

PROLOGUE (BARABBAS)

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in him should not perish,
but have everlasting life.*

John 3:16, KJV

“**D**id you ever imagine, my husband, that you would administer the covenants of marriage to one of your own sons?”

I wasn't sure why Chanah had waited until now to ask me that question. The wedding had been held several weeks ago, near the end of winter, in the sixty-seventh year after the Lord's birth. The long journey from Rome—all on foot and mostly under gray skies—had turned arduous once we entered the towering mountains of northern Italy, and we were nearly to Trento. If she had waited this long, couldn't she have waited a little while longer, until we had arrived and had a chance to rest a bit, and I could breathe properly?

Still, I smiled at the memory. Simon and Porcia had faced each other across an altar of God, in a house dedicated to him by none other than the recently martyred Peter. The presence of the Spirit had been poignant and powerful, nearly enough to overcome the strength in my knees. I had imagined our ancient

first parents, Adam and Eve, kneeling at similar altars, giving thanks to God and seeking his guidance as they made their way in a newly fallen world.

“No, not really.” It wasn’t an eloquent response, but short enough that it didn’t interrupt my next intake of desperately needed air. I turned my head, wondering why she wasn’t breathing harder. Neither she nor the girls seemed to be feeling tired at all, and they had walked as much as I had. The three mules we led were laden with provisions and gifts, so nobody had gotten to ride. We might have hired a wagon, but it wasn’t worth the expense, whether our own or that of the Lord’s Church.

Chanah’s cherubic face split in a radiant grin. “It was amazing. I could feel the presence of angels, maybe even Peter himself, though he’s probably extremely busy helping the Savior on the other side.”

I nodded, absorbing her sweet serenity but still focused on filling my lungs and keeping my weary legs moving. I was a large man, and supposedly strong. But I was carrying a heavy pack, and unfortunately, age was catching up with me. Or perhaps it had already caught me.

“Why do they want to live in Melita?” asked Sophia, our vibrant, bright, and witty seventeen-year-old. She sounded almost glum.

“I don’t know,” said Chanah. “But Simon has good memories from that place, not just bad ones. I think I’m more surprised Porcia agreed, though.”

“She’s smitten,” added Sophia, her wit emerging. “Well and truly. I don’t get it.”

Chanah laughed. The sound was so pleasant I almost forgot my laboring, aching muscles. “Of course you don’t. He’s your brother, and you’ve teased him way too much to think anyone could hold him in high esteem.”

“That’s why they’re moving to Melita,” said Marian, two years her sister’s senior. “To get away from you.”

“Ha ha,” Sophia retorted with a smirk, swinging her hip into her sister. They both giggled, and then Chanah joined in. Soon I added my slightly wheezing version to the chorus. As I did, we rounded the final bend in the road before Trento, getting our first view of the picturesque mountain town, settled among squat green foothills in a valley slightly wider than I had expected. The farmland appeared fertile, the Adige River clean and strong with the spring runoff beginning to surge. The natural beauty added a breath of warmth to the otherwise chilly air.

I stopped, causing the rest of my family to pause. The mules, too. A man driving a small wagon pulled by a single donkey grumbled loudly as he passed, complaining he had almost run us over. I smiled and waved at his back, then further soaked in the scene before us.

Chanah sidled up next to me and held my right arm with both hands. Evening was not far off. “We wondered why Esther had to find a man this far north,” she said reverently. “I think we have our answer. Rome is beautiful, but this is ... I can’t find the right words.” She leaned her head on my shoulder briefly, then turned as Marian and Sophia approached to stand next to her.

“I can see why Esther and Marco love it here,” remarked Sophia, suddenly serious.

“When it’s not the dead of winter, yes,” added Marian, who was always more practical, like her mother, whom she resembled in looks, too, with her rich dark hair and large green eyes. “I doubt Levi enjoys it much.”

Sophia pursed her lips at that. “Well, Great Uncle knows he could come live with us in Rome if he wanted to. It’s much warmer there.”

She was right. I wasn't sure why Levi didn't, other than the fact his adopted daughter Esther was here. An orphan from Samaria, she had bravely fled an abusive slave master at eight years old and ended up in Jerusalem. Slaves were all too common in the Roman empire—and beyond—even in Judea. Levi and my departed mother Ruth, whom he had married after my father died, had taken Esther in. That was after Levi had been miraculously healed of leprosy by the apostle Matthias and Mary the mother of Jesus. I closed my eyes briefly, remembering the awe of first seeing my uncle at our door, healed. I wasn't a Christian then, though by divine providence I had met Mary. I had met Jesus, too, of course. My awe increased as I reflected on just how much he had done for me—for me!—my heart swelling with indescribable feeling.

“Beloved, are you all right?” Chanah had brought her face close to mine, and I felt a single tear fleeing rebelliously down my right cheek.

I sniffled, blinking. “Yes, just astounded—again—at how blessed I am. And I really hope Paul is still here, though I would guess he has already departed.”

Chanah hummed. “You're probably right, but we'll see him again. I'm sure of it.”

