—that His Holiness does keep fighting us."

"What did you just call Him?"

Satchwick gulped. He was in trouble now.

"Did you just call God *Holy*?" Stinker did take a step closer. He looked cross.

Satchwick took a step back.

"Uh, I was saying them Pearlies is proof about Him, is all." One eyeball did twitch again.

Stinker kept coming.

"Think about it. Wasn't we meant to take over that day? Wasn't

we meant to win God for good?”

Stinker did have him up against the pile of Pearlies now.

“W-w-when,” gulp, “when we did have Jesus pinned to that cross, when we killed Him – wasn’t we meant to have won? Isn’t that what master said? God did lose because we killed His Son and people was gonna stop making Pearlies, ‘cause who was gonna still believe in a dead Saviour who couldn’t even save Himself – isn’t that what master said?”

Stinker’s nose hairs was tickling him. “We did kill Him. So we did win. The end.”

Satchwick was confused. He looked at his mountain of Pearlies. “We did?”

• • •

Jasmine’s head was hammering. She pushed herself upright. Why was she wet? What was she doing on a rock? The moment she remembered a shiver crawled down her spine.

What was that thing?

Was it gone?

It wanted to kill her – she could feel it – like a black mass of evil aimed straight at her. It charged, then there was fire, or an explosion or something and–

She couldn’t remember anything after that.

There was a noise behind her and she swung around.

It was just the wind.

Somehow she had to survive the night out here. She backed up until she felt the rocks against her back. Her eyes never left the entrance of the gorge.

Please, please, Father. Don’t let that thing come back. Please.

•

Lancello couldn’t live with himself. All he ever wanted was to make Father proud. All he ever searched for was ways to be better, to do better, to show better how much he loved God.

And now this.

Jasmine was dead.

He had robbed Skylock of the same thing he had lost, his way to bring Father pleasure.

The image of his brother with her body in his arms would probably haunt him forever.

You should be with him now, rather than off tending to your own wounds. He made his way back to the gorge.

He found Skylock staring at the rock floor. "Look at this," he pointed to where the stone looked charred with a peculiar green pattern.

"What is that?"

"Do you see the way the marks all come from this point?"

"Yes."

"This is where he stood when it went off."

"I'm sorry, when what went off?"

"I forget what they call it. It is a dirty trick they play to load a demon with unnatural levels of power to do a task. It's potent but highly unstable. You found Jasmine over there?"

"Yes, on that rock."

"And he was here when it erupted. He must have lost control of it too soon. Any closer and—" he looked over his shoulder.

Lancello followed his eyes. There was Jasmine – alive!

"She made it?" Lancello nearly choked out the words.

"Satan petitioned for an unanswered blow. But he wasn't allowed to kill her, though it sure looks like he tried to," Skylock studied the markings.

"Is that why you were called home?"

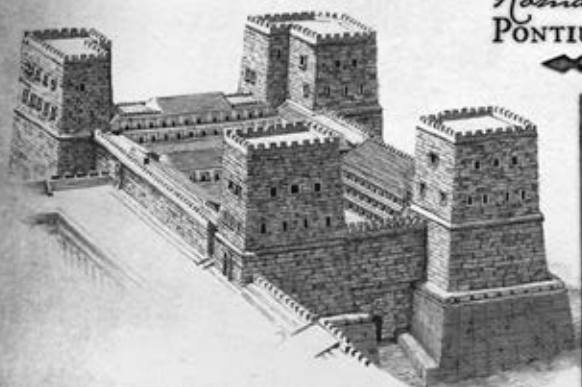
Skylock nodded.

Lancello felt all the tension drain from him. Who knew relief felt this good. *Thank You Father.*

Jerusalem

character map

Roman Political Rules
PONTIUS PILATE* *The Governor*



Annat *A Scribe*

MILITARY RANKS
 Titus *Roman General*

Quintillus *Centurion*

Roman Guards:

- Artorius
- Brutus
- Fabius
- Horatius
- Lucilius

Jewish Religious Rules
JOSEPH CALAPHAS* *Jewish High Priest*

..... Annas* *Former High Priest*

THE SANHEDRIN
Chief Priests:

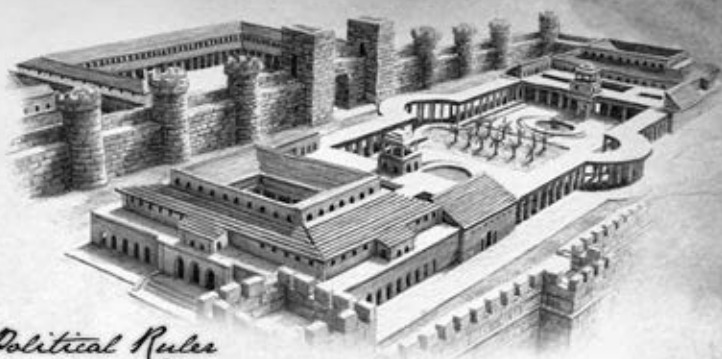
- Barak
- Josephus

Simon Magus* *A Sorcerer*
 Mashek *A Scribe*
 Inbal *A Levite*



..... *Two Witnesses against Jesus:*

- Dar of Joppa
- Timothy



Jewish Political Rules

HEROD THE TETRARCH* Ruler of Galilee

Ben-Ami Head of Herod's Servants

Manessa Servant Girl

The Son of God
JESUS CHRIST*

Simon the Cyrenian* Forced to Carry the Cross
Ruth Simon of Cyrene's Wife

Two Men Crucified with Jesus:

- Namor of Herodium Forgiven
- Bartholomew

Of the Twelve Disciples of Jesus:

- Simon Peter*
- Andrew* (Brother of Peter)
- John* (Son of Zebedee)
- James* (Brother of John)
- Judas Iscariot* (Betrayed)
- Phillip*
- Matthew*

Other Disciples of Jesus:

- Cleopas*
- Mary* (The Mother of Jesus)
- Mary Magdalene*

* Historical Characters



XXIII

Simon's Fate



— JERUSALEM —

Simon the Cyrenian was forced to lug the hefty cross up the infamous hill of the skull. He tried many times to subdue the reflex of his stomach muscles, disturbed by this endless trail of blood he had to follow.

He turned his head to plead to Jehovah, the God of his forefathers, but a strange darkness hung overhead. There were no clouds and yet the sun denied its light.

What if this tortured Man *was* the Messiah? What if they really were slaying their promised Deliverer? What if *he* was carrying the cross of the Christ?

Simon's steps faltered. He doubled over as his stomach contracted, but the cramp found nothing more to expel. *Oh God, have mercy on my soul.*

A soldier's whip gave an ear-splitting crack. "Get on with it. We haven't got all day."

He was set in step again to the tune of his task master.

Finally the way opened ahead of him into a large circular clearing at the top of the hill. He saw freedom and hurried the final paces. He dropped the cross with a hefty thud, then escaped to the edge of the crowd.

The guards were hoisting the second prisoner's cross up while

he screamed out every foul word he had collected in a lifetime.

Namor's beam landed in its final resting place and two guards moved in to set its base. He made one final assault, spitting on them and cussing out more vile words of hatred.

He hoped to incite them to anger. And it worked.

Horatius welcomed the challenge as he wiped the saliva from his cheek. He drew his sword ready to more than level the score. The fool had chosen the wrong guard to antagonize.

"Leave him," Quintillius commanded his man.

Horatius waved his blade at the villain and begrudgingly returned it to its sheath.

"You coward," Namor screamed, but his cross forced him to silent gasps for air.

...

"Aren't four lettered words the most satisfying sounds to roll off the tongue?" Dark Lord Vularisor, past master of the realms of debauchery and every sort of depraved pleasure had returned from king Herod. Now he was lounging back and picking gunk from his ear. He seemed quite unrattled by the fact that he had proved impotent against Jesus. "Take the word 'lust', for example," he flicked something from his talon and delved for more. "It feels as sensuous as silk."

The new extraction was suitably succulent and he wrapped the tip of his forked tongue around it. "Or even 'hate'. Now there's a word you could have an affair with."

"As if you'd know," Tyrufestax couldn't stomach Vularisor. All he ever felt was the intense urge to break every bone in his miserable, limp body. That was if he had any – a spine he certainly did not.

A vile gesture replied to Tyrufestax. Though Vularisor was suitably disgusted, he was never easily invoked. He far preferred drowning himself in pleasures than to waste his efforts on war.

"'Hell' has four letters too," Tyrufestax stomped off, bound for Golgotha to give Jesus more of exactly that.

...

Namor was exhausted from his efforts to breathe. There he hung like fools he'd mocked, always believing he could defy the hands of the gods. Now he was helpless under their scoffing gaze. How he wished that guard had had the gall to attack him and let him go out fighting like a lion in battle.

He watched the last of the fools to be executed that day. The guards had laid a heavy hand on Him, adding a ring of thorns on His head as a final insult. Namor enjoyed the sight.

What infamy had exacted that kind of reply? He knew all in Jerusalem who were criminal or rogue, but this Man he didn't know. The feast must have brought Him to the city.

He studied Him. What sort of man was He and how would such a man die? Just then he saw a sight so bizarre, so unexpected, he hardly knew if it should make him laugh or—

Jesus' swollen eyes tried to focus on the beam of wood beside Him. They couldn't. His entire body had surrendered to the torture. The last of His strength was spent on that merciless hill of Golgotha.

He dragged a trembling arm up from His side. It scraped over the dirt to reach for it but His quivering fingers fell short, finding only a palm full of dust.

He squeezed the dirt tight in His fist as determination coursed through Him again. Then lifting His leaden frame from the ground He clawed forward, an inch at a time.

His elbow buckled and He landed back in the dirt. It clung to the blood and sweat mingled on His cheek. Jesus forced His trembling arm rigid once more and the effort won Him a few short inches, but it was enough. His fingertips found the splintered beam and He collapsed onto the altar. "Here I am Father, take Me."

Horatius snorted. Dark Lord Tyrufestax was stoking a tempest within him, chanting, "Kill Him. Kill Him." He strode for the hammer and nails.

He dumped the metal implements next to Jesus and then ripped off His tattered clothing. The crowd gave out a moan at the sight. His ribs were exposed in three places and pieces of flesh hung like ribbons from His back.

Simon of Cyrene doubled over again, retching some imagined remnants of breakfast – repeatedly.

Horatius wrenched Jesus' wrist in place. The prisoner slammed into the rugged beam, mouth wide, searching for air that wouldn't come. He collected a spike and pounded it as if his own kin had suffered at the hands of this Man. Sweat splattered in every direction and a grunt escaped with each blow.

As he pounded again and again, the beam jarred under Jesus' back, driving splinters deeper into His wounds.

With one arm fixed, the soldier stood tall, admiring the work of his hands. His face was dripping as he plucked another peg from the ground to execute justice a second time.

The hammer fell with the satisfying clang of iron meeting iron. Inflicting pain was addictive.

Three soldiers watched him work – long after the deed was well enough done.

Quintillius put his hand on the hammer, "Enough."

He and Artorius finished the third nail without ceremony and prepared for the final hoist. With Lucilius in tow, they heaved Jesus in the air.

The cross thumped into its final resting place causing Jesus' arms to pull free of their sockets. His back burned like fire and the crowd's approving roars followed.

There the Lord hung over the City of Jerusalem, the City of God, the King crowned in mockery over the seat of David.

Lucilius laid claim to Jesus' clothes.

"That's mine," Horatius said.

"Let's see if you can take it off me, old man," the prankster challenged him.

"Put it down Lucilius, we will cast lots," Quintillius said.

Simon of Cyrene couldn't bear it. Three men hung there dying and those soldiers played games beneath it, as if it meant nothing.

He pushed his way through the spectators. He had to get away from this madness. His whole life had been turned on its head in just a few hours.

He staggered down the hill trying to understand how all this had happened. What was he going to tell his family? He was the one who had taught them to hope in that glorious day when their Messiah would come to save them. He showed them how to keep His laws and obey the commandments of Moses – and why? Because their Deliverer would surely come. God would not leave them without hope.

How was he ever going to tell them that he had helped their Roman oppressors nail Him to a cross?

He stumbled under the condemning weight of his thoughts. He had betrayed them. His whole family would be cursed under his guilt. There was only one thing left for him to do.

A man of trade stood by the cross. His habits after dark had soiled his conscience such that no offering would wash it away. This moment was a satisfying moral overhand. "Aha! You said You would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Well then, save Yourself and come down from that cross."

Jesus did nothing.

Just as I thought. There is no perfect prophet.

He felt better for the thought.

"Excuse me. Sorry, move aside please. Uh, uh, excuse me," Annat, the Roman scribe, tried to carve his way through the throng. He finally pushed through the front line and was greeted by his distorted reflection off Quintillius' breastplate. "It's from the governor," he delivered the board and fled.

Quintillius read it and laughed.

He lobbed it to Lucilius, who was only too happy for another moment in the spotlight.

He climbed a ladder and knocked the board onto Jesus' cross, for the world to read His judgment:

THIS IS JESUS OF NAZARETH, KING OF THE JEWS.

Quintillius looked at Jesus. "They say You saved others. Why can't you save Yourself? Come down from that cross and we will believe you."

Barak made a late arrival. He read the judgment against Jesus. *That's not right. It should say He calls Himself the King of the Jews, not that He is the King.* "He is no king. Let the Christ descend from the cross and show that He is."

Jesus' tongue was swollen, cemented to the roof of His mouth. His joints were dislocated and the remains of His back was being grated off by the raw beam every time He took a breath. But He heard the crowd. His eyes moved from one to the next. They had no idea how Father loved them. Jesus clenched His teeth against the pain and willed His arms even wider.

"If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us," Bartholomew said hanging on the cross beside Jesus.

Silence waited for Jesus to do something, anything.

No, He wasn't any kind of King, was He? Just another damned sinner like everyone else.

"He's going to speak," one said from the crowd.

"Shh!" another noticed the same.

Jesus pushed Himself up against the cross. The holes tore deeper into His hands and His heels rubbed raw against the wood. He gasped for a breath of air, as every sinew in his body pulled taut in the struggle.

He turned His face to Father, with a cry that echoed all the way to heaven's gates. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Namor hung on the cross beside Jesus, feeling his heart swell with rage. His whole life he had hated the world for its pretense and its lies, and men of religion were the worst of them.

There was no truth in their haughtiness. He had seen what was done behind closed doors. In the streets they would parade themselves as glorious vessels of God, bellowing damnation on the weak and hiding their own sins behind temple walls. All they sought was money and power and the name of God was no more to them than a useful whip.

But he would not be ruled as a fool. There was no goodness or mercy in this world. He was angry at what he had seen and made it his ambition to be the strongest of all men, so he could never be made their servant.

He would rule or die fighting but never, ever surrender. And yet here hung a Man they called the King of the Jews.

Was it possible? Could it be? Had this Jesus actually crawled onto His cross?

What sort of madness had the Man? What sense was there in willing His own torture? Why would He bear His accuser's wrath in complete silence? Why would He not answer the crowd's accusations when He had nothing left to lose? Why were even the priests here in their droves, more anxious than any to see Him die? And why – oh why – would a Man so tortured and torn to shreds do the unthinkable: even pray that His tormentors be forgiven! There was no sense to it, no sense at all. Not, unless... it was true.

Here was the sight Namor had believed, without a doubt, did not exist. Here was something pure in the midst of them, something real in a congregation of lies. Here at last, right in front of him, was something worth living for.

How dare they attack Jesus.

"Do you not even fear God since you are under the same condemnation?" he challenged Bartholomew, on the third cross. "We are killed justly and receive due reward for our deeds, but this Man has done nothing wrong."

He was furious with a kind of anger he had never known. Yes, he was a criminal and the worst of them. He had killed for

his place on this cross. But this Man, this King hanging beside Him, He didn't deserve to be cursed with thieves.

He turned to Jesus finding the gall to speak to Him. "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

Those were the words Jesus heard.

For the first time He turned to answer a cry.

He looked deep into Namor's unveiled heart and found a son longing to come back home. "I assure you, today you will be with Me in paradise."

...

Every eye in heaven was locked on the scene unfolding in Jerusalem, but Gabriel could not keep his off Father. There was so much pain in His expression. If Gabriel's own heart might not endure this day, what must Father be feeling?

"Gabriel."

The summons cut through his thoughts. He stepped forward, with every eye aimed at him. He was trembling by the time he got to the throne.

"My God?"

"What can I do for you My son?" Father asked.

The care in His tone shattered Gabriel's fragile nerves. How could Father ask him such a thing at such a time? "I cannot bear the sight of Your suffering. Is there no task You could give me, no work I may do to ease Your pain? Let me do something Father, *anything!*" He bowed his head and waited.

A breeze brushed over him from behind, as every brother's heart echoed his own and they each bowed low in turn.

"Oh My dear, dear sons," Father said, looking over the sea of them, "your love is more comfort than any act of service could be. I have no work for you now and I know you long to be with your Lord. You have leave to go."

.

All had gone to Jerusalem, all but Gabriel. There was a quiet around the throne now, like he had never known.

Heaven ached.

Anguish was etched in Father's eyes. He seemed far away for the first time ever.

"Hide yourself Gabriel," was all He said.

The archangel backed away, but heaven was not an easy place to hide. Soon the Mount began to vibrate, gently at first, but it grew more and more distinct. Then all of heaven began to dim as an eerie darkness set in around him.

Gabriel jolted when the first crack of thunder erupted. The sound tapered off into a deep rumble. A second later there was another, then another and another. Every new bolt sounded more potent than the last. The noise swelled causing the rocks to shake under it.

The violence of the storm rose like a volcano, summoning its full force. God was reaching into the distant stretches of time. He was collecting together all of His cause to anger, until even the very foundations of heaven were buckling under it.

