

THE
GRAVEDIGGER'S
BLESSING

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*Dedicated to Justin Martyr (100-165 AD),
saint of the early church in Rome*

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*For to me, to live is Christ
and to die is gain.*

Philippians 1:21





CHAPTER ONE

Rome, 165 AD

The oil lamp flickered, shifting shadows on the wall, then burned steadily again. Titus pulled his wool tunic tighter around his shoulders. Even this deep in the catacombs there were occasional drafts, slight breaths of wind that stirred past his cheek. One of the other *fossores*, an old gravedigger named Antonius, called it *Spirit Wind*. “The Holy Spirit is powerful in these tunnels,” he would say. “He watches over the Saints. You can feel Him all around you!”

Titus slid the lamp closer to his work. In this section of the tunnel there were no *lucemarias*—the shafts that let in sunlight from the upper world. His small lamp was all he had, so he kept its oil replenished and its wick carefully trimmed.

All morning he’d been painting a fresco above the entrance to a *cubicula*. Most Christians buried in the tunnels were placed in *loculi*, shelf-like compartments

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stacked in vertical rows. A cubicle was an entire room reserved for martyrs and saints. It was a great honor for Titus to have this job. He had been laboring here for weeks. Each morning he awoke, ate his simple breakfast, then took his pick, his basket, and his oil lamp and walked outside the gates of Rome to these catacombs along the Appian Way.

The need for Christian burial sites was growing. Followers of Jesus Christ were multiplying, providing targets for a new wave of persecution under Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Titus had worked with urgency, carving away the soft stone called *tufa*, placing it in baskets, then signaling other gravediggers to haul it up through the shafts. Now that the digging was over, he had come to his favorite part—the painting and decorating.

He applied a dab of white to the cloak of the man in his picture. It was Jesus the Good Shepherd. Every brush stroke made Jesus more alive, his staff in one hand, a lamb slung over his shoulders, a bold expression of love on his face. Throughout the mighty city of Rome, Christians used this image to express their faith in Jesus. They knew they could be caught, tortured, or even killed at any moment. Just to meet together for prayer was a mortal risk. Yet they believed that Jesus—their Good Shepherd—would protect them. They believed that even if they died, he would carry them home to heaven.

Titus longed to have such courage. It was the

courage he had seen in his parents before they were captured and crucified, before that dark night that changed his life forever. How vividly he remembered it—choking on his hatred and panic, fleeing with his Uncle Marcus through back alleys, hiding in doorways, waiting fearfully in darkness until the soldiers returned to their garrisons. It was only later that they heard about the bravery of Titus' parents. Up until they had taken their last breaths, they had never denied their faith. Like so many martyrs before them, from bishops to common folk, they had died with the name of Jesus on their lips.

Every night, Titus clenched his teeth and tried not to soak his pillow with grief. Crying was admitting defeat! When he wept it was as if the Emperor's reign grew stronger, but he could not stop his burning tears. No matter how kind Uncle Marcus and Aunt Lydia were to him, the pain of missing his parents was an unquenchable fire in his bones. And along with the hatred and grief there was always that disturbing question. Like a dark figure it stalked him, casting shadows on all his thoughts and feelings. He whispered it over and over in the darkness.

If the soldiers come for me, will I have the courage my parents did? Will I be able to honor them and the Lord?

He doubted it. Like every other Roman, he knew the realities of torture and death. Roman citizens had a strong thirst for blood. Titus had talked to eyewitnesses of

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the gladiator games in the Coliseum. He had heard about the piles of bodies thrown into a pit outside the arena. Even worse, he had heard every gory detail of the recent persecution of Christians. Men, women, even youths his age were burned, beheaded, or flogged by whips until their veins and muscles were laid bare. Titus had even walked near the Coliseum one day and heard the bloodthirsty roar of the Coliseum crowd.

How do they endure? What gives them the strength?

Titus knew what the others told him--*it is the power of the Holy Spirit*. They said it with such certainty, like it was an obvious fact of life. But it didn't seem obvious to Titus. His doubts outweighed his faith. He felt that if he faced such a trial, his fears would strangle him. Despite being strong and tall for his age, he felt his legs would melt like wax beneath him. Every night he prayed for Jesus to take away his fears. Every night they lingered in his mind like shadows in the catacomb tunnels.

He lifted his brush and applied the paint carefully. Once again, the honor of this task struck him. At age thirteen he had been given the job of preparing a burial place for a saint. There were only a few rooms like these in all the tunnels. The Church often used them as places of worship, gathering for communion to honor those who had died. This very *cubicula* could one day be packed with believers.