I knew *she* was, but I wasn't. Paul was likely well on his way to Spain, a place I doubted I would ever visit. It was a vast province, and he was still on the run from Roman authorities, so it would be nearly impossible to find him anyway.

As if she had read my thoughts, which she often did, she whispered, “There is always a way, my husband, Jesse called Barabbas.”

I smiled, freeing my arm to place it around her shoulders and squeeze. What a treasure she was, one of the most faithful and powerful women God had ever placed on the earth. And she had

somehow chosen to marry *me*. I knew God had forgiven me, just as he had Paul, but my past was still real—more real at some times than at others. And Chanah was aware of it all.

“Can we keep moving, please?” asked Sophia. “I’ll turn into a block of ice if we stand here much longer.” Her reverence had dissipated with a couple of gusts of cold mountain air.

I took a deep breath, feeling remarkably refreshed after such a short break. I winked at my youngest. “Yes, and I’ll try not to slow us down.” She gave me one of her classic expressions of teasing impatience. For some reason, I loved that look.

Esther and Marco’s house stood in stalwart pride halfway up the south side of the first significant hill in the eastern half of the valley, the farthest west of a loose cluster of homes belonging to members of Marco’s family. I noted that most of the homes in the area were built on the south sides of hills, which made sense given the angle of the sun, especially in the winter. Marco and his father and brothers farmed a large tract of land running south for at least a mile, and nearly to the east bank of the river. They had a few cows and sheep, too, along with oxen and mules to pull the heavy single plows.

It was still light enough to see, the sun hiding somewhere behind the grayness, which meant farmers were out across the valley preparing the soil for planting. That included Marco, so it was Esther who answered the door after we had secured the mules to a post at the side of the house—a very pregnant Esther. She hadn’t informed us in her last two letters, smuggled to us in Rome to preserve the secret of Paul’s location, but the mischievous glint in her eyes as she greeted us warmly told us she was delighted by our surprised faces.

Chanah squealed in delight, of course, as did Sophia. Marian was more reserved, if only slightly. After we had all entered the broad, plaster-sided home half-built into the hill, I set down my pack and closed the door, welcoming the warmth from the well-stoked fireplace in the corner of the large main room, which comprised both living area and kitchen. Several small windows provided sufficient light, though somewhat dim in comparison to that provided by the larger windows of homes in Rome's warmer climate.

They owned four chairs, which meant I got to sit on some rugs. That was better, anyway, because it almost felt like I was putting my feet up, which they sorely needed. I leaned back against the front wall and listened to the conversation—with keen interest at first, then with growing drowsiness.

“Jesse. Jesse!” A tap on my shoulder from Chanah brought me back into the conversation, and I willed my eyes open fully.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be this tired yet. I'm glad to finally be here, Esther. Your home is beautiful ... and warm.” I smiled, hoping my weak explanation was adequate.

Esther laughed. “It's okay. We were just talking about how the baby is due in a couple of weeks or so. Of course, since it's my first, it could be any day now.”

“Or you could go longer,” noted Chanah.

“Please don't say that,” pleaded Esther, gently patting her very round middle with a hint of exasperation. I had no useful comments on such things, so I stayed silent.

“Well,” said Chanah, glancing at me, “we can stay until you have the baby, whenever that is.”

I didn't object, even though I wanted to make sure we were back in Rome by the time Cornelius's trial was held. The date was

only tentatively set, which meant it would probably get delayed until late spring anyway. Though I wasn't convinced I would be of much help, Emperor Nero seemed to at least tolerate me, and the saints, and our temple. How long that would last was profoundly uncertain. Political tensions were building. Some of our people were still being persecuted for the Great Fire, even though most citizens of Rome agreed Christians had nothing to do with it ... other than assisting in the rescues and the rebuilding! Senator Manius Aviola, himself a Christian and our good friend, had assured me the Senate wouldn't move against the Christians, but Chanah and I, along with other church leaders, enjoined the members to constant prayer, greater faith, and more earnest charity.

Chanah and I prayed daily for Nero, too. After he had ordered the execution of Peter, something seemed to have ... broken ... inside him. Despite the Senate placing immense pressure on him, and though he had made Peter's death far less painful than the Senate had demanded, I knew Nero believed his own soul was irretrievably damned. In my anger and grief—at Peter's murder, the continued harassment of the Roman saints, and the Roman officials' fanatical search for Paul—I had largely ignored the young ruler, leaving him to battle his demons alone. I was trying to repent of that, having requested an audience with the emperor three times over the winter. Each time, however, his steward Octellus, also now a Christian along with other members of Nero's household, had reported that Nero refused to give any response to the requests. Octellus had also disclosed he was becoming increasingly paranoid and moody ... even violent. What else could I do?

"Jesse, what's wrong? You seem disturbed about something." Chanah's gentle voice roused me from my pained thoughts. I looked up at her, a little embarrassed I had revealed them so clearly.