...

Michael didn't know what he had expected, but it wasn't this. Truly men had tortured His Lord beyond recognition. He was one gaping wound from the crown piercing His head, all the way to the spike driven through His feet. No flesh had escaped their brutal hands. It felt like his own heart was hanging there with him, in shreds.

He heard the sound of distant thunder. Then a blackened ash started to fall like decayed snow. It clung to Jesus, a mantle smothering Him in the foul stench of every man's sins.

Jesus was wrapped in hopelessness. He completely lost sight of heaven, of everything. He was alone, abandoned and estranged from God, all in one awful moment.

The pain in His body surged, commanding every ounce of His attention and sapping out all courage. A heaviness bore down on His bones, determined to crush them and His arms shook violently under it. But the worst agony – by far – was that

rift in the center of His being. There was only a gaping wound where Father's love had always been.

"My God! My God! Why have You forsaken Me?"

• • •

God looked down on His own precious Son, wrapped in the guilt of all man's sin. It thrust a veil between Them, as if a wedge had been lodged in the fabric of Their love.

In that moment, Jesus personified the essence of all that God abhorred. Every man's sin was embodied in Him.

He became the thief who cared not to steal from the mouths of the starving, the rapist who preyed on the helpless, the father who molested his own innocent child. He became the hand whose blade offered a thousand victims on the altars of devils. He hung there guilty of the most monstrous, unthinkable, debased acts of history. His purity was smothered in all the vileness that thousands of years and billions of souls could contrive.

God Almighty fixed His eyes on the savage convolution of sin He'd cast upon the cross. The heavens shook, the earth shook — for God was angry!

He judged sin guilty.

His sentence — death.

The decree exploded from the throne, a bolt of lightning mixed with fire. All of it aimed at a Man, a single Man hanging on a cross outside Jerusalem.

It hit its mark.

There was a silence that followed.

The whole universe stood in breathless awe.

Only one voice dared to speak into that moment. Jesus spent His last breath ejecting a record into the chronicles of eternity. "It is finished."

Agony loosed its portrait on His face. His fists curled open and every muscle in His body sagged into passive consent. His head slumped and the last air escaped His chest.

Jesus, the Son of Man, the Son of God, was dead.

...

The Lord's cry echoed through the streets of Jerusalem and found a ghost of a man crouching in the shadows. Peter had seen the truth. There was no Peter-the-fearless, only a Peter who let them drag Jesus off to be killed. And Peter-the-sworn-faithful was nothing but a lie. He had denied His own Lord like a coward.

But Jesus had known all along, and that was the ache in his gut now. He didn't deserve to live. He was only an empty shell of a man, a shell that wished he had never been born.

...

Simon of Cyrene had followed the crimson trail back to the Praetorium and on toward the temple gates. All he could see was that gaze. The moment he looked into those eyes he should have known who that Man was. He should have refused to carry His cross, or defended Jesus, or done something.

He staggered up the temple stairs into the Herodian courtyard. A bizarre sight greeted him there.

The temple was a hive of activity so loud he could barely hear himself think. The Jews were celebrating the Passover and singing songs of praise.

Were they oblivious to the scene up on the hill? Didn't they know what had just happened?

He had to find a priest.

Simon pushed his way through the crowds to get nearer the temple. What hope was left for him? What sacrifice could possibly cleanse the guilt of the blood he now carried on his hands? Was there mercy for this?

The question haunted him as he bumped into a Rabbi and grabbed the man by the chest, shaking him forcefully. "What must I do? What must I do!"

The teacher stared back in blank shock.

Simon came to his senses and released him. He pressed on.

Just as he reached the Tabernacle's gates, the earth began to groan and the ground shuddered. Then lightning cracked its whip

across the sky and the temple mount was forcefully shaken.

Every man was thrown to the floor and screams of panic and cries for mercy cut through the air.

Simon fell to the ground and wrapped his arms over his head. God had come to destroy him. The Almighty's vengeance was loosed. He screamed out his own helpless cries, but the shuddering continued. All of Jerusalem's rocks were accusing him. El Shaddai wanted His revenge.

Simon begged the ground to swallow him, to hide him from God's wrath. But the moments just dragged on like hours, until finally the ground came to rest again.

He waited.

His panting churned up puffs of dust which he began to choke on. His ears were ringing as he lifted his head to see only a cloud of sand around him. It felt surreal, like a strange dream playing out in slow motion.

There was chaos as people screamed from shock, some staggered around aimlessly. Still others began searching for friends under the vast veil of powder.

When the dust settled, Jerusalem remembered again the Almighty One who had raised her up from nothing.

But Simon was glued to the sight set before him. A gaping fracture had cut the courtyard's floor in two and the fault led all the way into the Tabernacle.

Had God left the sanctuary?

Had God left them?

— MT. CARMEL —

Skylock had been watching a crease etch itself into Lancello's forehead as he wrote. "What is it brother?"

The scribe looked up. "My face give me away?"

Skylock nodded.

"It is an old habit that has served me ill."

"What are you writing about?"

Lancello flinched, "The story of our Lord's sacrifice for men."

Skylock could see he had touched a nerve.

Lancello rolled his scroll up and tucked it away.

He didn't press him.

"How is Jasmine? Any change?"

"She's asleep now," Skylock said.

"She is blessed to have you."

"Have you discovered why Father sent you here yet?"

"Oh yes indeed, that mystery I have solved. It seems I am here to make your job well-nigh impossible – and you will have noticed that I am very good at it too."

Skylock smiled, "This wasn't your fault."

Jasmine groaned.

Skylock's eyes swung to tend to her. "She'll be alright. She has to be."

•

She just couldn't sleep. When her eyes closed a wave of panic told her she wasn't safe. She had to keep watch.

Is it coming back?

Chills ran through her at the thought. She was scared like she had never been scared before.

Lord please, save me. But her prayers fell to the ground lifeless. God wasn't there.

Jasmine was utterly alone.

• • •

Satchwick stuck his head out the pile of Pearlies he was swimming in. He did spit one out so he could make a grin.

Stinker was looking at him, not so happy. Then he did see why. A watcher was next to him.

"Isn't this sweet. The two of you sitting on a nest egg are you?"

Satchwick did gulp.

"It seems you do have a talent after all, Satchwick," he had a Pearly right by his eyeball. "You inspire Faith Pearls of the finest quality."

"Yes master," he did agree and climbed out of the heap, "I has been busy with an experi—"

Stinker elbowed him hard.

The watcher lifted one eyebrow.

Satchwick tried to do that too but they did go up together.

"And I don't suppose you were ever hoping your Boss Orgon would discover this little experiment, were you?"

Satchwick did start to pee.

"And as for that preposterous theory of yours. Us, losing the war to God – simply nonsense."

Stinker did elbow him again.

"It's the sort of witless logic I expect from an imbecile. Maybe you should give up your bad habit of thinking altogether."

"That's what I has been say—"

"And *you* Gashwen," he did stare at Stinker now. "Do you expect me to believe that Satchwick was capable of *all* this without the aid of his trusted master-mind? Doubtful, very doubtful indeed."

And then the watcher did vanish.

"Stinker, what's an imbecile?"

Stinker did grab him by the throat and shook him hard. "You is, you nitwit."



CHAPTER 24

A LOVE LOST

Jasmine had never been so grateful to see the light of dawn. Her eyes ached from the night-long vigil. Her whole body was sore. But it was daylight and that was all she cared about.

That dark thing had left her defenseless. Why was she even alive? Jasmine took a deep breath trying to calm herself. She felt hollow inside. It was strange, like she was empty.

Lord? She looked for a sense of Him. *My God?*

There was nothing.

Jasmine swallowed hard.

There had been nothing from Him all night, even though she had cried to Him a thousand times.

No, it couldn't be. Was that the emptiness she felt? He just wasn't there. He was gone? Everything was gone? How could God be *gone*? Jasmine was left winded by the thought.

• • •

"Stinker, is you dead?" Satchwick couldn't really see him in that dark corner of the cell. They was chained around one leg.

"Well I isn't gonna get no deader, now is I?"

"So why is you so quiet then?"

"I is thinking of ways to throttle you when I get loose from here. How'd you get me in so much trouble anyway? I has to sit in this stinking dungeon just because of you."

"You'll never get loosed from here." The voice did come from another dark corner.

"Who said that?" Stinker said.

Nothing talked back.

"Hey, I did say, who-said-that?"

Satchwick began to shake. "Y-y-you think it's one of them s-s-spies Stinker? Never can see them watchers till it's too late."

"Now he catches on. I should've kept one of them Pearlies to plug your hooter with. From now I is doing the thinking, got it?"

"You have seen a Pearl of recent times?" The darkness asked.

"We haven't just seen—"

"What did I just say Satch? Sock it. Who's asking anyway?"

"Orbolitherith."

"Orba— what?"

"Maybe you should leave Orby-loitor-ator alone, Stinks."

A funny look came in Stinker's eye. "Satchwick is right, we hasn't just seen one Pearly, we has seen thousands. He practically makes them things himself."

"Stinks."

"Shut up Satch. He can do it all you know — you name the kind and he can make 'em — been doing it for centuries he has."

"Stinks, I don't think—" Satchwick saw a tiny white ball roll on the floor to him.

"Can you tell if this one is real?"

Satchwick stopped it with his big toe. He did hold the thing close to his eyeball. "I never seen one so small."

"Well?" Orby asked.

"Too small to be a real one," Stinker said. "And I wouldn't let him hold that for too long. He falls in love with them things."

"Only is one way to tell for sure," Satchwick rubbed the Pearlie between his fingers. It did begin to glow.

"Remarkable."

"Makes me miss 'em," Satchwick did love Pearlies.

"Don't say I didn't warn you. He's got a mushy spot for them. Gone straight to his head, all these Pearlies have. I keep telling him, don't go staring at them things too long, when they is shiny

they is dangerous. Go on Satch, give it back.”

Satchwick did. When it got into the darkness it did light Orby up just enough to see how big he was. Even Boss wasn’t so big.

• • •

Something is seriously wrong with you girl.

Jasmine felt strange, disconnected. It was like she’d been sucked into a new world as vast as the universe and void of everything. Only God could find her here, but He wasn’t looking.

She tried to push herself upright, just to see if she could, but heavy limbs kept tugging her back to the ground. Her breathing became an irregular pant. It was an effort to take in air.

She didn’t care if she ever got up again.

God was gone.

What was the point in anything else?

Father? She tried another hopeless prayer.

He wasn’t listening anymore.

She stared into nowhere. Her limbs were made of lead. Everything she lived for was gone.

Jasmine couldn’t even weep.

She simply existed, suspended in the emptiness between places.

It must have been hours that passed that way.

Jasmine tried to think but could not grasp at anything.

Come on girl, get up. The sun would set soon. It would be dark again. She wouldn’t make another night.

Where had the day gone? A paralysis had come over her whole being. Even thoughts struggled to compute.

She was still sitting against the same rock face, doing barely more than breathing and that was task enough.

You have to get up.

But even if she could, why would she want to? The world had nothing for her anymore.

You can’t do this.

She did anyway.



CHAPTER 25

THE KEEP

Father, I can't do this.

He didn't answer.

Jasmine surrendered to the numbness.

My Lord, I know You can hear me. I don't deserve You, I know I never have. You saved me Lord. I had nothing before You and You gave me everything. You were my everything.

A tear rolled down her cheek.

May I please ask one last mercy of You?

Silence.

If You are gone for good, she bit her lip, please take me home. I don't want this life without You.

The tear dropped off her chin and landed in the dust. She watched the sand suck it dry. Father wasn't going to answer that prayer.

The sun was setting.

She didn't care. That thing could have her now.

Jasmine had no reason to move, but she tried to anyway. For some reason her muscles responded and she made it to her feet. She escape the gorge through a channel in the rock only yards from where she had been. It led to softer slopes on the other side.

The incline was gentle, but intimidating. How would she ever get up there? She had no strength. Still one foot followed the other, in a battle against the harmless hill. She wanted to give up constantly, not sure what kept her going. How could such a simple

task be overwhelming?

She found the top – somehow.

•

Lancello watched his brother guide Jasmine's every step like a father would his newborn.

"Where are you taking her?"

"Father said she must reach the Keep before nightfall." Skylock's expression lit up for the first time in hours.

It was precious.

"Just a bit to the right little one. It isn't far now," he ushered her on. "There we go, that's it, you're doing so well."

Lancello saw the path leading to a cave carved from the mountainside. They weren't the first to find the place. A woolly blanket lay beside the ashes of another night's flame and more wood was piled against the inner wall.

"Here we are, precious one. Time to rest."

• • •

Jasmine sat mesmerized by the dancing flames. Crickets had begun their evening song and she was wrapped in a blanket from head toe. It was so much better than the night before.

She was sure now that something inside her had changed – permanently. She was different.

Just yesterday the world made sense to her, it was firm and sure, with stone under her feet and conviction in her heart. Black was black and white was white, and she knew the difference.

But now she didn't know anything. All of it was swept off like mist, as if it never existed. This new world was too big for her. So Jasmine stared into the fire until she dozed off.

•

Lancello looked back at his brother. Skylock's eyes had been fixed on the girl for hours.

"I must confess, your bond still puzzles me."

Skylock looked at him for the first time that night. "You still have not told me what you hope to find down here Lancello?"

"I would sooner spare you my true thoughts before I taint you with them."

"Is it a long story?"

"You have no idea."

"And here I thought you scribes liked long stories. We have all night you know."

"Are you always this persistent?"

"You have no idea," Skylock grinned.

Lancello took a deep breath, winning time to form his words. "I have studied more human lives than I care to count, all in the hopes of understanding what only ever eludes me. After all this time I am left with more questions than answers."

"Go on."

"I cannot find the slightest virtue which justifies our Lord's pains to save mankind. And yet He will not let them go. Why?

Why would He suffer under their hands and endure their rebuke, their mockery and their scorn? And that from frail *men*, creatures He could destroy with a single breath.

What power can men boast of? All they have has been given to them. Their life is a fragile, passing thing. What can they grasp at for security? Can they secure a tomorrow? They are at the mercy of every element – be it weather, or time, or decay – not even to speak of our foe who bends them at his every whim. Nothing is theirs to wield, but the meager works of their own hands and these only crumble at the slightest chance. They are captives of a mind so cramped it cannot begin to grasp the spheres beyond their own. Their greatest collective achievement is the destruction of the earth and you would imagine that somewhere between all this, they would come to realize their own insubstantiality. Yet even this escapes them.

Instead, they puff themselves up as if they held the stars in their place, or could call on the heavens to do their bidding. They laud one another and suppose themselves the masters of profound mysteries. So deep runs their malady that they would even wave

the finger at God.

Leave it to their wisdom and men would call an abomination a blessing, so long as it feeds some desire within them. They will swear by a truth today and let but one misfortune take them and it is cast aside for another tomorrow. They think God's gift a noose, there only to restrict their every base delight. They must surely be utterly blind, or else their delusion is complete."

Lancello clenched his teeth. "And I cannot come to terms with why our Lord would subject Himself to torture and mockery and pain – from creatures *like that*. Why let them treat Him like no more than the dirt under their feet? Why?"

He couldn't hide the tears anymore.

"And here I sit, with a scroll in my hand. Father has asked me the *one* thing I have no power to perform. *I* must write of His passion – when God knows the only passion I feel is for retribution. If I were God I would grind them back into the dust they are. It would be justice."

Skylock's eyes looked troubled. "All that would be left then is dust. Is that what you want?"

"Is that such a tragedy?"

XXVI

Dark Vengeance



HADES

— THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 30AD —

Twelve Prosmutus were chained to their stations. Around the mute trolls was only silence and the velvet darkness which shrouded everything. The complex network of tunnels weaving through all of Hades met here, in the Vestibule of Damnation.

It was a portal to the abyss, set right at the heart of their kingdom. Every detail was designed as a revolt against God and a keen reminder that no such rebellion was tolerated here.

The center of the floor had been consumed by the Fustilo, a hollow cone filled with a ravenous wind, spiraling down into darkness. All who lost their footing were sucked in and forgotten.

The Prosmutus stood around the lip of this predator, they were the mute monsters who kept these halls. Bound to their posts, they fed the insatiable appetite of the Fustilo day and night with the souls that found this place.

At the other end of their chains were the massive ring of pillars which framed the vestibule. They began at their base in perfect uniformity, until lifting off the ground each colossal cylinder would twist and writhe out of shape. They tried to reach for heaven. But the maligning forces of the Fustilo tugged them back down again, so that the eye which followed them was trapped in an endless cycle of empty promises and despair.

Seated on the backs of these bowing pillars and was a throne suspended high above the Fustilo, boasting power enough to escape damnation. On it sat Satan, the celestial savior of all who would procure some fashion of his 'salvation.'

From his seat went out the hypnotic tones of a bitter-sweet melody, sent to enchant all mankind. It offered reprieve from a ruthless God, hope to the unjustly damned, power to the self-lording and deserved reward to the strong.

Power and pleasure – these were his maxims. By them Satan lured the masses in from every side, drawn to his siren like a moth to a flame. The plan had worked for thousands of years and millions of souls.

Today it awaited their greatest trophy.

But for the Prosmutus there was not a trace of life or movement within Vestibule, nor had there been for hours. Every creature not cuffed to his post had gone to the surface to watch the Son of God die.

A stone fell from its perch and tumbled to the tunnel floor, breaking the silence. A few more followed it. Then the mountain of earth above them began to rouse from its sleep with a deep moan of displeasure.

The sounds of splitting rock rumbled through everything, amplified by the hollow cavities. Something was cutting its way toward them, coming ever closer, until the noise was deafening and the vestibule shook from its force.