Titus wondered who might be laid to rest here. Perhaps someone like Justin, one of the greatest Christians in Rome. Justin was so learned that he could sit with Stoics, Cynics, even worshippers of Jupiter, and convince them of the truth of the Gospel! When other believers spoke of Justin, pride burned in their eyes. He was a champion of the faith, a voice for Christ amidst an empire of pagans. Justin's school was the only official place for Christian learning in all of Rome. He had changed the lives of many people. What a blessing it was to prepare a room for a great person like that!

Titus quickly deflated his pride. He remembered what Uncle Marcus, one of the most respected gravediggers in the guild, had told him.

"We have chosen you because you have a gift for painting," said Marcus. "We are amazed at the skill moving through your young hands. But never forget, Titus, where this gift comes from. It is not yours to possess and brag about. It is God's. He has given it to you to glorify him. If you honor the Lord in all that you do, he will pour out blessings upon you. If you seek to honor yourself, he will bring you down. Think of the Saints who surround you in the tunnels. They are gathered here like a great cloud of witnesses. They lived for our Lord, not for themselves. Take strength from them."

Among those witnesses were his parents. Titus was sure of it. He felt them as he worked underground,

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especially the presence of his father, Crispus. The name of Crispus was known among all the gravediggers of Rome, because of what happened one afternoon when Titus was six years old. The men had begun a new tunnel in an area where the *tufa* was more porous than usual. Crispus was working with three other men when a section collapsed, covering his three companions. No one else was there to witness what happened next, but when they came upon the scene, they found that tons of rock had been moved by hand. Near the unconscious body of Crispus were the bodies of the three other men, bruised and cut, but still alive.

For years afterward, Titus heard *fossores* of all ages ask his father about that day. The question was always the same: How had he moved so much rock by himself in such a short time? It wasn't humanly possible!

Titus always delighted at the answer his father gave: "You're right. It wasn't humanly possible. But with God, **all** things are possible. It was his strength, not mine, that saved my three brothers."

Crispus lived to see Titus become a gravedigger, but he died before his son discovered his gift for painting. Titus wished his parents could return for a single day! He longed to honor them. He longed for them to not only see his paintings, but to tell him how he could face the world without them. Most of all, he wanted them to be proud of their son.

A voice clattered through the tunnel from far away:
“Titus! Come! It’s time to leave!”

It was Marcus. As Titus heard his uncle’s voice, he knew exactly from where it came. Titus had memorized every turn of these burial tunnels that spread out like a maze around Rome. He could navigate through them for miles, then back out again, with no lamp at all, guided only by memory and sound. Other Roman boys his age worked in the sunlight as apprentices to carpenters, stone layers, and metal workers. Many of them, especially non-Christians, scoffed at lowly gravediggers who worked in dark and smelly conditions.

Titus could think of no greater honor than preparing burial places for those waiting to be resurrected. Often he imagined the day of Jesus’ return. He visualized all the believers rising up out of the catacombs, above the Coliseum and the Circus Maximus, above the Forum and the Pantheon, above the greatest city of the greatest empire on the planet, going to meet Jesus as he appeared in glory among the clouds. What a day of triumph it would be! No more tears! No more soldiers! Even Marcus Aurelius would tremble in his palace! Titus imagined himself standing before the Lord, seeing him face-to-face, hearing Jesus say, “Well done, my son. You served the Saints well during your life.”

A rough hand grabbed his shoulder, startling him out of his reverie. “Didn’t you hear me?”

“Sorry, Uncle Marcus. I was just thinking.”

“Daydreaming is the word,” said Marcus.

Titus looked at his uncle in the dim light. Marcus was a poor man with the face of nobility. Dark brows arched his blue eyes, and his straight nose and chiseled chin gave an impression of great strength. His strong looks were coupled with a strong spirit. Marcus was a man of faith, a leader in the underground Church of Rome.

“There has been another raid,” said Marcus. “Soldiers broke into the home of one of the brethren. They took his wife and children away in chains. Tonight, after dark, we will join a prayer vigil with believers from all over the city...”

Marcus paused for a second, then added, “... including Justin.”

Titus' eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes,” said Marcus. “He's the one who called the meeting. Maybe you will even shake his hand. Now come.”

Titus fell into step behind his uncle, their lamps lighting the way. Along the tunnel walls Titus saw the symbols of the early church: the Alpha and Omega, the anchor of hope, doves with olive branches in their beaks, various scenes from the Old Testament. One of his favorites was Daniel standing between two lions, untouched by the wild beasts. Every Christian in Rome took hope from these stories of faith. They believed that

even if the lions of the Coliseum *did* tear them apart, God would deliver them.