“I’m fine. I was just thinking ... about Rome, and the challenges there.” I switched my gaze to Esther. “But I should be here, rejoicing in the time we’ll get to spend with Esther and Marco.”

“And their new baby,” piped in Sophia.

I chuckled, trying to further ward off the gloom. “And their baby, yes. My uncle Levi, too.”

Just then the front door opened, and Marco walked in. His arrival came earlier than I had expected, since there was still some daylight left. Right behind him was his father, whom I had never met. I hurriedly got to my feet, my joints creaking in protest.

Marco wore an anxious expression, and when his father turned to face us I figured out why. I remembered his name being Paolo.

“You,” he said, pointing fiercely at me, his voice nearly a growl. “Have you come to torment my son further?”

I blinked in surprise, sparing a glance for Chanah before responding. “We are just here to visit. Esther is a sister to me.”

When Paolo glanced at Esther, his gaze softened only slightly. He whipped his attention back to me.

“She is a kind and faithful woman, despite the evil you’ve filled her head with,” he spat.

My eyebrows rose, my mind searching for how to respond. I wished Chanah would step in, but she didn’t. I felt irritation at the unwarranted attack start to build, too.

“Can you be more specific?” I asked evenly.

He took a step closer, perhaps thinking I would be intimidated by that. We were of about the same age, though he was smaller. His gnarled, accusing finger nearly touched my chest.

“You sent that thief and deceiver Paul to us, and he tricked several families into giving him their hard-earned money to help him continue his journey. His two henchmen bullied some of them into doing it.”

“Morech and Antonius?” asked Chanah with a tone of disbelief.

“Yes,” he said disparagingly, glaring only briefly at her.

“How did Paul and his ‘henchmen’ bully them?” I challenged, folding my arms to keep them in check. In my younger, morally lost days as a headstrong Jewish rebel, I would have already thrown Paolo to the floor, especially after his implied insult to my wife. I worked hard to make sure those tendencies didn’t resurface.

“He preyed upon their fears,” he replied with barely restrained fury. “He threatened the welfare of their souls if they did not help him. He is a smooth talker, that one. And now you are here to bleed us further.”

I glared back at him, my anger rising. “You mean with the mules laden with supplies and gifts for the Christians here? *That’s* how I’m going to ‘bleed’ them?” My tone was heavy with ire and sarcasm, and I could feel the tension in the room increase dramatically. Then I realized what I had done in inviting the spirit of contention. I raised a hand as I lowered my head.

“I’m sorry, Paolo. You are a good man. I know you are concerned for your family and neighbors.” I raised my eyes to his, which appeared somewhat confused, though still fiery. “Tell me, please, everything that has happened, as you have *personally* witnessed it.” I gave emphasis to the last part. I wasn’t interested in hearing rumors.

Esther had risen and walked to a point almost between us. Marco stood beside her, a hand at her waist.

“It was two acolytes of Demas,” she said, gazing kindly but sternly at Marco’s father, then turning to me. “They passed through two weeks ago, having come from Thessalonica, searching for Paul themselves. I don’t know how they knew to look here. Demas used to be a faithful follower of Christ, but he now claims Paul stole from the saints at Troas, that he is a liar and blasphemer. He

wishes to confront him publicly, and he curries favor with local Roman officials, trying to improve his standing in the empire.” She looked pointedly again at her father-in-law when she finished, and he shuffled his feet, suddenly seeming uncomfortable.

Chanah had risen as well, placing herself by my side. She addressed Esther, ignoring Paolo for the moment. “Calling a man a thief is a common accusation, often without any proof. What else did they say?”

Esther appeared grateful Chanah had entered the conversation. I certainly was.

“They said Jesus of Nazareth was nothing more than a skilled teacher,” she responded, “neither prophet nor god. They said rumors of his resurrection were started by some of the Jewish leaders themselves, to create enemies that would distract from their own corruption. They claimed Paul was in on the plot, and that he had become wealthy because of it.”

I nearly laughed. Paul, *wealthy*? If he was, he hid it well—every day.

“Did he make any tents while he was here?” asked Chanah softly. Paul had often made tents, wherever he went, trying not to be a burden on the saints.

“He made *one* tent,” said Paolo derisively, holding up the same finger, having apparently regained some of his original angst, “which he then gave away, as a rich man would, to keep up his guise.”

Chanah studied him intently with kind eyes, beneath which the anger of almost anyone would melt away. “I have personally known Master Paul for many years,” she began. “I have seen him toil with his own hands for his support. I have seen him suffer, not only through his own trials, but for the struggles of others. His family was taken from him because he chose to follow the Christ.

He has blessed *our* family more than I could possibly describe, but not with money. You see us, how we are dressed, how we arrived. My husband has had the ear of Nero himself on several occasions. We could have ascended in rank among the Roman elite, curried great favor, like Demas and other apostates, if we had wanted to. But that is not what God purposed for us, and it is not what would make us truly happy.”

Paolo’s anger subsided again, but his mien still reflected a mulish cast. He appeared unsure how to respond, so Chanah continued.