It grew to a deafening, violent thunder and finally the dome topped cave burst open, unable to withstand it. The explosion let a shaft of light tear through the heart of the vestibule. It consumed everything in its path until it passed straight through and was swallowed into the mouth of the Fustilo below.

The doorway to death was left spewing out globs of molten rock, objecting to what it had just ingested. Around it, a decapitated ring of ruins was all that remained of the mighty circle of pillars that once held Satan's throne.

...

Gabriel had just come from the throne of God. His robe almost seemed to be set on fire, glowing with transparent flames, the way it always did when he had been in God's presence.

He walked ahead, like a torch to light their path. Behind him, Eli carried Jesus' Spirit. He was still trying to make sense of what they were doing in Hades. The mighty Michael was set at the rear, his sword drawn and every muscle vigilant to the shadows.

Their descent to the Katacombs was long, very long. The caverns of the sleeping dead were a well guarded fortress, set behind a series of strongholds. But Hades was a complex place. There were many passages and tunnels that made it a maze to penetrate. It also meant there were secret paths known only to a few. Father led Gabriel by one of these.

The walls of this endless passage were made of raw rock, bare, monotonous and unfriendly, chiseled by careless hands. The air, what little there was of it, was thick with fear. It was as if these creatures, these long-lost brothers, bore no resemblance to them anymore.

Occasionally they would pass a patch of crude graffiti scratched into the rock by frustrated claws. Every picture told the same story: They hated God, they hated heaven, they hated earth — they hated everything. It was like a disease destroying them on the inside, one that might never finish its work.

The tunnel crossed paths with another and Gabriel saw long desperate scratches, where some creature had been dragged against his will. It was disturbing, everything about this place spelled destruction, decay and death.

They reached a junction. Gabriel looked in each direction, then said, "This way." If not for his countenance, they would have been thrown into utter darkness.

They finally pressed through a narrow crevice, concealed behind a formation of rock. They pushed through and found themselves in a large cavity with gates set into one wall and two

broad tunnels feeding in.

"Beware brothers, we have company," Michael said, first to sense the horde's presence. "They are many."

The enormous iron doors ahead of them were bolted shut, and murmuring could be heard echoing in from somewhere, maybe everywhere. They were trapped.

...

Something was wrong.

Satan sank his claws into the rock-wall framing his chamber, his mind recounted the events of the past few hours. It was all too easy. Jesus hadn't resisted them. God had done nothing. Not even an angel had stood in their way.

Why?

What was he missing?

All in one horrific moment it dawned on him. Jesus might have died, but He hadn't sinned.

A chunk of rock crumbled in his grip.

...

Gabriel thumped on the door again.

They waited.

Evil was closing in on every side.

"They grow in number," Michael said. He scanned the darkness with his blade sweeping the air.

Gabriel thumped again.

"They tricked us," Eli said.

Michael drew his sword.

Just then the door screeched open in lethargic protest. A plume of stale smoke belched out from inside.

The first two archangels passed through, but Michael kept the door to hold back the skulking shadows.

Inside the atmosphere was suffocating. The cave's ceiling hung so low here it seemed to smother even the thought of air.

So these were the infamous Katacombs of Hades. Gabriel was unimpressed. It was only a long passage that trailed off into

endless darkness, lined with bolted doors on either side.

One stood open, waiting for them.

Gabriel took post there as Eli carried their Lord's Spirit inside. He was gone too long for Gabriel's liking. The stench of approaching demons was becoming ever stronger. Michael seemed uneasy too.

At the same moment Father spoke into all their spirits. Time was not on their side. They had to get out of there.

Eli reemerged from the chamber without his Lord. His face was the picture of agony. A part of his heart was left behind in there.

"Make haste brothers," Michael called. "We must go."

Gabriel was too wrapped in his pain to register the urgency. Michael took hold of him and charged for the gate.

XXVII

In Justice



HADES

— UNDER CHAINS OF DEATH —

Crudski could hear the hollow strides approaching down the long hall outside. The footsteps halted and the delivery was dumped. A screech of iron followed and when the door was finally open he shuffled over to investigate the new arrival.

"Well, well, what have we got here? Namor of Herodium, condemned to death by Roman crucifixion."

The iron made another protest followed by a deep thud. With the vault door sealed, the footsteps departed again.

"Blasphemy, theft, lawlessness, lust – oh look – brutality. What I wouldn't cussing give to ride one of these up there. Aha – murder."

"Putting of him four," Sooth said and scratched a mark into his colossal book.

"Chamber Four? What the cuss for?"

"Put four. Get on withing it."

Crudski grunted and hoisted their new prisoner up, dragging him over the jagged floor to the fourth chamber.

He hobbled back.

"Can't have any frikkin' fun around here. Be a nice cussing change – just work, work and more cussing work."

Sooth finished the new entry in his book, closed the parchment

he'd copied it from and tossed it on the heap behind him. Then he took a second parchment and all three his eyes studied it with a concentrated squint.

"Why do they get to murder on the cussing surface? Huh? What do we get? Cussing nothing. All we do is babysit the sleeping dead," Crudski said. "Who'd miss one of these idiots anyway? I cussing need something to sink my teeth into for a change, squeeze out cussing entrails an—"

He got distracted by Sooth who seemed to have nothing better to do than stare at a parchment. As if that wasn't what he did all day, every day. "What's your problem anyway?"

"Doesn't no sense."

"The only thing that doesn't cussing make any sense around here is you. Nothing you cussing say makes any cussing sense."

Sooth passed him the massive book of the dead.

"What the cuss. That *doesn't* make sense."

Namor of Herodium was the latest entry, a man crucified in Jerusalem at the Passover. Beside his name, under the 'Sins' column, was a long list of damning evidence to be used against him when the time came. But the name just before that was Jesus of Nazareth. Next to His name — nothing.

That was impossible.

"Nothing?" Crudski asked in disbelief.

"Nothing."

"Frikkin' nothing?"

"Nothing."

"You frikkin' telling me there's cussing *nothing*?"

"*Nothing*," Sooth screamed back.

Crudski flipped through the black book. "What about lust? You can't cussing tell me He didn't even cussing look at a girl, you know," his eyebrows wagged up and down.

Sooth's eyes just blinked randomly.

Crudski scanned through the list of names. Everyone had sins — lots of them. "What about stealing? Didn't He even take

a frikkin' loaf from some cussing old lady's oven or something? A swearword? Only one? What about a lie? You telling me He didn't cussing even tell one teeny-tiny little cussing white lie?"

Sooth handed him the scroll of accusations. The sum total of its findings recorded:

JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

"That's not a cussing sin. What are we supposed to do with that cussing thing?" He tossed it away.

There was another thump at the door.

"What now?" Crudski hobbled down the long passage of the prison muttering, "Work, work and more cussing work. I need a new job, on the surface thank you very much."

He arrived at the mammoth bolted door which guarded their prey. The lock was opened from the outside, the latch was loosed, then the hefty chain clattered to the ground. Finally, the crossbar was removed and a new item of stock could be delivered.

But not this time.

A bulky chain was tossed in front of him. "Seal it."

Crudski walked right up to the door and whispered, "Listen, uh, you know, this job isn't for the likes of us, hey? It's for these dimwits," he half motioned toward Sooth. "I really think my talents are wasted down here, you know."

The voice on the other side of the door laughed in mockery. "Just shut up and do your work."

The door slammed.

Crudski stood staring at the chain.

Seal it? What, alone? It took three cussing, archangels each the size of a frikkin' pyramid to get Jesus down here, but no, Crudski had to bind Jesus up — alone. He wasn't cussing Hercules.

"Idiots, all of them, just a bunch of idiots."

He took one end of the chain and dragged it down the long hall, then turned back for the other end of it, muttering as far as he went.

...

The dark lords of the Dominatrum Rex Ordo were all gathered in the hidden chamber of six thrones.

Sodalitus brought out their blasphemous scroll.

**Vet mesta bigdt aton magt.
Ontmeta forestes et a kragt.
En vjta kordes enden vor.
Ladon u ma peresten akor.**

“RexSux,” he began proceedings until all were passed.

Satan laid a book open on the onyx slab.

Tension mounted at the sight of the dreaded record. They hated God’s holy scriptures almost as much as they hated its Author. The book stank with the stale smell of all the defecation it had endured through countless blasphemous rituals. If only it was that easy to destroy.

Satan began to read the vow spoken over him at Eden, “You shall bruise His heel. He will crush your head.” He clenched his fist so tightly that his claws pierced his hide, extracting a dark, thickened puss, “Jesus died without sin.”

“You destroyed Him. He is dead. What can He do to you now?” Tyrufestax said.

“Then explain that mess in the Vestibule,” Vularisor said, more because he enjoyed stoking that brute than because he cared about the prophecy. “If He is so impotent, why is our master’s throne in shreds?”

Tyrufestax snorted.

Vularisor licked his lips like his brother was turning him on.

“You think this is a game?”

“I think you are too blunt to see the point. Our master is lord of the fallen.”

“And He has fallen,” Tyrufestax said.

“He is dead – it’s different. But then what would you know?”

The room’s tension grew thick.

"God will avenge His Son," Zerothustro said.

"Let Him try," Tyrufestax snarled. "We beat Him once, we will do worse this time."

"Oh great one," Sodalitus whispered with the caution of one disarming a bomb. "Did the prophecy not say He would be raised on the third day?"

Satan's pupils retracted into thin slits. The entire room turned cold. Icicles formed a crystal skin on the walls around them and all the flames were instantly snuffed out.

In the darkness, Sodalitus' eyes gleamed with devilry. "If He is not raised, how can He crush your head? If by sunset tomorrow Jesus is still in His tomb, the living Word will have denied Himself." He waved his hand over the crystal orbs and they ignited again, thawing the cavern's icy skin. "Think of it master. He has prophesied the one thing most utterly in our power to deny Him. We have Him limp and lifeless, under lock and chain. All we have to do is keep Him here and the Word of Truth will instantly be turned into a lie, and the prophecies gone with it."

The others began to grasp the gravity of his plan.

All eyes turned to their overlord.

Satan's nostrils flared, "See that His mutilated corpse rots until the end of time."

...

The Katacomb's vault door was pounded again. One of Sooth's eyes rolled to look at it, the other two still studying a manuscript. Another thump followed.

A second eye left its duty to peer down the passage for Crudski. He was still setting the bonds around Jesus' sarcophagus.

Sooth shuffled to the door and waited for it to open.

It screeched its usual, unheeded plea and revealed two towering Prosmutus. They had olive skin that pulled taut from their necks down to their belts. Their shoulders were enormous but hung as if they were weighed down by some immense weight, so that their hands hung just above the floor. Their legs were short

and bow shaped, with flat feet, only three toes a piece.

Without a word, they stomped down the long passage.

"The Son of God, stuck in a box," Cruḁski smirked. "Now You cussing know what it feels like, locked in a stinking hellhole, left to frikkin' rot. No glory down here, no cussing angels bowing and scraping at Your feet."

He was dancing around the stone casket, making vile gestures to it until a thought dawned. Then he drew close and fondled it with an intimate whisper, "I wonder what price I could get for You? Huh? You'd go for a frikkin' fortune."

He got lost imagining all the glory he could have for a trade like that. What wouldn't God give to get His precious Son back?

Two creatures entered the chamber.

He froze, "It's all good. Locked away nice and tight," he tapped the sarcophagus matter-of-factly.

They ignored him and set down with a solid thump, one at the head, the other at the foot of the stone box.

Cruḁski hobbled out grumbling, "So much for that frikkin' plan. Couldn't lift them off if I were Hercules."

He found two more of those mute monsters flanking the door. *What the cuss?*

Beyond them was an entire frikkin' battalion.

They couldn't be serious. There was hardly enough room to walk between all these overgrown oafs.

He wrestled his way back to his post, squeezing between alternating bulges of muscle and flab. Who's frikkin' genius plan was this anyway?

...

Three brothers walked the golden street side by side. Home had never seemed so beautiful as after witnessing the filth of Hades. But even so heaven was in mourning. A heavy cloud hung over the Mount. It left everything under a dim light as if dusk had fallen on them.

Every face recorded the same deep sorrow. Jesus was missing,

now not only from heaven but from the earth as well. In a way, each of their hearts had been buried with Him.

Gabriel's hand rolled into a clenched fist. Tense fingers released only to roll back in. He had imagined this day would be different somehow, "Do you think he could ever suffer enough for this?"

"You to seek revenge brother?" Michael was worried about him. Gabriel was by nature a gentle prince, always favoring compassion and care. But whatever he had seen in the Katacombs must have shaken him to the core, for he had not spoken since. Not until this.

"I seek justice."

Michael had never known him to be like this.

"Have you never wondered Michael, what of our Lord's pain? How is this fair to Him? Who is there to defend Him now? Where is justice when the Judge Himself is being wronged?"

Michael stopped to face him. "I know this pains you brother."

Gabriel managed a half smile. This day was such a concoction of feelings he hardly knew how to feel.

"Few have touched God's heart as deeply as you have Gabriel. Who can understand His passion better, or see more clearly that every creature that loves Him, loves Him less than He deserves? Not one of us is capable of returning as He gives. You must see that He will *never* receive *justice* — not as you mean it."

...

"Jesus is bound, the Katacombs are guarded, the gates are sealed, the breach is fortified and all are in position sovereign master. Hades is impenetrable," Dark Lord Tyrufestax reported. "No one enters or leaves until you say so."



CHAPTER 28

A PILGRIM'S REST

Jasmine's sleep had been uneasy but still she was thankful for the rest. She woke with the same emptiness in her heart though. She got up, folded the blanket and put it back when her toe kicked something. It was an old weathered book, long since relieved of its cover. She dusted it off.

The truth be told she had lost any urge to read anything, but for some reason she did anyway.

BE then not too deeply afflicted, dear pilgrim, when thou findest thy soul thus assaulted.

THY faculties will seem to thee dried up, thy understanding confused and thoughts clouded. Thou wilt find thy own will so faint it thinks the slightest task insurmountable. And still thy former strengths will be to thee as barren as the desert sand.

SO heavy will be the burden of thy loss, that thou wilt despair, not imagining how any remedy can come to thee. For it will seem that no hope remains of escaping such a dark and dreadful place.

THE aid thou hast formerly known from the hand of God may seem so far removed that thy soul will think He has cast it away from His sight, and there is no more a God to save thee.

IT will seem to thee that thou art alone in this world, deserted by all aid and caught in a place none can either reach nor understand.

Was it possible? No, it couldn't be. Her heart began to hammer. Had this book just found her – out here, in this nothingness?

THY soul will find its own wisdom sorely lacking, and like all others who have gone by this way before thee, thy mind will be caught in confusion and darkness. Greatly will thou desire a guide to instruct thee, thinking thou has fallen from the path of grace. And indeed thy soul would wrestle with what hope such a guide would offer thee, its message seeming so far removed from thy present state.

THOU wilt flee companionship, believing thy case too desperate for aid, thy disposition too dark for company and all thy faculties suspended. And so shalt thou remain in straits, shut up betwixt four walls.

THOUGH darkness will be all about thee and thy soul cannot progress one small step, nay, thou wilt find even thy thoughts will persuade thee that thou art loosing ground. Yet pacify thy troubled heart with this knowledge, that the Lord leads thee now by a secret way that thou knowest not, nor canst know as yet. And let this assurance secure thy heart.

Did she dare to believe this? What if it was a false hope, just a new card house that would come crashing down like the last. It didn't take a genius to figure out she was messed up. She wouldn't pretend otherwise.

Oh Father, is this how it ends?

Why didn't that thought even hurt? Was she that dead inside? She tried to feel something: regret, sadness, a longing for God – anything – but all feeling was gone. She was just numb.

Look at you Jasmine, you don't even love Him anymore.

That should have ached unimaginably, but it didn't.

Why not? What was she turning into? Could she be *that* cold?

God, did I ever really love you? Jasmine could hardly remember the feeling of longing for Him, it was almost lost to her.

How could she be so wretched?

You're just a phony, Jasmine, nothing more than a phony.

She hopped up wanting to escape, but she had nowhere to go. A few paces later and she took perch on a rock again.

The view told her she was a fair way further up the mountain than she'd expected. Just below her hung a blanket of clouds. It divided heaven from earth and heaven's side was breathtaking. The white tufts looked like the turf of another world, a carpet weaving its way between fiery peaks painted by the morning sun.

Jasmine cast an eye over her shoulder to the book.

Come on Jasmine, at least read the thing.

THY soul will earnestly desire to pursue God, though such will be its deadened state that it think no devotion remains within. This is but the fruit of this work.

YET thou wilt find in thyself a higher esteem of Him and a perfect loathing of thy own weaknesses and failings. In thy miserable state, wilt thy soul find itself unable to perform prayer devotion as it was formerly wont to with ease – though no sin can account for this. Thou wilt seek solitude and find thyself now stripped of all former understanding so that even conversation of such things will be entirely impossible. And so shall ye prefer silence.

Jasmine was running out of ways to convince herself that this book was not talking about her.

BUT fear not dear pilgrim, for so have traveled the souls of many of God's beloved. So did David travail in the drought of his soul and Jeremiah wrestle with the darkness. So too from this place, did Job cry out for the mercy of his God. And by that same mysterious wrestling did Jacob receive a new name.

FOR when that night so encompasses thy soul, thou wilt find in its midst the very mercies of God! But it is a treacherous path and many, finding the way too strange to their understanding, do turn back for familiar ground and so loose what gain God's grace would grant them.

FOR this is not the way of babes whom God nurtures with sweet milks, but is the path of proficients. These will find its bountiful benefits but such as do must first be tempered.

AND so then go all whom God wishes to promote on to deeper and richer things. He takes them by way of that path of darkness which brings all the soul's works to naught. For this is the cleansing fire which shines truth on the miseries of man and consumes the heart's own desires, bringing to submission that feeble understanding which so hinders in knowing His perfect beauty.