“Have you spoken with each of the families who helped Paul continue his journey, especially the women?” She was smart to include the women. Paolo had probably spoken to some of the men, and among them they had likely confused everything. I had been as foolish before, on many occasions.

Paolo’s mouth worked soundlessly. He looked at his son, his eyes seeming to demand help.

Marco spoke, eyes fixed on Chanah. “Esther has spoken with them. I ... doubted at first ... but Esther and I have prayed about it.” He cast a wary glance at his father. “I do not have any more doubts.”

“Humph!” erupted Paolo, his face turning red. “You—all of you—have corrupted my own son. A curse be upon you, by the gods and goddesses!” He made a flurry of frenzied motions with his hands, stirring the air uselessly, then turned and stomped out of the house.

In the silence that followed his receding footsteps, I surveyed everyone in the room. Chanah’s face was filled with compassion as she considered Esther and Marco. Esther cried softly as Marco stared at nothing, his expression neutral. Sophia alternated her gaze between Esther and Chanah, her eyes welling with tears.

Marian was deeply pensive, her eyes resting most frequently upon me, which made me feel obligated to say something more.

“Marco, I do believe your father is a good man. I know he was baptized, but he has apparently rejected that, at least for now. I’m not sure how to help him, but the Lord can.”

Marco hesitated before responding. “He can cause trouble. He is more stubborn than you know.”

I nodded ruefully. “We can all cause trouble. I have caused plenty myself. Paul, too, as I’m sure he told you. May we all sit again?”

Chanah, Esther, and the girls resumed their seats. Marco sat on the bare floor next to Esther. I felt guilty resting on the rugs, at least two of them, but Marco wasn’t complaining.

“What was the last thing Paul taught here?” I asked.

Esther answered immediately. “He talked about the Lord’s triumphant return, which Jesus himself prophesied. He said dark times were coming that would test our hearts and challenge our faithfulness. He advised us not to count on Christ’s return to deliver us from our trials, but to place our burdens before him constantly, and to work, pray, and serve each other. We should study God’s word, too. Every Christian family here has at least one tract containing epistles from apostles and sister leaders. One of my favorites is from Priscilla. I’ve been teaching all the sisters to read and write, and some of the men, too, including my husband.”

Marco looked a little sheepish at that, but it was no shame he hadn’t been taught to read before. It was important he had the opportunity now.

Chanah beamed. “I wish we could have been here and seen him preach, even though we have heard him give sermons many times. His words invite the Spirit, which is what truly teaches us.”

More tears streaked down Esther's ruddy cheeks as she nodded, reaching down to grasp Marco's shoulder. "I'm frightened for our baby," she said softly.

"Why, dear?" asked Chanah.

"Because this world is already dangerous and difficult. If it's getting worse, how will—?" She cut off as a sob escaped. Chanah instantly knelt in front of her chair, holding her other hand in both of hers.

"No matter the trials," she said soothingly and firmly, "we must keep our perspective eternal, and help our children do the same. We saints are no better or worse than anyone else. This life is a necessary test for us all, but it is only a brief moment. We are extremely blessed to have prophets and prophetesses. We have the written word of God, including new scriptures. We have the gifts of the Spirit. We are graced with the awareness of the overwhelming love of our Savior, and our Father. It is easy to forget how much we possess when life seems so hard and unpredictable, but we must constantly try to remember. God will help us, if we are willing to accept that help, and especially if we are humble and obedient to his wise commandments ... if we keep the natural man in check. You are doing a great work here, Esther. I know you are. You are such a powerful example of the light of Christ. The people here need that. Everyone needs that, including the people of Spain, where Paul travels now."

Esther was openly crying again. The other three women joined the harmony. I noted the beginnings of tears in my own eyes, spotting them in Marco's as well. When he looked back at me, we both smiled and shrugged. My family and I had just arrived, and already I felt as emotionally drained as I was physically exhausted. I wasn't sure what to expect next.

Paolo avoided us over the next few days as we visited the saints in the area, making several trips into the heart of the town as well. We distributed the provisions we had brought after counseling with the local church leaders. The people of Trento were proud, but still grateful for some small assistance from the saints of Rome. After all, they had sent what relief they could to Rome following the Great Fire, and from what I could tell of their modest circumstances, it had been a significant sacrifice.

I wasn't a farmer—not by a long stretch—but I spent a little time attempting to help Marco and his brothers. I didn't try to avoid his father, but neither did I seek him out, and we only saw each other at a distance. Each time, he pretended not to have seen me. That was fine, at least for now. I prayed for him, as best I could, even as I was stumbling along, trying to steady a plow.

I learned they grew mostly common wheat, with some legumes as well. They also kept a large family garden with a wide variety of crops, tended mainly by the women and children, who also sometimes helped in the large fields. Chanah, Marian, and Sophia seemed to enjoy working in the garden. I was continuously amazed at how pure it felt to work in the soil of God's marvelous creation, amid such a scenic landscape, enabling the growth of the bounties that sustained human life. As a tentmaker, I'd felt satisfaction many times, but this seemed different. Not greater, perhaps, but I welcomed this powerful new perspective.

I was grateful I was with Marco, and not on a ministering visit somewhere else in the valley, when Sophia came bounding up to us, her feet finding uneven purchase on the tilled soil as her brown hair bounced erratically.

“Papa, Marco, the baby's coming!” I loved that she still called me Papa, even at seventeen. I wished she would forever. Marian

used the more formal term Father now. Did that make me feel older? Was that the issue?

No matter. The announcement sent a jolt of energy through me. It clearly did for Marco, too. He dropped the reins of the ox and raced after Sophia, who had already turned to start running back to the house, over a quarter mile away. I stared after them a moment, then looked at the ox. Should I leave it there? Would it ruin something?

As I studied the ox, standing placidly in its harness, I decided I should try to be helpful. I wouldn't be of any use in the house while Esther was laboring, anyway. As carefully as I could, I unfastened the heavy straps linking the animal to the plow, then stepped gingerly to the front and picked up the reins, tugging gently. After a second, the beast started to move, paying me little more mind than a fly it would swat with its tail. That was a relief.

We had been in the middle of the crosshatch plowing, so I led it back through the section of field which had only been plowed in one direction, aiming for the corral where it was kept. Our progress was steady but slow, and by the time I had taken care of the ox and was nearing the house, Esther's labor screams were coming frequently. I hesitated, not knowing if I should enter yet, or even if I wanted to. Chanah would have things well in hand—along with Marco's mother, probably, though I didn't know if she was present or not.

As I was about to open the door, Esther gave a long, agonizing scream, and a wave of worry washed over me. I entered quickly, looking with concern toward the space cleared on the floor where Esther lay, surrounded by various women, including Chanah and Marco's mother, Julia. Marian and Sophia hovered over Chanah's shoulder, empathy on their faces for what Esther was going through. A little fear as well.

As I took a step toward the group, I heard a small but strong cry, along with a gasp of joyous relief from Esther as she reached toward the babe.

“It’s a boy!” announced Sophia, looking at me, beaming.

“And a strong one,” said Julia. She and Chanah worked to clean him up and complete the messy birthing process, as he continued to cry out in protest at his new, much cooler environment.

I took two more steps, reaching Marco, who was practically bouncing on his toes near one wall, holding his arms. Levi hovered proudly next to him. Marco’s smile was broad, but the awesome responsibility of becoming a father clearly showed on his face. He was smart. He let the women do their work, though he did finally move to kneel near Esther and put a hand under her head.

“What will you name him?” asked Sophia excitedly.

Esther gave her an exhausted but happy look, then grasped Marco’s arm. “John,” she announced proudly, “because we both feel he is a precursor to something great, like John the Baptist was to Jesus.”

Warmth spread through me. It was a fantastic name, filled with holy purpose. I had come to expect nothing less from Esther, whose bright faith was both anchor and beacon.

“You will be a wonderful mother,” said Chanah, using a clean, damp cloth to wipe sweat from Esther’s brow. “This child is blessed to have you and Marco as his parents. Few are so lucky in this world.”

Esther grasped her by the wrist. “Thank you, Chanah. You are a marvelous example to me.”

I could attest to that sentiment, of course. I still experienced profound amazement that Chanah had agreed to have children by me. She had explained it before, and while it made more sense

in the light of the personal redemption offered by Christ, it was still difficult to comprehend sometimes.

And I was an uncle again, which reminded me with a twinge of sadness that I'd never seen my other nieces and nephews. My sisters Salome and Mara still lived in Armenia with their husbands, all strong in the faith, as far as I knew. Mary Magdalene lived there, too, though her children were all grown. I'd never heard of her remarrying. A few wondered why, even some of the Church's leaders in Jerusalem.

A few minutes later, Marco and I left the house to return to the fields with a new spring in our steps. Marco expressed happy surprise when he learned I had brought the ox out of the field. I wasn't sure whether his shock stemmed from the fact I had done it, or that I hadn't messed anything up in doing it. Either way, he was grateful, and we continued our work.

"Did you feel like it was going to be a boy?" I asked a little while later as the plow started to move again.

Marco shook his head. "Esther felt like it was a boy, but I had no idea. I'm glad they are both healthy." He paused, his tone becoming more somber. "One of my aunts died in childbirth. One of my friend's wives, too, recently."

I grunted as the plow tried to jerk free of the furrow and I struggled to re-settle it. When I could finally respond, I said, "Life is fragile, but miraculous. I don't know how so many people survive to adulthood, given all the dangers."

Marco smiled, snapping the reins lightly to get the ox to pull a little harder. "I agree. It must be God helping us."

"Indeed. There is little we can do without his aid ... and without each other's help."

Marco nodded thoughtfully, and then I started asking him questions about farming. I was curious—and truly impressed

with how hard he worked. Without people like him, most of us would die, even the smart and highly educated ones who thought they were better than everyone else. I wondered how those ‘great ones of the earth’ would fare if they were thrust into a field with an ox.