REST then, dear pilgrim, believing that thou art blessed to be so taken in by the grace of God, for by it He aims finally at thy profit though no such sight currently appears. That which most concerns thy heart now is to find thy rest in Him.

THINE own strength is not gain to thee now. Nay, what is being wrought in thee is done in secret by the hands of God. And what would thou doest to aid the Almighty, but the very works which He seeks to vanquish, the very same ill which is in need of a physician?

TO prove that such is thy need, will He render thee both dumb and lame, finding thyself impotent of all action and strength or even the desire of doing any good thing. And whenst thou art left so stripped and powerless wilt thy heart first see itself exposed.

IN such a state wilt thou feel thyself undone, past all remedy and thy woes too heavy to bear. Thou wilt despise thyself, believing such a creature unworthy of love and rightly disowned by the infinite good God. So dark will be thy state that at last thou wilt wish as Job did, that His mercy will bring of thee a swift end.

WHAT doest thou think dear soul, that thou canst add one single act of goodness to the works of an infinite God? Or that the God of heaven and earth hast need of thy assistance? Nay it is thine enemy that will thus persuade thee that without thine own successes there canst

be no advance from this place.

AND in this darkness where no comfort is found and no pleasure tasted does He work the greatest good in thine heart. For thy own workings suspended bring naught hindrance to His hand. Then is the soul most prepared for that glorious salvation which is to come upon it.

KNOW then most firmly dear soul, thou canst do nothing toward thine own remedy but to surrender to the expert hand of thy Saviour who alone can root out the source of all thy evil. Yea even to thine own dear heart.

• • •

“You collected how many?” Orby asked.

“Gazillions of them. I had big ones and littlely ones and every other kind you can think of. Not so small as yours though, but I bet I had every other kind, hey Stinks?”

Stinks just made a funny noise.

“That’s astounding. And to think I have been incarcerated for centuries on the grounds of a single Pearl. What retribution lays waiting for the likes of you two?”

“What? But I didn’t do nothing. We is here because of him.” Stinker did come for him, but his chain tripped him and he planted with his face in the dirt. His behind let off another long stink.

“Repulsive,” Orby said. “I understand the name now.”

“What’s so bad about them Pearlies anyway?” Satchwick asked. “They is just pretty things, doesn’t hurt anyone.”

“Exactly,” Stinker said. “Hurting people is what we is meant to do – ‘member?”

“You actually allowed humans to produce Pearls *intentionally*?”

“He did. I had nothing to do with it.”

“We is partners Stinks, you was there every time.”

“I hasn’t worked with you every time. Only the times when you messed up,” his eyes did get big. “I is gonna kill you Satch, kill you till you is deader than dead.”

“Can you actually get deader-an-dead hey Stinks?”

“Yes-you-can.”



CHAPTER 29

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Ahh! Jasmine hoofed the dirt in frustration. Who was she kidding? The book did offer hope, but to someone else, not her. Falling apart was the only thing she was capable of now.

Some faint, willful denial kept her wanting to believe God was busy with her. But she should have known better. Anyone with even half a grip on their sanity could see that He didn't need the likes of her.

It was useless trying to take a step forward if He wasn't in it. But waiting here was a waste of time and time was wearing her out. She looked for something to vent on and realized she'd wandered off into who-knew-the-heck-where?

A blanket of mist had crept up the mountain and swallowed the world around her. She couldn't see more than ten feet in any direction.

Excellent Jasmine, that's a glorious botch. And now you've got yourself lost as well. Just brilliant.

If she didn't laugh now she was going to cry.

Okay, don't stress. All you need to do is go back the way you came, simple. She did an about turn. It wasn't more than a few yards before she found herself at a ledge, with a sheer drop down into the white expanse.

"I guess *that's* not the way I came."

Now, left or right?

She guessed left and wandered a distance before she realized

she was headed into new territory. *Come on Jasmine.* Couldn't she even take a walk without messing it up?

Okay, plan B, look for footprints. Sure enough the rain soaked ground had recorded her steps. She followed them carefully.

It was going well enough, at least it was until the prints led into a rocky patch and she lost the trail. But she was headed downhill now, that had to be a good thing, right?

A loose rock, a missed step, a rush of adrenalin and her fingers snatched at the air for something to break her fall. She landed on the ground and saw the world spin in dizzying loops until she was launched into the air again. A blow to her hip told her when she found terra firma.

There she lay, dead still, until the pain set in.

• • •

"But isn't the world rampant with Untouchables then?"

"Huh?" Satchwick had never heard of them.

"Gone and lost his marbles already," Stinker said to Satch. "I told Orby not to stare at them Pearlies – but nobody listens to me."

"What's an Untouchable?" Satchwick asked.

"No point asking him. He's gone loopy, ditsy as a fruitcake."

"You mean to tell me you don't know?" Orby asked.

"No, we doesn't," Stinker said and stared at Orby.

"Go on Orby, tell us about it."

"We isn't going to go talking about that, okay Satch. They doesn't exist. It's forbidden talk."

"You don't ever want to talk about anything Stinks."

"Yes, 'cause there is eyes everywhere, watchers hiding behind every bush and their ears is always twitching."

"Not in these forgotten cavities. You're in the dungeon now, they don't trouble themselves with incarcerated dregs."

"How is we even supposed to know you isn't one?" Stinker was staring at Orby again.

"Oh that's priceless. You actually think *I'm*... oh that's too good." Orby did laugh from his belly.

"Hang on a minute. You knows what they are, doesn't you Stinks? That's why you doesn't want to talk about it."

"I doesn't know anything."

"Now there's a truth," Orby said.

Stinker stared at him again. It didn't look like he liked Orby very much.

"An Untouchable is a servant of God. A servant who has crossed over," Orby said, "to the other side. A tree in the plantation of the Lord."

"Doesn't exist."

"What you mean Orby?"

"Don't listen to him Satch. That story's just a myth. Someone cooked it up ages ago, okay. Nobody crosses over to nowhere like it's some mother planet thingy," Stinker wiggled his fingers. "There isn't no other side of nothing. Some even says that there is devils who disappeared forever – gone in a blink – just 'cause they talked about those things. God squashed 'em good."

"Am I to understand that talk of Untouchables is outlawed then?"

"U-huh," Satchwick nodded.

"When precisely did that happen?"

"I isn't counting," Stinker said. "Couple hundred years ago, maybe more."

"So you says if it's outlawed, then it proves that they doesn't exist?" Satchwick asked.

"Exactly."

"Just like them Pearlies then, hey Stinks?"

"No. Yes. No, Untouchables is just a story."

"Is 1585 the year, by chance?"

"What? Yes. That's what I said."

Orby took the glowing Pearlie and shined it on the wall of the cell. It had all sorts of marks in it.

"Have you been down here since *then*?" Stinker asked.

"Very perceptive odious one."

“What did you do that was so bad?”

“Ooh,” Satchwick said, “I know. You is one of them missing ones, isn’t you? You is.”

Orby did smile.

“I doesn’t want to hear another word,” Stinker did plug his ears shut.

“Actually the tale has everything to do with this Pearl and a Protestant Christian tortured for his faith back in 1548.”

“Not listening,” Stinker said and started to whistle.

Satchwick did like stories, ‘specially stories that did end with Pearlies.

XXX

A Wake



JERUSALEM

— IN THE FEAR OF PROPHECY —

“With all due respect governor, we cannot afford to take that chance.” Caiaphas could feel the beads of sweat running down his brow. He wasn’t getting anywhere. They had come this far, all they needed was one more piece of insurance. “That *deceiver* spread the story that He would rise again after three days.”

Pilate was not fooled by this nonsense. The high priest, along with his entire entourage, had the look of fear about them.

It seemed the Galilean’s strange power could torment them even from His grave. He watched Barak finger the seam of his robe nervously. They believed this fairy tale, didn’t they? It troubled them that this Jesus might well have been a prophet.

Even Pilate could not deny having been shaken by the Man who had not left his dreams since.

Caiaphas soldiered on, “Command your men to secure the tomb until the third day lest His disciples come and steal the body and spread a rumor that He has risen. That last deception will be far worse than the first one was.”

The high priest had a point. Jerusalem was rife with fanatical religionists looking for something to get worked up about. He could ill afford another public disturbance. “Very well then, you have your guard. Make His tomb as secure as you know how.”

• • •

Crudski's cheeks were impressed by the bulging frames of two enormous demons, one on either side of him. He had been sandwiched there for so long that he thought the indents would become permanent.

What, are they just planning to sit here? Doing nothing? Forever? What the cuss is everyone waiting around for? Don't they have any cussing work to do?

No, I'm the one that has to do all the cussing work, aren't I? And what's the frikkin' genius idea behind stuffing every single, cussing, stinking soldier of Hades into one frikkin' room?

Hello, has anyone actually used a cussing brain cell here?

"You uh, you work on the surface?" he tried to make a new contact, but only a muffled moan escaped.

Neither of the hulks that flanked him so much as grunted. Not in the mood to talk, now were they? Idiots probably didn't have a brain cell to share between them anyway.

Beyond the door someone squealed.

What was that howling sound?

Then a few thuds and more voices moaned. Soon it sounded like a war going on out there.

Crudski sank back between the bellies of two oafs. *Don't just sit there, cussing do something. What are you waiting for?*

The shrieks were close enough to curdle Crudski's blood already. He squirmed out from between the overgrown beasts and cowered in a crevice in the corner.

The door began to rock slowly, until a deep thump told of a demon hurled against it on the far side. It was the first of many. Hefty as it was, the door began to heave back and forth, groaning under the strain on its hinges.

The chaos of war began a regular beat and Crudski tried to block his ears. But he couldn't drown out the high pitched whistle of a wind piercing its way through tight seams and tiny crevices in the door. Even the smallest cracks gave way as it ripped open

a path. When it did, the vault door jerked so violently that its hinges began to pull free under the force.

"The gate. Hold the gate," someone commanded.

A row of demons launched themselves toward it and collided with the full force of their combined weight. But the wind poured in and swirled through the cavern, hurling the beasts into confusion. Demons started scampering over one another and beating each other down as they wrestled hysterically against a formless foe.

Moments later all came to rest and the only sound was the groans of the wounded.

Crudski had wedged himself head first into a crack in the wall. He wasn't about to come out.

The Wind had passed all of Hades defenses, pushed through the vault door and every bully Hades could pack into the Katacombs. Finally He came to rest upon the black sarcophagus, secured under heavy chains. None of its guards so much as noticed Him pour inside and alight upon the precious Christ.

As He did, Jesus took in a great gasp and the fullness of Life infused Him.

The rocks suddenly recognized the presence of their Maker and shuddered with joy. Then the mountains groaned, calling for His freedom. Even the onyx sarcophagus rebelled against His chains, exploding into a thousand shards of shrapnel.

With his cheeks sandwiched by rocks this time, Crudski could hardly miss it when it happened. The mountains around him had begun to vibrate. *What the cuss was that all about?*

Crudski pulled his head back and wedged it in again, to be sure he wasn't dreaming. There it was – the rocks were almost... singing? It was all too frikkin' weird.

A chamber door blew right off and demons poured out of it like cockroaches frantically scrambling for a hole. A toxic mixture of burning tar and sulfur filled the air and shrieks were ringing off the walls.

"Cuss, oh cussing cuss," Crudski thrashed his legs wildly,

trying to burrow deeper into his hideaway. He clamored for safety until the rocks turned on him too. They were glowing red as hot coals.

He peddled backwards to get away from it, gripping his face in agony, but that was worse. The cave was shimmering with a heat so intense he thought he'd stepped into a furnace. He was burning alive.

He dove back for the crevice.

That was when the blazing figure of a Man emerged from the chamber. His face was too bright to look at. It seemed to swallow everything in light. Even the stone walls melted to bow down as He passed.

The vault door was the last of death's chains to surrender. They burst open, unable to contain Him.

Jasmine appeared through the thick mist. She was trudging with the slow motions of a weather-worn traveler. Her scarlet dress wore clods of mud and a slither of cloth dragged behind. There was a gash in her right knee. She looked spent.

Her foot sank into a patch of soggy soil and she collapsed.

Lancello was too far to break her fall.

Then he heard her gentle sobs.

It stirred him.

"Shouldn't you do something?" He glanced for Skylock.

Skylock?

Where had he disappeared to now?

Lancello turned back to her. She looked so helpless, so fragile. He wanted to hold her. No, no that wouldn't do. Where was Skylock? He would know what to do.

Her shoulders began to jerk from the tears.

Lancello struggled to do nothing. He lifted a foot and then rooted it down again. Another glance around him yielded no help from his brother.

Come on Skylock, get back here.

Her tears ran down in a stream. She wasn't even trying to stop them. It hurt to watch.

He had to do something, so he wrapped his wings around her and just held her as she shook.

As he did, the strangest feeling came over him. Tears welled in his own eyes. He felt... what was that, confusion? There was a hopelessness too. What was no point to anything if God didn't want him close? A black hole was sucking him in.

Wait a moment – these were *her* emotions.

How could *he* be feeling them?

"Jasmine," he whispered and pulled her closer, "you aren't alone. You must know the Lord will never forsake you, never. The only reason I'm even here is because He–"

A pang told him how selfish he had been all this while. He was so focused on his own question he hadn't even thought of what she was going through. How difficult was all of this on her? Hadn't Father asked him to help her?

"You'll be alright little sister, just you hang in there."

"We have company," Skylock said behind him.

"Where did you go?"

Skylock stared at something with both hands at the ready.

Lancello followed his eyes. Was that Satan? His frame was only just visible through the mist.

Skylock unsheathed two long swords and stormed, both blades drawing arcing circles through the air.

The last glimpse Lancello had of them, Skylock looked like a terrier taking on an overgrown rottweiler.

They were lost to the mist. Only clangs and grunts gave Lancello any clue what was happening.

He planted himself squarely between Jasmine and the enemy.

Nothing was getting past him.

There was a disturbing growl and then silence.

Lancello poised himself.

Where are you Satan?

Nothing moved.

The silence was long – too long.

A figure appeared.

Lancello coiled with tension.

The frame became ever more familiar, with two blades hanging from his hands.

“Skylock,” Lancello eased. “What was that about?”

“He was just taking a chance.”

Skylock would do anything to defend Jasmine, wouldn’t he? And she would never even know it. He looked at his brother with new eyes – he truly had no thought for himself, only for her.

“You have no sword,” Skylock said.

“I had no use for one until now.”

“So what did you imagine you would do if he came for her?” Skylock sheathed a sword and flinched. He turned the other over to his brother. “What goes up will come down.”

Lancello saw a deep gash stretched across his brother’s shoulder, “You’re wounded.”

Skylock’s knees buckled under him.

“What must I do?”

But he collapsed before he could answer.



CHAPTER 31

A WAR OF WILLS

Lancello swooped in over the waterfall and aimed straight for the throne. Skylock hung limp in his arms. He was fading quickly. How long did they have? Lancello didn't know how to tend a wound. He had no idea the enemy's blows could tap an angel's strength so quickly. He didn't know much about the sharp-end of this war at all.

"Father, Skylock was—" Lancello swallowed his words. What was *he* doing here.

"Your brother doesn't look too good," Satan said.

How dare he wear a smirk?

His fist coiled, wanting to set in to him. But didn't his presence mean Jasmine was in trouble? He shot a glance to Father.

"Have you seen My servant Jasmine?" Father's question was aimed at the dragon.

The reptile's pupils contracted. "She believes You have abandoned her just like her human father did. Has she not lost faith already? She cannot so much as remember Your goodness."

"As you have forgotten it?" Father's voice cracked.

Did He still love Satan?

Lancello's head was spinning with that thought. But then he saw the only thing *more* startling than finding the accuser at the throne. Jasmine's spirit was there too.

She stumbled in, oblivious to where she was or surely even the thought would have given her strength.

Satan eyed her like a predator.

Jasmine huffed out a heavy breath. "Oh God, how could *You* ever want *me*? There is nothing here, nothing worth saving."

"Exactly," Satan said under his breath. "God doesn't need you. He doesn't love you because you aren't worth it."

How deluded had Satan become? He actually looked to believe his own lies.

Jasmine dropped to her knees, "My God, I know only *You* can save me now... But I wouldn't even dare to ask *You* to."

"Drown in despair you worthless—"

"Hold your tongue devil," Lancello had tolerated enough of this overgrown snake.

Satan looked amused.

Jasmine fell to her face. Was she giving up?

"Lord," she said, "if *You* did restore me, wouldn't I just find some new way to disappoint *You*? I know I would. I don't trust myself anymore. All my life the only thing I ever wanted was *You*. Now I'm scared to have *You* because... Oh Lord I don't want to let *You* down. I couldn't bear that. Please don't let me. Ruin me before *You* raise me up for *Your* harm."

"How the hell did she get *there*?" Satan's jaw clenched.

"I beg *You* my God, let me die before I bring *You* dishonor." Jasmine collapsed in surrender.

"Worthless wench was no good to me anyway," Satan spun on his heel and left.

Lancello couldn't help the grin smeared across his own face.

"He's a sore loser," he heard behind him.

Lancello swung round. "Skylock, you're healed," he pulled him into a thumping embrace.

"Easy brother."

Lancello released him. "How could— when— how did this happen? Jasmine, Satan, they were here, did you see that?"

Skylock laughed. "I saw it all."

Lancello threw his arms around him again. When last had he

felt so alive? Just then Father's warm presence flooded him. Oh how he had missed that. "Thank You for healing Skylock, Father. I didn't know what to do but bring him home."

"You did well Lancello."

An anxious thought gripped him. "I left Jasmine alone on the mountain."

"She is safe."