I was sore the next morning. Keeping that plow steady had required a lot of strength, using muscles I didn’t exercise much while making tents. My legs felt like jelly. Walking through softened dirt was much different than stepping on hard ground. Some of the farmers used wider shoes to help them, but even then it was taxing.

My daughters and I were just finishing breakfast—Marco and Levi having departed before first light—when Chanah rushed into the kitchen. “Husband, follow me. Something’s wrong!” She hurried back toward the two sleeping rooms, entering the larger of them, where Marco and Esther normally slept.

I glanced at Marian and Sophia in alarm as I rose quickly and followed.

“Brother, he’s not breathing right,” said Esther as I entered, her voice thick with concern. In the candlelight, I could see her eyes were rimmed red. “You and Chanah can bless him, and I have faith he’ll be okay.”

“Yes, of course,” I said, kneeling by her bed and immediately placing my hands on the baby’s head. His breathing was irregular and raspy, and his flesh felt too warm. His eyes were closed, and his body squirmed. He wasn’t crying, though. Chanah placed her hands on top of mine, and I searched for words of healing from the Spirit. I searched for faith, too—*my* faith, not Chanah’s or Esther’s. I knew they had faith. It was my own I sometimes doubted.

After my prayer was finished, I removed my hands and looked at little John. He had calmed considerably. His breathing wasn't normal, but it was better.

"Has he been suckling?" I asked.

Esther nodded. "Pretty well, yes. Not as much as I think he should, but ... I guess most new mothers think that." She glanced up at Chanah, who nodded.

"We will continue to pray for him," Chanah said reassuringly, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I was going to accompany Jesse to town for a meeting with the solitary Jewish family in Trento, whom we haven't met yet, but I'll stay here with you. That's okay, husband?"

"Yes, of course." She didn't need me to agree, especially for something like this. "I'll make it brief, and get back here as soon as I can, probably by early afternoon. Maybe I can help Marco further." I was sincere, or so I hoped—my muscles rejected the thought.

John weighed heavily on my mind as I walked toward Trento, but I smiled whenever I recalled his sweet face. It was like looking at an angel, or so I supposed, never having seen one myself. Besides Chanah. And my children. And Paul, too. Well, I hadn't seen an *angel* angel. I wondered idly if I would still be alive by the time John became a man. He would have brothers and sisters. He would be handsome. He would be smart, knowledgeable, and strong. I thought of my own sons, Elhanan, Matthew and Simon. Simon we had recently seen, of course. But we hadn't seen our adopted Elhanan and his family since they moved to Ephesus several years ago when Paul called him to be a bishop there. We also hadn't seen Matthew and his wife Reyanza, whom we had met briefly in Rome, for over a year now, and I questioned if we ever would again in this life. They lived in B'Ashra, south of Ethiopia,

with Cornelius's family, and with our dear non-Christian Greek friend Damianos—also called Dan—and his family of new believers. The distance was so daunting, but I knew Matthew was doing amazing things as a trader and as a teacher for the Church there. Chanah was to credit for all our children turning out so well. She and the Lord, both of whom knew far more than I ever would.

The meeting with the Jewish family took longer than I had intended. They weren't contentious, but they had *so* many questions. I told them about Rabbi Jonas and his wife Imma, who had embraced the New Covenant of Christ the Messiah on Melita, lost a child because of the persecution that followed, and yet persevered in the faith. I related a few words of both Paul and Apollos, as well as I could recite them, regarding the messianic prophecies of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others. I recounted my own story, which fascinated them as much as anything, and I testified that if the risen Lord could rescue and forgive me, he could save anyone, anywhere.

I offered to return with Chanah and continue the conversation, but while they appeared curious, they were noncommittal. I left a tract of scripture with them, including a brief synopsis of Jesus's life written by Luke, then bid them farewell.

My walk home was peaceful ... and a lot easier than plowing fields. But as I neared the cluster of homes belonging to Marco's family, I could sense something was wrong. The fields were empty. I braced myself for another confrontation with Paolo, praying I would be patient and calm. Perhaps someone had been hurt, which thought made me repent of dreading an outburst from Paolo.

It was neither of those things.

I heard the soft weeping as I entered Marco and Esther's house. As my vision passed across the members of his family, crammed into the main room and kitchen, I knew. My heart sank, tears

springing to my eyes. My shoulders slumped as I found Marian's face in the small crowd.

"John?" I asked, the tears starting to flow freely.

She nodded, holding in a sob as she weaved through the bodies and rushed toward me, throwing her arms around my neck and releasing a mournful moan into my shoulder. Sophia followed, and I held my girls tightly for a few moments.

I looked around for Marco. He wasn't there, so I extricated myself from my daughters' embrace and walked slowly toward Esther and Marco's room.

I held my breath as I crossed the threshold and took in the scene. Chanah sat on the bed with Esther, slowly rocking her in her arms. Esther held her baby to her breast, his body pale and lifeless. Marco leaned against a wall, his face in his hands, his mother and Levi trying to comfort him.