It surprised Lancello how much that news relieved him.

"You stood to defend her, My son. You were prepared to suffer wounds for her – thank you."

Lancello hadn't even realized it. But yes, in that moment he would have spent himself to guard her. Had he become so bound to the girl?

"My God?"

"What is it?"

"You know my thoughts Father." Lancello didn't know why he chose to defend Jasmine, but surely it was the same thing that drove Skylock to, or His Lord to defend mankind? He didn't understand but he was done questioning. All he longed for now was bring God honor, "I am Yours."

"You always have been, My son," Father smiled.

Lancello's heart thumped at those words.

"Stay on with Skylock. Jasmine will need you both where I have called her to."

Father brought out the most magnificent sword Lancello had ever seen. It had a butt of gold and a curved blade of transparent silver. Engraved upon it were a few short words written in the tongue of angels.

"Every guardian needs a sword," Father handed it to him.

Lancello didn't have words.

Father didn't need them.

He turned to Skylock and saw a grin holding a corner of his mouth. "Wait a minute. You knew all along didn't you?"

Skylock's grin found the other corner too.



CHAPTER 32

THE SECRET PLACE

Skylock was proud of Jasmine. Come to think of it, he was proud of his brother too.

They landed on the grassy slopes of the mountainside. She was ambling about, enjoying the scenery.

"It seems someone else is feeling better too," Lancello said.

"She needs to head that way," Skylock gently nudged her towards the old gate. It was only a ruin now but the path still peeped through the grass and she would follow it.

"Where does it lead?" Lancello asked.

"You'll see," Skylock kept his tone casual.

The brothers walked side by side. Lancello carried his weapon on his back, like an axe, because it was a heavy blade. He looked to be made of more steely stuff than before, though Skylock thought his gray eyes were never so warm.

A flurry of movement, an instinctive swing and a loud clang left both of them chuckling.

"Not bad," Skylock said, his weapon shielding Lancello's surprise attack. "We may make a guardian of you yet."

Lancello wore a gleam. "Then I have news for you, brother, I already am one."

Skylock sheathed his sword, "Almost. But first guardianship lesson one: Never turn your back on the enemy. He has more gall by the day."

"I see you teach from experience. And the second lesson?"

Skylock put a hand on Lancello's chest. "Trust this. No matter where you are or what you're facing, trust Father's voice in your heart."

The path gave way to bare rock and the wind came up. This place was always hostile to company. The stones here were steep and made of a jagged black onyx to dissuade the faint hearted from going any further. He kept a close eye on Jasmine.

She lost her footing.

He grabbed her.

"That was a close call," Lancello said.

He was right, it would be a long fall. He put her foot on firmer ground. "Take it easy little one, we have a ways to go yet."

"Where exactly are we going?"

Skylock grinned, "Elyon-Ayther*."

"Don't play with me brother."

Skylock knew he'd like that. "Well fellow guardian, are you coming or not?"

The climb became more difficult the higher they went. Even the wind didn't follow them this far. Jasmine's muscles began to twitch as she tired.

"She's not going to make it," Lancello said.

"Just over that ridge and we're there."

Skylock might have helped a bit at the end.

Jasmine crawled over the final ledge and collapsed.

A small flock of birds were startled off by their arrival.

"Sorry," she huffed, with only the strength to lift a finger in apology.

Skylock chuckled at her.

"Oh my word," Lancello was staring up at the giants with his jaw hanging open.

Skylock had long since forgotten the awe he felt the first time he saw this forest. It was all coming back to him in his brother's expression.

Jasmine had noticed it now too. He hung back, just enjoying

*Elyon-Ayther – See page 252

the sight of them overcome by it all.

"I knew these trees were ancient, but I had no idea they were anything near this size," Lancello hurdled a root that had carved its way through the rocky floor.

It felt like a cathedral under those gargantuan branches overhead. They formed a canopy as far as the eye could see.

Time seemed to stop here. This place was more like heaven than anything on earth. It was steady and unshakable and it always made him consciously aware of the marvel of his God.

"The planting of the Lord," Lancello tapped a trunk. "I never thought I'd see the likes of it. It's even more beautiful than I imagined."

"That is Jacob's tree," Skylock said, pointing to the one Lancello was resting against.

"Really?" he studied it up and down with new interest. "And the others?"

"That over there is Noah's, and Paul, Abraham, Isaiah. And you'll like this one, it is Enoch's."

Lancello stopped dead in his tracks. The trunk had three equal stems, platted together with hardly another branch extending from them. The bark was a smooth gray and there was no imperfection in sight.

"They are magnificent," Lancello said.

"Each in its own way."

"I have read so much about this place. The great Scroll tells how each tree is the fruit of a promise, birthed in the heart of God," Lancello went on. "That this peak lies near the gates of heaven and His goodness rains down on it constantly. It says there is a mystery which this forest reveals to the guardians who keep its secret. Is it true?"

"It is," Skylock said.

Jasmine was standing beside the only clearing in the canopy where the sun could flood in.

"Is that what I think it is?" Lancello approached it slowly,

knowing all too well what she was facing.

There was little to see but a chasm cut in the rock. The only remaining evidence of where that first majestic tree had stood, was the rock pool it had cut, springing up with living water.

"Jesus' tree," Lancello whispered, "I wish I could have seen it."

Of course he had seen it, but in heaven, at the base of the Mount where the River of Life flowed between its twin trunks. Elasshi-Tahem it was called, the Tree of Life, the tree of their Lord.

Lancello slowly sank to his knees as if an arrow had pierced him. He began to weep with great heaving breaths.

He was beginning to understand.

Now you truly are a guardian brother.

These were the precious birth pains they had all endured. The Lord's love would seep deeper and deeper, consuming him on the inside. Finally, it would turn into a jealous fire and *that* was the fearless strength they all bore.

Lancello stared into the heavens and cried, "Lord, it *can't* be for nothing, Jasmine *has* to know. It has to *change* her."

• • •

Orby was snoring.

Stinker was poking his stick at his big belly, like he wanted to pop it every time it swelled with air.

"Stinks, you think he really was talking crazy talk?"

He didn't say nothing.

"Stinks."

Orby snorted and Stinker jumped. "What is you asking me for? Orby knows everything doesn't he? It's just Orby this and Orby that."

Stinker did turn his back on Satchwick and huffed.

"We is gonna be down here forever Stinks. Cause Orby did say that—"

"Oh sock it."

Orby made another snore.

"You too Orba-whatever-the-heck-his-name-is. Why is he

sleeping? We doesn't need sleep."

"It's them Pearlies that got us in trouble. But I didn't know they was gonna, I swear I didn't."

"I did tell you."

"Orby says that if people makes one too many of them Pearlies, then they turns into Untouchables—"

"I doesn't care."

"They make them stronger and stronger until they just—"

"Does I look like I wants to hear this?"

"—disappear into smoke or something."

"Now that's just silly. Where did you ever hear of people just disappearing into a puff?"

"Not so silly Stinks. They cross over behind this mist into this other place and then they is just gone."

"Only a nitwit would fall for a story like that."

"Orby says that everybody that ever made a person get lost like that, they gets locked down here forever."

"So what of it?"

"Remember the mountain there by that Carmelton Village, the one that was always so full of mist?"

"Of course I does."

"What if Jasmine did run up there and never did come back again? What if she got lost Stinks? Then we is gonna be down here forever."



CHAPTER 33

DIVINE EXCHANGE

Sitting beside the rock pool that evening, the Lord had never seemed so big and Jasmine was never quite so small. It was in the stars that filled an endless sky, in the stillness of this place that hushed in His presence, and these enormous trees reminding her of His majesty. Her confusion fell into place. Even her weakness made sense here – it left God alone to be God.

Maybe it was the fact that she had fallen apart and yet this mountain, this forest, this rock pool all told her that God was still on the throne. It stood because He could never be shaken. It didn't matter that she was nothing because He was the great All in All.

There was a strange new hush inside of her. She had peace. The evening air was crisp and there was a light breeze against her skin. The leaves rustled under it and she almost thought she heard them whisper to her.

It was like a whole other world here, but it felt somehow familiar, almost like these trees were friends and this place was a haven. The 'real' world never felt this much like home.

Jasmine let her toe draw patterns in the water. Her mind drifted back to a stream and a flying fish. She thought of Josh again and their ridiculous fishing expedition. Their adventure might not have caught any fish, but it had reeled her heart in.

What had He said to her in the end?

"It's time to leave the darkness behind little one. You don't know the way out, but you don't need to – just follow Me – I Am the way."

Jasmine carefully pulled Rudolph's gift out from under her strap. The paper had gotten wet, probably more than once. It took trouble to peel it open without tearing it:

"I TOOK YOU FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH,
FROM ITS FARTHEST CORNERS I CALLED YOU.
I SAID, 'YOU ARE MY SERVANT,'
I HAVE CHOSEN YOU AND HAVE NOT REJECTED YOU.
SO DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU;
DO NOT BE DISMAYED, FOR I AM YOUR GOD.

The page became blurry. She wiped her tears.

I WILL STRENGTHEN YOU AND HELP YOU;
I WILL UPHOLD YOU WITH MY RIGHTEOUS RIGHT HAND."

God had her – that was all she needed to hear this whole time. He was here. He loved her.

He loved her.

"Thank You Lord," she whispered.

"You think I might have that dance after all?"

Jasmine startled.

A man was standing right in front of her, tall and strapping and strong. She knew those eyes.

"Josh?"

Yes, it was Josh, only He was so much more. His skin almost glowed and His hair seemed to be made of burning bronze. He was... breathtaking.

She wanted to melt under His gaze that seemed to be searching right through her deepest secrets. She felt intimately known, perfectly understood and endlessly loved, all in one moment.

Time seemed to stand still,

She didn't want it to tick on, not ever.

He cupped her face with one hand and swept the hair from her brow with the other. "There you are."

His smile made her want to laugh and cry as too much emotion

tried to escape all at once.

That was when she saw the hole that pierced right through His wrist. It hit her right in the gut, winding her.

No, this was all wrong! He was too beautiful to suffer so much pain. Why did *He* have to hurt?

With a single finger He gently tilted her face to meet His.

“I did it for you, little one. I’ve already bought your healing, won’t you let Me give it to you?”

Jasmine could barely breathe.

He stretched His hand out to her.

Warm tears streamed down her cheeks. All she could manage was a nod.

With that He scooped her into His arms and swirled her through the forest.

An hour later the Lord’s presence still lingered like a warm blanket wrapped all around her. Jasmine wiped her cheeks but she couldn’t keep them from spilling over. He was so tender, so gentle, so intimate and yet perfectly safe all at the same time.

She looked at the note again.

God was always reminding her that He was there.

He wanted her.

Only then did she notice her tiny seed again.

Gilbert* had sprouted. I fresh white stem was just visible on one side. Jasmine had to smile. “Aren’t you just the sweetest thing. Go on little guy, you’re free,” she dipped her hand in the rock-pool and released him to the water.

Jasmine watched him slowly drift away. She lay back and closed her eyes, feeling like she would never long for another thing again, not ever.

• • •

Lancello was sitting on a cliff-top overlooking a valley. Heaven didn’t have nights like these. Lancello hadn’t expected the earth to offer anything that impressed him, but this did.

*Gilbert – See page 253

“Do you mind the company?” Skylock came up behind.

“Please,” he gestured for him to sit.

Skylock made himself comfortable. The strain had finally lifted from his expression. At first sight the warlord could be mistaken for a blunt instrument, a powerful warrior with chiseled muscles and a fearless heart. But there was a depth in him. “A scribe and a warlord defending a girl. We are quite the peculiar pair aren’t we?”

“That would make a good book,” Skylock smiled. “And I know a guy who could write it.”

“I heard he retired,” Lancello teased him.

“You never really had the look of a scribe. This suits you better. But wasn’t it only two nights ago you asked why I would waste my talents on defending Jasmine?”

“That sounds about right. In my defense though, you have to remember that it was *before* I decided to waste mine on the same thing.”

Skylock laughed.

“How’s Jasmine?”

His brother looked off into the distance with an afterglow in his expression, “She’s home.”

“I owe you an apology brother. Watching you care for her pressed a nerve. I thought that having read the stories of so many human lives meant that I knew men. But when I actually experienced her heart—”

Skylock tapped him on the back, “I know.”

“I didn’t know hopelessness was quite so consuming. I didn’t realise that she could feel so far from God, so lost, so alone.”

“Darkness is deceptive.”

“Exactly. But all her pain wasn’t because of her struggle, it was because she feared disappointing Father. It was her love for Him...” he had to swallow his own emotions. “That’s what you were trying to tell me the other night, isn’t it?”

Skylock’s expression held all his own emotions.

“You were right, *that* is worth defending. It made me realise

that God was never looking for perfection from them, only love. I was measuring them with the wrong yardstick.”

As he said the words, they erupted in his heart. That was it! *That* was what Lancello had been searching for all this time. Behind all his questions, he wasn’t looking for the reason God loved men – he wanted to know why God loved *him*! He was trying to be faultless, to be worthy of Father’s love. All the while watching ungrateful, undeserving men lavished with it.

He pulled out his sword and read the inscription as the truth found home in his heart.

LOVE NEEDS NO REASON.

“Forgive me brother, I have to go,” he shot off.

Lancello was desperate to get home. All his speed couldn’t reach the throne fast enough. He finally knew what Father had wanted to show him all along.

He was loved, he was simply, unconditionally, endlessly loved.

When he found home, God’s arms were stretched open, waiting for him.

Trembling legs forgot all ceremony and he ran headlong into Father’s embrace.

“Oh My boy, I have missed you.” Father’s fingers dug into the angels’ back. He didn’t let go.

Lancello just wept and wept and wept.

XXXIV

Kingdom Come



— JERUSALEM —

Peter sat watching the others sleep wishing the hours would be as kind to him. He wasn't sure how he would get through another endless day, but night time was even worse.

He envied Judas. He'd killed himself for betraying Jesus, but Peter didn't have the courage for that. He was always so proud of the fact that he was better than the others. Now there was a strange comfort in just being counted as one of them.

Their plan was to hide until the Sabbath had passed, then at sunrise they would escape the city. All he waited for was the dawn. But it refused to come.

Jesus' mother had hardly slept and the other Mary, Magdalene, had sobbed herself to exhaustion before she got any. They were first to stir. A sadness hung on their faces as they scuttled to get ready and slip out the door, careful not to wake the others.

...

The first rays of morning light were greeted with a boot. "Hey, it's your watch."

A groan replied, but the soldier didn't budge.

Brutus prodded him again, "It's your watch Fabius."

The guard got to his feet and wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"What are we guarding a tomb for anyway? Those priests are more paranoid of that Man dead than alive."

"Orders are orders," Quintillus reminded him and rolled over.

"Shut up all of you. I'm dreaming of that looker we saw yesterday," Lucilius said lifting one eye half open.

"Dreaming is as close as you'll ever get," Fabius scoffed.

The other three started snoring – Fabius was jealous.

Guarding a blasted tomb, what next?

There was a sound of grinding sand and he swung round to catch the culprit, but there was no one. He eased.

The sound came again and Fabius was quicker on the draw this time round. Still there was nothing.

He studied the three sleeping guards to see if they were hiding some mischief. They were sound asleep. Was he imagining it?

The third time was so loud it woke the others and they launched to their feet, as one man.

"What was that?" Lucilius asked.

"There's something here," Fabius said, sounding spooked. He aimed his pilum straight at the tombstone.

Quintillus drew his sword and scanned the area, prodding at the odd bush.

The earth began to shudder and all four guards were rooted to the spot, like statues, gaping at a rock rolling itself away.

Then the unseen force materialized before their very eyes. It was an enormous figure, much like a man only he glowed with light and wore a robe of the purest white. His presence was so terrifying they fell to the ground like dead men.

"I'm not ready to die," Lucilius cried and bolted off.

He ran for the city as fast as his legs would carry him, but only a few strides later three soldiers overtook him from behind.

...

Two men walked down the Kidron valley toward the lower city of Jerusalem. They were merchants from Bethany on their way to the market.

"I still think the taxes are too high," one complained. "Do you know what I pay just to get this through the gates?" He motioned

to the stack of baskets he had loaded onto his pack mule.

"Wheat is no better," the other agreed. "It's been—" he swallowed his words. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes, it came from over here," he skipped over to investigate. "Look, it's cracked."

"We should get out of here."

"What if there's someone inside?"

"Don't be silly, of course there's someone inside. It's a tomb."

"Well I heard something."

"Which is exactly why we should be leaving."

A moment later another man came bounding down the hill, wearing nothing more than a loincloth. He was screaming for the world to hear, "I'm alive, I'm *alive*! Glory to God, I'm alive."

"What do you think *that* was?"

But his friend wasn't about to wait to find out, he was already trotting off.

...

"Where are the women?" John asked, rolling up his bed.

"They took spices to the tomb," Peter replied.

John looked at his friend through two aching eyeballs that begged for more sleep. Peter didn't look any better, actually he looked terrible, but then he never was one for half measures. "Did you get any rest?"

He shook his head.

"James and I will go to the market to get supplies for the trip," the ever practical Andrew suggested.

John looked at his brother earnestly, then back at Andrew, "Alright, but be careful."

"Peter, John, they've taken Him," Mary Magdalene stumbled in, out of breath. "They've taken the Lord from the tomb. I don't know where—" Peter shot out the door, "—they've got Him."

"If they catch you they'll kill you," Philip shouted after him.

John flew out the door too.

"Great, now they'll kill the both of them."

Mary darted out behind them as well.

"Doesn't anyone listen to sense anymore?"

John left a plume of dust when he skid to a halt outside the tomb. It was open. His heart hammered in his chest as he stooped to peer inside.