I looked at Chanah through a glaze of tears. "When?" I asked. "About an hour ago," she replied, sniffing.

I knelt beside the bed and placed my hands on one of Chanah's arms, looking at Esther. "I'm so sorry, Esther. I'm so sorry."

Esther sucked in a breath. "I know. You tried. We all tried. I thought I had enough fai—" She couldn't complete the word, a low wail escaping her chest. Chanah increased her rocking motion, humming softly.

After a few moments, Esther calmed. "At least he won't have to suffer through the terrible things that are coming."

I didn't know what to say to that, not immediately. I gently placed my right hand on John's head, almost recoiling at how cold it was. "His purpose on this earth is already fulfilled. He has other work to do, on the other side, with our Savior." I hadn't expected those words to be accompanied by such power, but they were.

Esther nodded. “He is with him, I know. He was pure. He is saved. He is our vanguard.”

I was astounded at how calmly she said that.

“What do you mean?”

I spun my head around. I hadn’t heard Paolo enter. Esther gazed intently at him, but she was having a hard time finding further words, so Chanah stepped in.

“It means little children return to the God that gave them life. They have no sin, nothing for which to repent. He welcomes them home. John is happy, and”—she gave a little sob—“he is safe.”

Paolo choked back a tear, then stared at me. “Are you making excuses for your god?” The fact he had said ‘your’ god pierced me with sadness.

I didn’t directly answer his question. Instead, I said, “We buried our first child, a daughter we named Hannah, a week after her birth. Our second child was a son, whom we called Joel. He lived for two hours.” I couldn’t continue. My throat wouldn’t let me. But Chanah picked it up.

“The doctors told me I was barren after that. I expected never to have more children. And then the miracle of Matthew occurred. Miriam followed, and she survived just two days. I wept continuously before God, but I resolved to be grateful for the one child he had given me who lived. And then we had three more beautiful children, miraculous and gracious gifts from heaven. Later, we learned we would see Hannah, Joel, and Miriam again. They are forever our children. We love them, even though we haven’t gotten to know them yet.” She had to stop there, emotions overwhelming her. She squeezed Esther tighter, burying her face in Esther’s hair as they both cried freely.

I studied Paolo’s reaction. He was a proud man, but tears crept down his cheeks. When he looked at me again, I no longer saw

anger in his eyes, just sadness touched with confusion. Suddenly, I felt the Spirit turning our grief into something else—something indescribably powerful and peaceful. I blinked several times, turning my head toward Chanah and Esther and placing a hand on Chanah’s shoulder.

“The Lord will help us through this.”

Chanah raised her head, smiling through her tears. “He already is.” Her gaze shifted to Esther, then to Marco, and finally to Paolo. “And someday, we will understand his purposes perfectly.”

CHAPTER 1 (CORNELIUS)

If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

ROMANS 12:18

The Theater of Marcellus was full to bursting. Cornelius hadn't seen even the best fishermen's nets packed so tightly. Eighteen thousand people, a mix of high and low, rich and poor, had gathered for the event. The senators wanted a spectacle, and he knew their purposes varied. Some saw his trial as a public repudiation of Christianity. Others conspired to weaken the influence of his family and friends by any means necessary. Yet others simply wanted to give the plebeians a good show ... with their names attached, of course. Few, if any, wanted truth and justice. It was the way of the world, especially among the ruthlessly ambitious and powerful.

Senator Manius Acilius Aviola was an exception. The three other senators who had become Christians likely were as well. Even collectively, though, they were powerless to stop this circus. Dozens of Christians had already died on trumped up charges over the last nearly three years. Peter had been executed in Nero's Circus before a similar crowd. Cornelius knew he would have his sacrifice to make, too, and he was ready.

All these thoughts passed through his mind as his lone guard led him to the place in the center of the stage where he would

stand and be judged. Ten chairs formed two lines to either side of him, angled outward slightly toward the audience, so those presenting could speak to him or the crowd, as they pleased. He wore no manacles or leg chains, for which he was grateful, and he had been dressed in respectable clothes. His knee-length, short-sleeved tunic was an expensive, white garment trimmed in gold thread, his sandals sturdy and new. The rope belt around his waist was coarse, though. Perhaps the senators had meant to draw the distinction, parading a visible flaw in his attire to symbolize the defect in his high stature as a notable and once-respected officer in Rome's vaunted legions.

Emperor Nero sat in the first chair to his right, furthest from the audience. Manius had reported on a recent visit that Nero was becoming more paranoid by the day—not just of the people, but of the senators, the Praetorian Guard, his generals, and most of the Roman nobility. Cornelius pitied him sometimes. Thrust into the role of emperor at sixteen by his mother's murderous machinations, he had probably never coveted the position. What right-minded man would? The knives were always out. Always.

Many of those knives were aimed at Cornelius now. He sighed deeply, just as Nero left his chair and took a position a few feet in front of Cornelius, facing the audience. It was commonly known that a younger Nero had aspired to be a thespian and perform on stage, especially in such a grand theater as the Marcellus. That innocent youth had likely never envisioned this scenario.