Peter came tearing past him without a thought. "Where is He?" his heavy panting bounced off the tomb's bare walls.

John cautiously ventured in behind him. A chill went down his spine. There was nothing left but grave clothes lying folded in a heap. How could Jesus be gone?

...

There was a thump at the door.

Barak looked up through his heavy brow. None of the other priests were in the least disturbed.

The door was thumped again.

"You should make a law against this," he said to Caiaphas while chewing his last mouthful. "Whatever is going on out there can surely wait until after breakfast."

The door was impatiently hammered a third time.

Barak pounded his knife down and shoved his heavy chair back. He pulled the door open, as the next thumping started. "What?"

"We come to speak with the high priest."

Barak was faced with four flushed Roman guards. He wiped his beard clean and begrudgingly let them in. He had lost his appetite anyway.

"You saw *what*?" Caiaphas asked moments later. He had turned white as a sheet.

Quintillius returned a cold stare. He didn't care much for repeating himself.

"It took eight men to roll that stone into place. No single man could push it open," Fabius added, to prove their point.

Mashek needed to take a seat at the news. It couldn't be happening. Jesus couldn't be alive again. "What have we done?" he groaned out the words as he buried his head in his hands.

Barak wasn't going to roll over that easily, "Do you expect us to believe that an angel rolled the stone away? And a *dead* Man walked out of His grave?"

Quintillius looked the skeptical clergyman up and down. Frankly, he hadn't expected much more from him.

Fabius didn't have the same tact, he strode in to meet the challenge head on, "Would we lie? Failing to complete our duty will cost our lives."

Quintillius slapped a hand against Fabius' breastplate to restrain him from another act he might regret.

"Are you saying the body is *missing*?" Caiaphas asked one more time.

Quintillius held his irritation back, even though he had been more than clear the first time. "No sir, not just a body, a living Man walked from that tomb."

There was a tangible tension between the camp of priests and that of the Roman guards.

"Wait here and let us take counsel on what is to be done."

...

Ruth packed the clothes in with a little more force than they deserved. She couldn't wait to get home where things were normal. Hopefully Simon would settle down in the beautiful forests of Cyrene. He was always such a sensible man, but since those Romans had made him carry the Prisoner's cross, he just wasn't himself. She was very worried about him.

Thump.

He stormed through the door and pressed it shut behind him, as if to keep his pursuer out.

"You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"I think I have. Yes I have. I *have* just seen a ghost."

Ruth's head gave a slight tilt. Was he losing his mind?

"He's alive. Oh glory to God in the highest, He's alive."

What on earth had gotten in to him? She dropped her chores and ran next door. "Tamara, come quickly."

"What is it?"

"Something's very wrong with my husband."

They barged through the door, almost together.

"Alexander. Rufus." Simon shouted as he danced through the house, his face beaming with glee.

The boys ran in on command.

"Glory to God. It's true, Jesus, the Nazarene. I met a man, at the gate, a dead man. He's alive. He's the Messiah, He's alive." Simon's words were coming out so thick and fast they hardly made a morsel of sense.

Ruth looked at her friend and whispered. "You see what I mean? I'm telling you the man is losing his mind."

"You *also* saw a dead man?" Tamara gasped.

"Yes, no, he was risen from the grave. I saw him alive."

Tamara dropped to her knees, "Oh blessed be the God of our fathers. He has sent His Deliverer to save us. The prophecy is fulfilled in our day. Surely we are a blessed people."

Ruth's eyes bounced between the two of them. "Can someone please tell me what's going on here?"

"Ruth, I heard the same story at the market this morning," Tamara's face was etched with awe. "Now it is confirmed a third time. There are people walking the streets of Jerusalem who were dead. They all testify that the Nazarene is the Christ, He is alive again. They are risen from their tombs by the power of God as a sign to us from heaven."

...

The priests gathered in an inner chamber.

"They haven't reported it to Pilate yet," Caiaphas noted. "We still have a chance to do something."

"We have to cover the evidence," Barak agreed, "re-seal the tomb before anyone sees it."

"If this news spreads, they will demand we open the grave to prove He is there." Mashek said.

"Do you offer a better plan?" Barak challenged him.

"Mashek is right. Even if we wanted to re-seal the tomb we'd need Pilate's signet ring to do it," Caiaphas said.

There was a knock on the door.

"What is it?" Barak bellowed.

The door opened slowly and Inbal wormed his way into their sacred chamber.

"What?" The baritone voice demanded again.

Inbal gave a lingering bow, "There is a man preaching in the temple, teacher. He is telling the crowd that he was raised from the dead." Inbal glanced around, "He says the Nazarene is alive, that He is the Messiah, the Christ."

"Then have him stoned."

"Barak," Caiaphas chastised him with only that word.

"But if the people believe we crucified their Messiah they will turn on us next. We have to stop this before the news spreads like a disease."

"It's too late for that. By now half the city will be on their way to the tomb," Mashek said.

"Then we have only one course left. We bribe the guards and tell them to say that His disciples stole Him while they slept last night. The people will believe that." Caiaphas was decided.

He walked to the coffers to collect a large sum of silver to secure the deal.

XXXV

A New Vision



— JERUSALEM —

Pilate sealed the parchment with his signet ring. He handed it back to the centurion, who saluted his governor one final time.

"You are dismissed. Titus, escort him to the armory," Pilate waved them off.

Quintillius did an about turn and marched out the hall, shadowed by his old friend.

Pilate had considered having Quintillius and his guards killed for their negligence at the tomb of the Jew, but enough blood had been shed. Frankly he only wanted to see the end of the matter.

He walked up a tower of the Praetorium, another one of the great Herod's ambitious building projects. That man had single handedly made Jerusalem an impressive mark, even on Rome's far reaching maps.

Pilate came to a balcony which looked out over the city. Thousands of travelers were leaving after the Passover, as they did every year. The coffers were full and Jerusalem was restored to peace again. Yes, its governor had governed well.

Life went on, though one Jew had fallen, what difference did His death make? Had this Jesus' Truth left any legacy? No. Yet a hundred years after Herod's death men would still marvel at the glory of Jerusalem. When all was said and done there was only

one truth that stood the test of time and that was power.

It had proven itself once again.

...

Quintillius placed his pilum in a line with all the other spears. Then he slipped the leather belt and sheath over his head. He stared at his sword for a long while before he handed it to Titus.

"You are a good soldier," his friend said.

Quintillius said nothing. He unbuckled his breastplate. This was his life, it was all he knew, but that life was over.

"Leave your uniform at the barracks," Titus realized he could not change his mind.

Quintillius saluted and marched out the door. Fabius stood there waiting for him. They locked eyes in silence, as both men's characters came to bear. The centurion strode on.

After removing all the remnants of Rome from his person, he was left with nothing but the clothes he arrived with years before and a bag of money he'd never had.

He felt naked without so much as a weapon on him. He would have to learn the ways of civilian armor now. He pulled a coin from the leather pouch. There was a lot more where this came from, enough to return to Rome and start a whole new life.

He turned the coin round in his hand, *Rector Orbis*, it said.

Quintillius had dedicated his entire life to serving Caesar, the master of the world. Could that justify his killing the King of the Jews? Probably. The thought drew a smirk.

What about the Son of God? Could serving Caesar justify Quintillius' killing Him?

That Nazarene had asked too many searching questions of his soul, questions he had no answers to and he had to find some. So the ex-centurion tucked the money into his belt and left the Praetorium as a pilgrim searching for the meaning of life.

...

"So who took the Lord's body then?" Cleopas asked his friend, still wrestling with all that had happened that morning.

"Maybe grave robbers heard He was a King and thought they'd find treasure buried with Him? I don't know. Mary Magdalene hasn't changed her story about seeing Him alive."

"Who?"

"The Lord."

"You're kidding."

"She wasn't."

"Do you believe her?"

"I wish I could Cleopas, but I think she only saw what she wanted to see," Peter kicked the dirt, "what we all wanted to see."

"What are you two talking about that has you so upset?" A stranger invited himself into their company.

Peter eyeballed him.

"You don't know?" Cleopas asked in disbelief. "Have you just arrived in Jerusalem? Haven't you heard what's happened here in the last few days?"

"What happened?"

"Jesus of Nazareth happened," Cleopas informed him, as if the entire world knew who that was.

Apparently not everyone did.

"He was a mighty prophet of God. He proved it in everything He said and did. There were miracles, every day. Lame men walked, the blind saw, lepers were healed and He taught us the scriptures like He *knew* them." Cleopas groped at the air with his hands, trying to catch words that would explain his meaning.

"The chief priests conspired against Him, they gave Him to the Romans to be condemned to death." Peter spoke with a vacant stare, reliving the horror of that night. "Then He was crucified."

There was an awful finality in that word. A finality that had shattered his whole world.

"We were hoping He was the one who would redeem Israel." Cleopas looked at their new companion, the man was thoroughly Jewish, he would understand.

"Now this morning," Peter tried to form cohesive thoughts.

"Today is the third day and this morning, some women who are with us came and told us His tomb was empty. They went out with spices very early and came running back saying they'd seen angels and one swears she even saw *Him* – alive." He reined in his skepticism to add, "I ran to the tomb too. It was empty."

"We don't know who took Him."

"Oh you are foolish and slow to believe in the words of the prophets," the man chastised them.

Cleopas was taken aback. He shot a glance at Peter who looked no less surprised by this stranger's words.

"Was the Messiah not *meant* to suffer these things before entering His glory?"

Who was this man to tell *them* about Jesus? Peter had spent three years following Him. If this man had seen what they did to Jesus he would never have the gall to say it was *meant* to happen.

"From the beginning God has promised to send His Redeemer. Was it not all foretold in the scriptures so that you may believe? For they all point to the Saviour who would come to fulfill that which was prepared for Him."

Peter studied him with suspicion. Was he a teacher, a scribe maybe? He wasn't dressed like one.

"A spotless lamb was sacrificed to free the children of Israel from bondage to Egypt. So why are you surprised that the Lamb of God came to shed His blood at the Passover to free you? Is the feast not a foreshadow of that which was to come?"

Peter's eyes were glued to him.

"Have you not read how the people will plot a vain thing and the kings and rulers of the world will take council against God and His Messiah? Do the scriptures not even tell you how He should suffer under their hands?"

It was King David who saw his Lord upon the cross and told how His hands and feet would be pierced, how the people would ridicule and mock Him. He saw His bones pulled from their joints, staring at Him through open wounds. David even

saw lots cast for His clothing and that finally He would cry out, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'

Peter could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"The prophet Isaiah also saw the suffering of his Lord and how He would give His back to those who struck Him and His cheeks to those who plucked His beard. That He would give no answer to His accusers and His visage would be marred more than any man."

The memory came back to Peter with an awful stab of guilt. He had watched them beating his Lord and done nothing. No worse, he had betrayed Him just then.

Jesus felt compassion on Peter's pain, so He softened His words when He continued. "Should you be surprised that He was conspired against and put to death? No. But you were made to stumble that the words of the prophet might be fulfilled, 'I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.'"

That didn't ease Peter's guilt. He clenched his jaw, fighting off the loathing he wished he could vent on himself.

Jesus walked in silence for a while, giving his friend chance to collect himself in the presence of a supposed stranger.

"These things had to come to pass, for the purposes of God and the hope of men. The Messiah's suffering was not for Himself. He bore your sins, your griefs and your sorrows and nailed them to that cross."

Peter's lip quivered. He looked the other way when the sun began to glisten off his cheeks.

Jesus spoke even more gently to him. "Do not doubt that He has been raised from the dead. Even that was foretold. If He laid down His life for you in death, would He not surely take it up again, to give you new life?"

Silence buried Jesus' words into Peter's heart. He tried his best not to show it and smeared the evidence from his cheeks.

"Stay with us," Cleopas almost begged as they reached the village. His heart was burning to hear more of this Man's

wisdom. "It's late already and we have place for a friend."

Jesus accepted the invitation and followed the two men down a rocky path, to the humble dwelling Cleopas called home.

Peter dipped his feet in the basin at the door, as memories of Jesus flooded over him. Everything reminded him of his Lord now – the fish on the table, the bread, the water – all of it.

Their new Friend even took up the bread the way the Lord used to, and He blessed it and broke it and gave a piece to each of them.

Then suddenly it dawned on Peter, this Man *was* Jesus!

The next second the bread landed on the table with a light thump and rocked a few times before it came to a halt.

Peter and Cleopas sat gaping at absolutely nothing.

Jesus had simply vanished.

...

"They're saying we did it," Philemon reported to the other disciples. He put the loaves of bread on the table and unwrapped the cloth he wore for a disguise.

"We did what?" James asked, locking the door behind him.

"It's all around town. The guards say they fell asleep in the middle of the night and we snuck in and stole His body."

"That's ridiculous, we were all here last night."

"And you actually think they'll believe us?" Philemon shot James a sobering stare.

"Who would believe their story? How could we have rolled that huge stone away without making any noise?" Matthew pointed out. "Besides that, how would they know it was *us*, if they were *sleeping*?"

John looked at Mary Magdalene. She was convinced of her story, but no one else seemed to be.

"You're all missing the point: they killed Him. They're just looking for an excuse to do the same to us," Philemon brought home the reality. "We have to leave town tonight. We can't stay any longer."

"But what about the Lord's body? We can't—"

A forceful hand banged on the door.

Everyone froze.

"Did someone follow you?" John asked Philemon.

His petrified eyes said he didn't know.

The door was banged again.

"Open up it's me, Peter."

James glanced at his brother.

"Open up," and the door shook on its hinges again.

"That's him alright," John nodded.

James lifted the latch and Simon Peter squeezed through the gap, with eyes as wide as saucers. "I've seen Him, I just saw Jesus."

Cleopas was next through the door.

"What do you mean, did you find His body?" John asked.

"No He's alive again. He spoke with us on the road to Emmaus... ."

Jesus stood in the room with them, unseen by His disciples. He watched Peter recount the story without even stopping to breathe. Cleopas was standing beside, nodding vigorously. Oh what a precious sight their excitement was.

"He broke the bread and we just *knew* it was Him."

The others passed glances of skepticism.

"What made you so sure?" Matthew asked.

John had been wrestling with Mary's story. What should he make of Peter's now too? Maybe the trauma was too much for them. "If He just disappeared, maybe it was only a vision you saw," he suggested, wanting to let his friend down easily.

"Or an angel," James suggested.

"Did he ever actually *say* he was the Lord?" Matthew asked.

"No, He didn't," Peter answered hesitantly. The possibility hadn't even occurred to him before.

"You have to believe it," Mary pleaded, "It's what I've been trying to tell you all. He *is* alive."

"Peace be with you," Jesus said, revealing Himself.

The disciples were gripped with terror. They staggered backward instinctively, trying to get away from the apparition. The huddle pressed itself tight into the far corner.

John hid behind James, his knuckles white as he clung to him. Matthew wanted to speak, but his jaw was clenched in a spasm.

Peter got out a whisper, "Lord, is it You?"

"Why are you troubled? Why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at My hands and My feet. It is I Myself. Touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as I have."

"Teacher?" Peter's eyes lit up, "it is You."



CHAPTER 36

THE WAY BACK HOME

It was near sunset when Jasmine arrived at the outskirts of the village. A pebbled path led her to an enormous Oak tree, with its trunk wrapped in a gown of delicate, pink-white Jasmine blossoms. She might have been biased but they were her favorites.

"I hope I'm not disturbing."

She'd know that voice anywhere. "Rudolph," she swung round and threw her arms around him.

"There, there, easy on an old man," he chuckled.

She set him free.

"Why, you look just like a princess."

She gave him a twirl.

His eyes smiled back, warm as they had ever been. "You couldn't be more beautiful."

"I'm so sorry for running off, I—"

"Now, now my dear, there's no need for that. The important thing is that you're alright."

"I think I just might be."

His eyes alone told her how welcome that news was. "Come along dear, let's get you warm and fed. Nan will be thrilled to see you in one piece." He offered her his elbow.

She tucked in.

The path lead them through a large metal gate. Her fingers dug into his arm a little. Wasn't it the gate he'd showed her when she first arrived?

"You remember it, do you?"

So it was the same one. "But hasn't it been locked up for years?"

"Indeed my dear, but we had a thunderstorm through here a couple nights ago – popped that chain right off. It seems miracles do still happen," he tapped her hand.

An hour later, Jasmine emerged from a bath brimming to her ears with bubbles. A clean change of clothes was waiting for her on the bed. The table held a mug of steaming coffee and a bright pink rose, freshly picked from the garden.

These are truly special people Lord.

She hugged the mug as she stepped into the lounge, feeling like a new person.

"I believe that's Rummy," Nan placed her cards on the table.

Rudolph flopped his hand down. "Well if it gets any worse I may as well take up poker."

"Don't kid yourself Mr. Fraser, you'd be far worse at that," Nan chuckled. "Your face does not lie."

"Three straight games," Rudolph moaned.

Jasmine giggled at the two of them.

"Ah, there you are. Feeling a little better now treasure?"

"Yes, thank you Nan. And I can't tell you how good this cup of coffee is."

"Well if you're ready, then so is dinner."

There was a knock on the door.

Jasmine hopped over to find Tricia's beaming smile.

"Jaz, you *are* back," she gave her a tight squeeze. "I was so worried about you."

"Thanks Trish," Jasmine couldn't wipe the smile off her face. She'd only met these people a few days before and already they were family.

"Nan that smells delicious," Tricia said as she bounded in.

"Hot chocolate anyone?" Nan arrived from the kitchen and

two seconds later her tray had been vandalized.

Jasmine sipped at her mug slowly, wishing the night wouldn't pass so quickly. They'd had a hearty meal, a decadent toffee pudding and now the deck of cards was out again. It was the fourth round of Bluff already.

"Two queens," Rudolph set the cards face down on the table.

Nan eyed him carefully, but only the corner of her mouth gave away her discovery.

"That has to be a bluff," Tricia said, "look your eyes are doing that thing again." She flipped over a card to produce the evidence. "Rudolph, you are the worst liar in the whole world."

"My dear, you may well be right." He swept all the table's cards his way and packed them neatly into his hand, as if he thought they belonged there.

"King," Nan said and discarded her final card.

All eyes studied her.

"You're bluffing," Jasmine said. She had to be. What were the odds of her winning again?

She flipped the card over.

"How does she do that?" Tricia flopped her hand on the table in defeat.

"Too good for me too," Jasmine threw hers in as well.

"Ladies, I believe we have met our match," Rudolph collected the seven cards that were not already in his hand.

There was a silence in the room.

He cleared his throat, "Well my dear, would you care to join me for a walk?"

Somehow Jasmine just knew that this was goodbye.

She got up and pushed in her chair, then she looked at Nan. "I don't know how to say thank you."

Nan came over and gave her the warmest hug. "Just you take better care of yourself, you hear?"

Tricia put her arms around the both of them. "We'll miss you."

When they were done Jasmine looked at Rudolph. Suddenly

goodbye became just too hard to say.

“Shall we?” he opened the door for her.

She nodded and took a last glance at the others.

“Bless you dear,” Nan said.

“Bye Jaz,” Tricia waved.

“Ladies,” Rudolph tipped his imaginary hat and closed the door behind them.

Jasmine looked to the stars and blinked a few times.

“My dear, do you know what the name Jasmine means?” Rudolph asked as they walked.

“I heard it was nothing but the name of a flower.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. But not just any flower, one that has the tiniest of blossoms and yet a most potent perfume. Did you know that its fragrance is strongest at night?”

“No I didn’t.”

“It isn’t your name for nothing. You may be one small voice but when things grow darkest around you, that is when you will touch the most lives. Never forget that.”

“Okay,” Jasmine stored the treasure in her heart.

They reached the old park at the center of Carmelton. Rudolph sat on his usual bench, with a grunt of protesting joints.

“I’m going back into that Hall, aren’t I?”

“Only when you feel quite ready.”

Jasmine stared at the doors, wondering if she could get through this without weeping.

“Rudolph.”

“Yes dear?”

She summoned her courage, “I will never forget you.”

His brows curled to frame a smile.

She hopped up and headed for the hall, before good-bye got any harder to say.

•

Beyond the doors was the library Jasmine loved so well. Tonight it was dimly lit by a few old fashioned torches on each

of its pillars. Beautiful as the sight was, it took a few moments for Jasmine's heart to leave Rudolph and join her there.

She ambled around the room with her fingers gently running over the book's spines. There was a contentment now she didn't feel the last time she was here.

On full circle she found Lancello seated just the way he was the day she'd met him. But he looked different.

"I'm so glad to see you," she beamed.

"I could not let you leave without at least opening the door for you, now could I?"

Jasmine smiled from somewhere deep on the inside.

His eyes were warmer than she remembered them. And he felt more familiar than before.

"You found the way," he said.

"I discovered just how small and weak I really am," she smiled, "and that it didn't matter to Him one bit."

"You don't need to be strong because He is."

Jasmine felt understood. "It's going to be hard to leave this place, these people, that mountain... you."

She saw his smile for the first time. It lit up his whole face and softened it at the same time. "You won't have to."

She let out a contented sigh. "Thank you Lancello, for everything."

He walked to a door and turned the knob, "It's time, Jasmine, time to help others find their way back home."

XXXVII

Hope of Glory



— JERUSALEM —

There, Peter finally got the last knot out of the old rope. His hands were not used to this kind of labor anymore. It had been a long night on the sea and they hadn't caught a thing. But it didn't matter, it just felt good to be out here in the open air, the sound of lapping water under the boat and the familiar rocking rhythm of his old friend.

Fishing was what he knew. It was strange how all those years ago he'd had an intense longing for some greater purpose in life, like he was destined for more than this. But now he knew that he was no more than a humble fisherman.

"Do you have anything to eat?" a voice called out to them from the shore.

Thomas spotted the man only a hundred yards off. "No," he called back.

"Not likely to catch anything either," James mumbled half asleep, drawing patterns in the water.

"Cast your net in on the right side and you will find some."

Thomas was amused by the comment.

"It's worth a go," James was only too glad for something to do. His brother helped him haul the net in and they cast on the other side. The weights slowly sank out of sight, again.

Peter was first to feel the boat tip, but it didn't sway back.

"It's hooked on something," James said, tugging on the line.

Peter jumped in to help, tipping the boat heavily, so Thomas dove to the other side to counter balance it. The other four heaved on the line and won only couple of feet before the water erupted in a wild spray. James and John burst out in their Zebedee laugh. The net was so full the ropes threatened to tear under the tension.

It hit John between the eyes, "It's the Lord."

Peter's heart skipped a beat. Yes it was, it had to be.

He dropped the net, spun round and one leap later, plunged headlong into the water.

He went under with an inglorious splash.

Oh Peter – dear old Peter, Jesus watched him.

For all his thrashing about he only just beat the boat to shore, but nothing could wipe the smile off his face.

The rest of the disciples tugged their over-fed net ashore, all beaming from ear to ear.

Jesus enjoyed their excitement. "Bring some of the fish you have caught and have breakfast."

They found a fire burning with some fish and bread already laid on it and added their share to the meal.

It was only Peter who had a shadow hanging over him. He could not shake off the guilt of his betrayal. Jesus knew He could not leave them until that wound was healed. So after breakfast, He turned to Simon Peter.

"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?"

Peter felt the stab of his careless words that fateful night. He had sworn so many things he now wished he could take back. He dropped his eyes to the sand in shame.

"Yes Lord," he whispered, "You know that I love You." Maybe he didn't love the way he had hoped he would, the way he had even vowed he did – but he would always love Him.

"Feed My lambs," Jesus' voice was tender.

Peter's eyes glanced up, searching His with an infant hope.

"Simon, son of Jonah," Jesus held his gaze and the moment

seemed to drag on forever, "do you love Me?"

A crease crumpled the disciple's brow as his doubts taunted him again. Could Jesus see through his facade? Maybe he was lying, yet he was so sure he loved Him. "Yes Lord, You know that I love You."

"Tend My sheep," Jesus said with steady words.

Peter tried to make sense of the message.

"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"

Hearing it a third time Peter's heart sank to his heels. He would do anything to prove that he loved his Lord, but how could he prove it now, after what he'd done?

"Lord," the word came out as a plea, "You know *all* things, surely You *know* that I love You."

"Feed My sheep," Jesus said a third time. Then He looked into Peter's burdened heart. "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you got up and went wherever you wished. But when you are old, someone else will carry you to where you do not wish."

Hope dawned in Peter's eyes. He understood.

Yes, there could still be a day – one glorious, precious day – when all he had dreamed of would come true. What Peter could never do in his own strength, he would finally accomplish by God's. He would be faithful to his Lord, even unto death.



CHAPTER 38

MARKS OF THE MOUNTAIN

Maybe it was the ray of sunshine aimed straight at her eyeball, or the kitchen counter which had molded to her head that woke her. Either way, Jasmine felt awful. Her neck was stiff and her back ached from being hunched over all night. She'd obviously fallen asleep in the kitchen.

She stood up, maybe too quickly, so she propped herself against the slab for just a moment to clear the fog in her head.

I need a cup of coffee – a strong one.

She shuffled to the kettle.

Thoughts of Nan's hot chocolate came to mind when she poured the mug. It wasn't only Nan, but Rudolph and Trish and a whole flood of memories of Carmelton found her all at once.

What was that, a dream?

The parcel was still on the kitchen counter, untouched. Everything was exactly the same as the day before, except she wasn't. There was a bizarre feeling like she was dreaming now and Carmelton was the real world.

With mug in hand, she flopped onto the couch giving the caffeine a chance to kick in.

Maybe the feeling would wear off.

It didn't.

Jasmine decided to read a book. That would get her mind off things. She loved books. She pulled a thin volume from her shelf and tried not to think of the library. She made another turn

around the kettle and tried not to think of Nan. As she sank into the couch with the book in one hand and her second cup in the other, she tried not to think of Rudolph.

Jasmine smiled and flipped the first few pages open.

THERE is something common to all the great men of God who have walked this earth, something so striking it can hardly be missed. Maybe it was best captured in the words of Job, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

THE apostle Paul put it thus, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

THAT same heart was heard echoed in the Garden of Gethsemane, when our champion and Lord prayed, "Not My will Father, but Yours be done."

THESE are the cries of those who have seen something beyond what this world can offer. It has captivated their hearts and they will not relinquish it, not at any cost.

IT must be a marvel to the world that has not glimpsed what they have seen. What could make men offer themselves like martyrs?

THE apostle Paul spoke of this mystery often and all through history, God's faithful ones have known the same secret. They have walked the earth with a piece of heaven in their hearts. They have seen a glimpse of God Himself!

HOW many of us long for the same? Should we not also be willing to seek out the infinite blessing of knowing Him?

TOO few of us pursue this kind of faith. The cross we cling to brings blessing and joy and fortune and favor, but it asks nothing of us. The thorns, the nails and the scars all belong solely to our Saviour and we gladly watch Him bear it in our stead.

WE claim for ourselves the fruit of His cross, but will we not allow Him to shape it in us?

IT was our faithful brother Tozer, who once said:

“We expect to enter the everlasting kingdom of our Father and to sit down around the table of sages, saints and martyrs; and through the grace of God, maybe we shall; yes, maybe we shall. But for the most of us it could prove at first an embarrassing experience. Ours might be the silence of the untried soldier in the presence of the battle-hardened heroes who have fought the fight and won the victory and who have scars to prove that they were present when the battle was joined.

The devil, things and people being what they are, it is necessary for God to use the hammer, the file and the furnace in His holy work of preparing a saint for true sainthood. It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply. Without doubt we of this generation have become too soft to scale great spiritual heights.” *

DO we dare to offer ourselves for the sake of a God who has offered Himself for us? What sort of trade are our unholy fetters for the matchless prize of being joined to Him?

LET us cast off the chains of this world and pursue Him on whichever path leads finally to His greatest glory – and praise God for every blessing and every burden along that holy way!

Jasmine put the book down. It was only making her miss Carmelton even more. She wanted to be back in that dream, not here. She looked at the parcel on the counter, then took a seat beside it. There was no fear in opening it anymore.

Fancy that.

She smiled as she lifted the pen out and for the first time she noticed a Jasmine blossom near the base of the ebony barrel.

Rudolph's words came to mind, "*Jasmine, you may be one small voice but when things grow darkest around you, that is when you will touch the most lives.*"

Jasmine found it hard to breathe. Her eyes misted up as she looked at the pen. There was some fine writing engraved on the clip. What was that? She blinked a few times and read:

SHOW THEM THE WAY BACK HOME.

Her heart stopped.

Those were the words Lancello had used. Jasmine bit her lip. It *had* actually happened. It was real. The tears were running freely now. She had no desire to stop them – she missed her friends, she missed the mountain – so she let it flow.

Half an hour later, even she knew it was time. It wasn't about her anymore. It was about a world that needed a glimpse of the God she knew and loved with all her heart, no matter what it cost. "*Father, give me the words to show them who You truly are. I can be the dust if You will make the pearl.*"

With a clean page in front of her and a journey brewing in her heart, Jasmine began to write.

• • •

"Everybody out, out." They did bang on the bars really loud. An ugly guard uncuffed Satchwick.

Stinker put his leg in the air to be loosed too. His bottom made a trumpet sound when he did.

The guard stomped off, waving the stink from his nose.

"Hey, what about Orby?"

The guard turned back, "Who?"

"Orby-loitor-ator," Satchwick pointed to the shadow.

"I said *everybody* out!" he did loose Orby's shackle also.

"You think they is gonna kill us till we is deader-an-dead hey Stinker?" Satchwick was trying not to pee.

"Shut-up Satch."

"But–"

“Sock it.”

“Everybody out, no one stays behind.” Hang on, that was Boss in there. He was all in a ball in the corner of his cell. His eyes didn’t look like they was right at all. Looked like he’d gone for a tan in a toaster too.

He did elbow Stinker, “Look it’s Bo–”

“I said sock it.”

“That means you,” the guard did give Boss a hoof. Boss didn’t even fight with him.

“Keep moving,” Satchwick got a boot on his backside too.

They was taken to a cavern with a warden on a stool standing up at the front. He looked like a big toad. He opened a scroll:

“Prisoners of the Dungeons, thus is the decree of your overlord, the grand and sovereign master of the kingdom of Hades, the great and terrible Satan. You are all hereby summoned to attend the fifth Grand Assembly of all the forces of Hades.”

“Think that means we’s got trouble Stinks? ‘Cause last time–” and Stinker did plug his hooter with a fist.

• • •

“What should I be looking at?” Lancello asked.

Skylock had brought him back to the forest of Elyon-Ayther.

“Right there, in the crack,” he gestured.

Sure enough, inside was a tiny plant, no more than half an inch high. “Is that–” he looked at Skylock.

His brother smiled, “Jasmine’s seed took root.”

His own expression shot into a grin as if released by a rubber band. Jasmine would have her own tree in the garden. He thought he might burst. He felt a like a proud new father.

“I have something to show you too,” Lancello pulled out the scroll.

“You finished it,” Skylock gave him a thump in congratulations. “Oh please let me be there when you show Father.”

Lancello was still smiling, “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

XXXIX

Sound the **Trumpet**



Crudski dangled by an arm begging, "Don't torture me master." A string of white drool bridged his charred lips as he sniveled his incoherent plea.

Dark Lord Zerothustro tossed him aside like an old, wet rag. The hunched mite scuttled off into the shadows, cussing as far as he went.

Debris lay everywhere. Hades was as black as the night and burnt to cinders. Another whimpering demon huddled in a corner. All three his eyes stared straight ahead, like a mesmerized cobra. "Too bright, too bright," he kept repeating.

Zerothustro scowled at the weakling.

There were only a few hides walking dazed through the corridors of the Katacombs. Hades was as quiet as death, its creatures still buried in their holes, too petrified to surface.

Evidence of Jesus' escape was now cast as a monument on every wall. Jagged edges of rock had melted into smooth stone globules, dripping down the sides of the tunnels every place His presence had passed.

Hades was mocking their impotence.

...

Gabriel sat gazing at all his Lord had created. Heaven looked like one great living organism, with the mountain at the center and vast undulating planes stretching off on every side. The city

of angels spread out over it as scattered gems on a crystal table.

This untainted world floated like an iceberg in the skies, set on a backdrop more beautiful than a thousand sunsets wrapped into one. It marked the heart of all the heavens, that infinite expanse which curled around its center, endlessly purring at its Creator. As far as the eye could see in any direction, the skies were painted with gargantuan cloud formations of celestial nebulae. Galaxies floated between them, each in turn would run its course and finally come to bow down before its Maker.

Today, the enormous orbs of Azar and Zion floated past the Mount in silent majesty. In the celestial clock, they marked the day Father would bring His plan to perfection.

Only one sight had ever made Gabriel marvel more. It was the picture of His Lord, hanging on a tree, beaten and torn for mankind – the perfect image of an unfathomable God.

Oh how he loved Him! And though these last few days had been a torture to endure, Gabriel thought he loved his Lord more now than ever before, if such a thing were even possible.

The sound of a trumpet jolted him from his thoughts. The single call was met by a thousand more.

Their Lord was near.

All of creation quivered in delight.

Gabriel flew to Heaven's Gate.

The sight of Jesus approaching was like the sun rising on heaven after all these days of darkness. He threw himself to the floor and there he worshiped from the depths of his being.

As he did, the Lord's love poured into him until he thought he might burst. How he adored this One who would give Himself for others, who hurt and suffered so that others could know His Father's love. The beauty of it was almost painful. It consumed Gabriel and filled him and set fire to his heart all at once. The more it did, the more he offered himself to his Lord. And the more he tried to waste himself, more it seemed he could contain of His limitless love.

The only thing left was to worship.

And Gabriel gave his all.

Whether an eternity or a moment later, he didn't know, he lifted his head again. All his brothers had flooded the planes around him, all worshiping as one. They had thrown out their wings along His way, as a white carpet to carry Him home.

Then the whole translucent mountain of God began to throb with light – Father's heart beating out loud.

His Son was home.

Heaven was whole again.

As Jesus began to ascend the Mount, the clouds shrouding its peak pulled back, as if two, great curtains were being drawn open. Behind them the white flames abated to reveal a breathtaking sight.

The whole company of angels stood in stunned silence.

Gabriel ached as the beauty of it found him. It gave reason to all that had gone before.

During heaven's agony, Father's heart was set on an end that only He could have seen. There, right beside the Great White Throne of Glory, now stood what only His mysterious wisdom could fashion – a second throne, waiting beside His own.

Yes, Gabriel's Lord had suffered, but to stir the awe he felt for Him now. It was always Father's longing to boast of His Son's beauty, to bring His Son glory, to give His Son His all.

The Heart of
Heaven

— HEAVEN —

Heaven was bathed in a golden light, as the hour of dusk would sometimes do upon the earth. All the angel's had gathered on the sea of glass, around the thrones.

Every eye watched as Jesus opened the scroll of the life of one Namor of Herodius. When God's presence searched his life, it would not let Him in. Blemishes on the scroll told of Namor's countless sins. They began to glow in protest under His light, until they formed an infant flame. The fire ate its way across the page, consuming all in its path.

The scroll's defects decomposed like an ancient mummy exposed to fresh air, disintegrating into blackened flakes of ash.

The man had been tested. He was found evil, the chief of sinners, sentenced to the brutal death of Roman crucifixion, a death they had all witnessed first hand.