"Fellow Romans," he began in a rich, dramatic baritone. He was nearly thirty, no longer young. He had married at least twice, and one of his wives was dead. So was his mother, on his orders. The apostle Paul had connected with a piece of Nero's soul, but Paul was not here. Nor was Peter, who had sacrificed himself for the Church. Nor was Barabbas, as far as Cornelius could tell. If

he had arrived, he would have announced himself immediately at the home where Cornelius had been loosely confined.

“We have proven our mettle through fire and rebirth. Rome is strong, and will become greater still. But to do so, we must have order. We must have loyalty. We must all do our duty to the empire.”

It had the beginnings of a fine political speech. Nero’s oratory skills probably comprised a large part of the reason he still lived.

“This man”—he twisted to his left and gestured elaborately toward Cornelius—“was once a decorated, highly respected centurion, a man of resolve and action, a soldier true to the laws of Rome and her people.” As he squared himself again to the crowd, he spread both arms wide. “Now he favors strange gods above Rome, above her emperor, and above her true gods. He has helped Paul of Tarsus escape justice, and he has sought to weaken the influence of Rome across the world.”

Nero offered no facts to support his last claim, but because Cornelius had publicly admitted to helping Paul escape—and also because Nero was emperor—nobody would challenge the assertion.

“The question,” continued Nero, “isn’t whether Cornelius of the Italian band has betrayed Rome, but to what extent, and what his punishment should be. I will withhold that judgment until we have heard a few words in his defense.”

Cornelius watched in mild surprise as Senator Aviola rose from the front row and ascended the stage. Nero returned to his seat. Cornelius had expected someone else to be assigned to his defense—someone who couldn’t truly represent him, and wouldn’t care to. One of the occupants of the other nine chairs, none of which held him in any regard. Having Manius speak would be a boon ... unless they had somehow gotten to him. A steely knot of dread formed in the pit of his stomach.

Senator Aviola didn't look at Cornelius as he took his place and faced the people. The knot tightened and grew cold.

"Wise Roman citizens," he began, "I am not here to spin fanciful tales, or to rob justice of her full due." Cornelius nearly groaned aloud. "I will speak truth to you, in honor of all that is good and noble in your hearts and minds."

He paused a moment, gripping the front of his rich, senatorial robes, trimmed in purple and red. He could be almost as dramatic as Nero, which had served *him* well, too.

"The truth is that Master Cornelius has put his own life in peril many times in protecting the lives of fellow Romans. He most recently drove the Parthians from Eastern Africa, using mostly non-Roman troops he had trained himself." Cornelius blinked. This sounded better than expected, and the crowd seemed attentive.

"When he returned to Rome, he sought to honor the god he felt in his heart, while being a faithful, honest, and conscientious Roman citizen. He may have judged wrongly in helping Paul flee from Rome—and he has admitted he did so—but he has also been a model of civility, respect, and service as we have worked to rebuild this great city. He harbors no ill feelings toward his countrymen, and in fact yearns for their welfare. I am a proud Roman, and honored to know *this* Roman." He turned and pointed at Cornelius, who nodded his thanks, being sure to keep his expression neutral.

The senator returned his attention to the crowd. "As many of you know, I, too, am a Christian. That was no small decision to make, given the honored traditions of our many gods. The emperor himself knows Christianity isn't a Jewish creed; it is a global religion which teaches that God loves all his children, whether Roman, Greek, Jewish, or even Scythian Barbarian. It inspires

duty in those who know more to share with those who know less, which betters the conditions of both. We recognize the value in this, intuitively. Romans are charitable and noble, and have been for centuries. The only people threatened by Christianity are those who are greedy and selfish.

“You all know as well as I do how faithful our Roman Christians have been to Roman law and society, and how devotedly they have assisted in rebuilding the Caput Mundi. Despite suffering defamation and prejudice, they have not rebelled. Instead, they have continued to serve—not just each other, but everyone around them. They are not perfect, this is true, but they are profoundly *good*, and they are valuable to the glory and progress of Rome.

“I cannot in good conscience condemn another good, brave, and honorable Roman to an unholy death, and I doubt the Roman gods would be pleased with it, either. It is our choice to make, but we should make it carefully. I yield the stage.”

It was a masterful speech, both courageous and brilliant. Yet Cornelius believed it wouldn't make much, if any, difference. He was prepared to die. His heart ached for his wife and children, but the Lord would take care of them, and they would be reunited someday. He didn't just think that to be true, or merely hope it. He knew it. God had shown him too many miracles, taught him too many eternal truths in profoundly compelling ways, for him to ever deny it. Early on in his imprisonment, he had been told by a group of powerful senators, the conniving and merciless Quintus and Urban among them, that if he renounced his Christian faith, thereby proclaiming Paul a criminal and heretic, he would be set free. He had refused, immediately. There had been nothing to think about.

They hated him for that, with a visceral passion. Both occupied chairs to his left.