Not one single shred of goodness was found in him, not until his dying breath when he had called out to Jesus from his cross.

Heaven stood in a silence so thick you could hear a feather float to the floor.

Jesus looked up at His Father, His hand holding only the ashes of a man They had made, a man They had loved. "Father, I brought him home."

He closed His hands tight together and when He opened

them again, the tiniest Pearl lay cupped inside.

With a tender smile holding His features, Jesus gave it to Gabriel. Only the slightest nod and the archangel understood what His Lord was asking of him. He was sent to bring back the reward of His suffering.

Gabriel set the man down at heaven's gates. He had expected Namor to charge inside, overjoyed by the sight of where he was. Instead, the man staggered backwards until he tripped. When he hit the floor he huddled against a pillar and wrapped his arms tight around his legs. It almost looked like he was hoping to disappear.

"My name is Gabriel," he stepped closer to extend a hand in greeting, as he knew men were wont to do.

The bundle squeezed even tighter and began to shudder.

"I am an archangel and commander of the keepers. I was sent by my Master to bring you, Namor."

"I'm sorry. I, I'm so sorry." The sound was almost inaudible at first, but it grew more and more desperate each time Namor repeated it.

Gabriel was stirred watching the man rock himself in comfort.

Jesus had read to them how Namor had never known his mother. All he did know was the stories he had heard of her accepting eyes and gentle touch, how she had compassion on everyone and a soothing word for any pain.

Oh how Namor needed that now. But he didn't deserve to know her love. It was his fault – he had killed her – she had died giving birth to *him*. His father had never forgiven him for that. So many times he would return home drunk, cursing his son for destroying his life and any reason he had to keep on living.

Namor had tried everything to repay his debt, but finally he knew there was only one gift his father wanted. He was thirteen when he left home.

Namor left behind any illusions that a Father could ever

want him. He kept away from people after that, away from love and anything beautiful, so that he could not destroy them again.

In their stead, he found an insatiable need for power. He had to control all he touched. His relentless drive won him infamy in the streets of Jerusalem. None defied him, not without knowing his retribution.

Alphaeus was fool enough to test him. The man had owed Namor money and when he came to collect it, he only had an empty purse and a string of excuses about children to feed. He begged for mercy but it only roused Namor's anger.

One blow had catapulted Alphaeus over the table and into the clay wall, which crumbled as he met it. A cry of terror came from Alphaeus' wife as she desperately tried to stop the beating. But Namor's fury was unleashed. It was a mad rush of exhilaration pounding his head against that wall, over and over again.

An eye for an eye and a life for a life, that was the law. But how could Namor's execution ever help three young children he had robbed of a father?

It could not. Not until the deed was done did he realize that he had done it again. Another innocent family was destroyed, because of him.

He was a vile creature.

The anguish of that truth drove him back to Lillith, it was the name she went by, though Namor never knew her true name – he'd never cared.

He used her services every time that self-loathing tried to suffocate him. The hole in his heart was only silenced by dominating a woman. But the beast within him was loose that day. It took blood for a second time, but no one seemed to notice when one of her kind disappeared.

An eye for an eye and a life for a life, but what if a man took two? A Roman crucifixion could never wash him of all his guilt.

Namor sobbed from the depths of his gut.

Gabriel felt his anguish, "Brother, won't you come inside?"

Namor's trembling only got worse. "I can't. I don't belong here, I, I'm too unclean."

Gabriel hunched down beside him and softened his tone. "I know you are brother. But the Lord you called upon from your cross," Gabriel brought out the man's Faith Pearl, "His love has washed you perfectly clean."

The little jewel began to glow with a slow and steady throb.

Namor's eyes were fixed on the tiny treasure. Just then the entire mountain of God began to pulse with light, a gargantuan diamond, throbbing in perfect time with the Pearl.

Namor froze.

He could feel the mountain turning its gaze on him. It knew he was there, it was calling to him. He felt naked, like all of heaven was staring straight through him.

There was nowhere left to hide.

He covered his face crying, "Oh God don't look on me, I am a sinner!"

As if his words had startled them, a flock of angels took to flight from the mountain top. He peddled backwards, trying to get away from all this beauty, desperate not to defile it. "I can't be here. I can't see this," he scrambled.

"Namor."

One word was all it took to root him to the spot. It rumbled through the heavens and his heart fluttered in terrified delight.

With a heaving chest he slowly turned to face his Maker.

"Namor," he felt the thrill of that single word again. It poured over him like warm oil, soothing every wound, until all he wanted to do was laugh and dance and shout out hallelujahs. Yes, Father was calling out — calling out to *him*.

"My boy has finally come home!"

And God came running.





“THIS IS LOVE, NOT THAT WE LOVED GOD, BUT THAT HE LOVED
US, AND SENT HIS SON TO BE AN ATONING SACRIFICE FOR OUR SINS.”

– 1 JOHN 4:10.

THE *Glossary* OF TERMS & CONCEPTS

For this story, it was necessary to knit historical fact with a liberal dose of fiction. Because the fiction should not be taken as gospel truth, the elements of the story must again be sifted out, fact from fiction.

True characters and concepts are marked here with an: *



BARAK
Temple Priest
FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

Barak is a chief priests of the temple in Jerusalem. He is one of those who feels most threatened by the obvious authority and popularity of Jesus. Having tested Him publicly many times, though never able to trip Him up, he is now determined to see Jesus killed.



CAIAPHAS *
High Priest
HISTORICAL CHARACTER

The bible records that Joseph Caiaphas was high priest at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. As high priest, he held the position of religious ruler in Jerusalem, a position given to him by king Herod the tetrarch, son of King Herod the Great, who tried to kill Jesus after His birth.

Caiaphas' position as high priest succeeds that of his father-in-law, Annas. The seat of high priest, along with the rest of the priesthood, had long since become positions governed by political concerns, rather than submission to the will of God.



CARMELTON
Village
FICTITIOUS PLACE

Carmelton is a place of retreat from the pressures of the real world, where Jasmine is taken for a time of healing. It is nestled under a majestic mountain called Carmel, after its namesake in the Bible.

The experiences of Carmelton are symbolic of the journey God will take someone on, who is fervently in pursuit of Him.



DARK LORDS
Fallen Angels
FICTITIOUS CONCEPT

The term 'dark lord' is a reference to those fallen angels who form part of the DominatrumRexOrdo. Satan holds the highest rank of RexSupremus – translated 'the supreme king'. Below him are another five dark lords. Collectively they command all the dominions of darkness.



DOMINATRUMREXORDO
Kings of Hades
FICTITIOUS GROUP

The DominatrumRexOrdo – translated 'the Order of the Kings of Domination' – is a secret council of the most formidable forces of Hades, the dark lords. While Satan holds absolute authority, it is the collective work of the council which makes their despotic rule of the underworld possible.



DUNGEON
Prison of Hades
FICTITIOUS CONCEPT

The dungeon is a prison for keeping and torturing those demons deemed to need severe punishment or correction.



ELYON-AYTHER
Forest
PARTLY FICTITIOUS CONCEPT

Elyon-Ayther is a mysterious forest on the top of Mount Carmel, rooted in solid rock. It represents the planting of the Lord, the trees of Righteousness (See Isaiah 61:3), and also the secret place of Psalm 91.

Many who have been taken through very deep journeys with the Lord come finally to a more complete union with Him. The mountain forest is a metaphor for the internal peace found in Him, in such a journey.



FAITH PEARL
The Pearl of Great Price
 PARTLY FICTITIOUS CONCEPT

A Faith Pearl is formed when a child of God grows in faith, typically during a time of trials. The more their faith is exercised, the larger the Pearl it produces. Pearlies are a symbol of God's victory over the forces of darkness. They act as a homing device, drawing the children of God back to the Mount of heaven, where all Pearls are made.

After the crucifixion of Christ, Pearls were outlawed to the lower ranks of Hades. The law served to support the lie that they had overcome Jesus by crucifying Him and that faith in God would become extinct. By spreading this disinformation, the Ordo hoped to prove to their forces that they still had every chance of finally destroying God.



THE FUSTILO
The Gate of Damnation
 FICTITIOUS PLACE

The Fustilo is a large, cone-shaped funnel in the floor of the Vestibule of Damnation. It is inhabited by a vicious spiraling wind which sucks its victims down to the abode of the damned. It is guarded by twelve Prosmutus, large oafs of Hades. They are formidable beasts of enormous strength, used for tasks which require action without insight. Within the Vestibule, their task is to feed souls into the mouth of the Fustilo.



GASHWEN
Demon
 FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

Gashwen is an Underling, the lowest rank of Hades. He goes by the name Stinker because his rear end regularly lets off a potent pong. He is a Quodian, which means he falls within the dominion of Dark Lord Quodius. Gashwen is a spirit-of-rejection who copes with his troubles by over inflating his self-opinion and undermining Satchwick's.



GILBERT
Seed of Promise
 PARTLY FICTITIOUS CONCEPT

Gilbert is a seed of promise given to Jasmine to help her through

the journey she is to take in Carmelton. It is symbol of God's intention to draw her closer to Himself, despite all evidence to the contrary. Gilbert's taking root in Elyon-Ayther, is a metaphor for her heart clinging onto the Rock of her salvation and the goodness of God.



SATCHWICK

Demon

FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

Satchwick is an underling, the lowest rank in Hades. A short podgy creature, he looks very much like a little gargoyle. As a spirit-of-fear, he falls under the dominion of Dark Lord Zerothustro. He is a runt of the camp, usually more terrified himself than what he is able to inspire any terror.

His years of contact with Faith Pearls have softened him to such an extent that he is an utterly ineffective demon and his partner Gashwen, is regularly called in to help him out of trouble.



HEAVEN *

TRUE PLACE

The abode of God Almighty and His angels, in a realm beyond time and space. Though God is not contained or limited to heaven in any way, He presents Himself there, on His throne.

To die, and after death finally be transported into the presence of the living God, is the true hope in every Christian heart.

The description of heaven in this story holds no known contradictions to the biblical accounts, but should be treated as fiction.



INBAL

A Levite

FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

Inbal is a slight man with sharp features, who resembles a rat in more ways than one. He was born a Levite, but was passed over for any duties within the Sanhedrin. Having failed at the traditional means of gaining position, he has set his ambition on gaining it by less honorable means. To this end, he is willing to go to any lengths to find favor with the priests and secures two false witnesses against Jesus at His first trial.



THE KATACOMBS
Abode of the Dead
 TRUE PLACE - FICTITIOUS NAME

The Katacombs of Hades is a storehouse for the sleeping dead. Before the final judgment it will offer up all its souls. (See Revelation 20:11-15). It is also known as Hell, Hades, the underworld, the grave and Sheol. See discussion on page 260, *Did Jesus really descend to Hades after His death?*

MICHAEL *
Archangel
 TRUE CHARACTER

Michael is an archangel of heaven and chief guardian over all the guardians of God's children. He surpasses his brothers in majestic power, presence, wisdom and the skills of war. Despite this, his heart is lowly because his awe of God grows with each new unveiling of His nature.

NAMOR *
Man Crucified with Jesus
 FICTITIOUS NAME - HISTORICAL CHARACTER

One of the two men condemned to death and crucified beside Jesus. While the second man, (named Bartholomew in this account) remained unrepentant, Namor confessed his sin when he saw the purity of Jesus. Even there, giving his dying breaths, he was forgiven and drawn into the family of God. Although he is an historical character, we know nothing about the man, bar the few words he said to Jesus upon the cross. The rest of the account is fictitious.

ORBOLITHERITH
Demon
 FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

Orbolitherith (a.k.a. Orby) is a spirit-of-isolation. He becomes the cell mate of Satchwick and Gashwen when their adventures turn south. His only crime was having seen a person find the Secret Place. It was a time in history of great spiritual revival, followed swiftly by mass persecution which caused people to grow in faith exponentially.

ORGON

Demon

FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

The Handler set directly in command of Satchwick and Gashwen. Though he flaunts his position over the Underlings, he is truly of little consequence in the kingdom of Hades, having only 9 demons under his command. Orgon is also the rider originally tasked to bring Jasmine down. Under the overshadowing power of Sum-Fektus, his power to do that is increased exponentially by ‘borrowing’ from his superiors.



QUINTILLIUS *

Roman Centurion

HISTORICAL CHARACTER - FICTITIOUS NAME

Quintillius is a devoted soldier of Rome. Having risen to the rank of centurion he has won the respect of all with his personal code of honor. However, when he finds himself guilty of crucifying the Son of God in the name of duty, he begins to question the moral integrity of the path he has chosen. The gospels record a centurion at the crucifixion, however we only know that he marveled at Jesus’ death. Beyond that the story has been embellished with fiction.



QUODIUS

Fallen Angel

FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

One of six dark lords who rule Hades, known as the Dominatrum-RexOrdo. Within the Ordo, Quodius holds the rank of RexSux – translated ‘the sixth king’. Under his rule are the two dominions of Rejection and Isolation. He is a cunning agent of darkness who operates alone, when his prey is at its weakest. It is his task to isolate victims and destroy them or – better yet – get them to destroy themselves.



SATAN*

Fallen Cherub

TRUE CHARACTER

Satan is the sovereign master of the kingdom of Hades, called that (the adversary), because he chose to stand in opposition to all God is and upholds. He rules his own kingdom with an iron fist, using his

minions as slaves, to execute his revenge on God.

To men and angels alike, he promises whatever bait will reel them in and make them serve him. He cares not that his promises are only empty deceptions. The Bible calls him Satan, the devil, the dragon of old and the serpent.



SIMON MAGUS *

Sorcerer

HISTORICAL CHARACTER - FICTITIOUS PLOT

Simon Magus is a sorcerer, from the wealthy and influential families of the Sanhedrin. But his ambitions lie far higher than the Sanhedrin can offer him. Therefore he has chosen not to take the path of a priest.

It is the Magus who attempts to perform a ritual in order to assume all the powers of the crucified Christ. But his plans are thwarted when Barak loses courage for the task, and dupes Simon Magus, bringing him the blood of a lamb instead of the blood of Jesus.

There is no historical account of such a relationship or ritual ever taking place. We are absolutely *not* suggesting that Jesus' blood was ever used in such a way. Our only purpose to show the stark contrast between a heart of evil intent, and the perfection of God's motives.



SODALITUS

Fallen Angel

FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

One of six dark lords who rule Hades, known as the Dominatrum-RexOrdo. Sodalitus holds the rank of RexTres – translated 'the third king'. Under his rule are the two dominions of Conspiring and Secrecy.

He is a stealthy dark lord, able to disguise his presence in nearly any environment. His most potent weapon however is information. All the watchers of men and watchers of the skies report finally to him. This gives him the title the 'All-Seeing Eye'.



UNTOUCHABLES

Mature Christians

SEMI-FICTITIOUS CONCEPT

Untouchables are those who have found the secret place of God and abide under the shadow of the Almighty, (see Psalm 91:1). They have

surrendered all to God and can finally say, ‘It is no longer I that lives, but Jesus Christ that lives in me.’ Untouchables are therefore much less susceptible to the ploys of the enemy and are a true obstacle to Hades.



VESTIBULE OF DAMNATION
Judgment Seat of Hades
FICTITIOUS CONCEPT

The Vestibule is Satan’s throne room in the heart of Hades, intentionally constructed as an inversion of the throne of God. Here the Fustilo threatens all who approach his throne with torture and damnation.



WATCHERS
Demons
FICTITIOUS CHARACTERS

There are two types of watchers: watcher of the skies and the watchers of men. The first group are the more powerful. Their task is to keep tabs on all demonic activity. They are the eyes and ears of their masters, to ensure all is done according to plan and there is no room for rebellion.

The second group, the watchers of men, are set to spy on mankind. They are used for various tasks, amongst others, to gather evidence of men’s sins to be used against them in the final judgment.



ZEROTHUSTRO
Fallen Angel
FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

One of the six dark lords of the DominatrumRexOrdo, who rule all of Hades. Within the Ordo, Zerothustro holds the rank of RexDuos – translated ‘the second king’. Under his rule are the two dominions of Fear and Darkness.

Zerothustro is a powerful dark lord and a creature of shadows. It is he who launches the first attack on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

A DISCUSSION OF DIFFICULT POINTS



Question 1 CAN A CHRISTIAN HAVE A DEMON?

We certainly *do not* believe that a child of God can be possessed by a demon. Possession relates to ownership and we can only belong to one master. Demons therefore can never own a Christian.

We do however see evidence that demons can exert external influence in areas of sin, selfishness or wounding.

A biblical example of Satan influencing a child of God, (who was clearly not possessed), is Simon Peter tempting Jesus. Here the enemy used Peter's selfish motive as a point of access.

Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord, this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

– Matthew 16:22-25.



Question 2 DID JESUS REALLY DESCEND TO HADES/SHEOL?

If we simply go on the Biblical evidence for the point, it seems likely that Jesus' body was not only raised up from the grave, but His soul was also raised up from Hades/Sheol. This, however, does

not mean that He was tortured or subject to Satan in any way.

“For David says concerning Him: ‘...For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.’ ...Therefore [David], being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption.”

– Acts 2:25-30.

Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.” (Now this, “He ascended” what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

– Ephesians 4:8-10.



Question 3

WHAT DOES GOD LOOK LIKE?

Though we have insinuated in the story that God is of comparable size to other creatures, having similar form to us and showing recognizable emotions, it is not our intention to try to capture Him visually. These were simply necessary images in order to discuss His relationship with us.

It is quite likely that the infinitely large and powerful God presents Himself to His creatures in terms that we can compute, and therefore appears in a form somewhat familiar (see Rev 4:3 and Rev 5:1). But we should not mistake such imagery as a limitation on God in any way.