They reached the final stairway that led to the surface. Up they went, and as they emerged in the late afternoon sunlight of a summer day, all the bustle and commotion of Rome swarmed around them. Over a million people now lived in the great city, and the Appian Way was one of its busiest highways, stretching for more than three hundred and fifty miles into the empire. Titus once spoke to a man had taken it all the way to Greece. As men who worked with pick and stone, the gravediggers marveled at its construction. Huge blocks of lava had been cut and fit together on a bed of crushed rock, then cemented together with lime. Over this cobbled surface, horse-drawn carts loaded with goods clattered loudly. Titus kept his wits about him as he walked; neither the animals nor their drivers paid heed to pedestrians.

He strode with a lively step toward the city gates, Marcus just ahead of him. He still couldn't believe that he might meet Justin in person. His heart stirred. *Maybe Justin will calm my fears. Maybe he will be the one who helps me find the peace that passes understanding.*

Titus doubted it.



CHAPTER TWO

Titus watched Aunt Lydia prepare dinner. She was in the final days of her first pregnancy. He had never known a pregnant woman before, and he was afraid her swollen womb would burst. The larger she got, the smaller seemed their home. Like other lower-class Romans, they lived in an *insulae*, a one-room apartment on the second floor of a five-story building. These wooden apartment complexes crowded the back streets of Rome. There was always the danger of fire. It seemed that every week there were clouds of dark smoke hanging over some section of the city. The buildings had no running water, and one of Titus' nightly chores was to haul what they needed for washing and drinking from the public fountain nearby.

Lydia was from Sicily, an island south of Italy in the great Mediterranean Sea. She had grown up in a family of servants on the estate of a Roman official. Her master was a hard man, greedy for wealth and political power, who got pleasure from treating his servants harshly. His presence alone was enough to make Lydia's childhood a

nightmare. Her master was only half the evil that plagued her. Her father was a drunkard who beat her during fits of rage, and the anger kindled in those years still burned occasionally inside her.

“There’s no justice in the Empire,” she would say. “Look at this mighty city of Rome. So many glorious buildings, even greater than the Greeks. But look beneath those buildings into the streets. See the poverty and the suffering of so many people! Hear the groaning and pain of the slaves! They call this great? Rome is like a piece of fruit that looks ripe on the outside but is rotten to the core.

“Praise the Lord, Titus! Praise Him that you have been called to live in the Kingdom of Heaven. Praise Him that you have found the God of love and equality, not the false gods of this rotten empire!”

Titus loved his aunt, especially when she spoke like that. She was always honest with him, treating him like a man rather than a boy. She was a remarkable woman, both in her spirit and her physical appearance. Unlike Marcus who was fair-skinned and blue-eyed, she had an olive complexion, black hair, and dark eyes that flashed with the strength of her faith. A white scar, her only inheritance from her father, ran diagonally across her left cheek.

What courage it must have taken to leave Sicily. At the same age as Titus, she ran away in the night, hitching a ride with a merchant who brought her to Rome. The merchant’s name was Metrodorus, and he showed her

amazing kindness. Her gave her lodging until she found work, treating her like a daughter. As Lydia began to trust him and his family, he shared with her his faith in a new religion stirring Rome. He told her of a God who was unlike any of the Roman gods. This was *one God over all* of creation, a Heavenly Father who loved her so much that he sent his only son to earth as a Savior. That son's name was Jesus of Nazareth, a humble carpenter who was fully God and fully human. God's power flowed from Jesus in words of wisdom, compassionate healing, even mighty miracles. As the strength of his ministry grew, multitudes flocked to him. He became such a threat to his own people, the Jews, that they convinced the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to crucify him.

Lydia had seen such crucifixions. On the day she and Metrodorus rode into Rome, a number of crosses lined the hills. Vultures perched on the dead bodies, ripping flesh in their sharp beaks. It was a hideous sight, one that made Lydia's anger burn even deeper against the Romans.

Then Metrodorus told her something that was very hard for her to understand. He said that Jesus' death had been for *all* people—that he had taken upon him *all* the sins of this ugly world. Through that cross, said Metrodorus, people could be forgiven and find new life. And to prove that this was so, God raised Jesus from the dead, bringing him to heaven with glory and power.

“The Lord Jesus loves you,” Metrodorus had said.

“He cares about every hair on your head. He wants you to be with him in heaven for eternity. He asks only that you believe in him and live your life to spread the good news of his love.”

Despite her affection for Metrodorus, Lydia sadly rejected his words. They were too good to be true—a myth. She was fiercely angry, fed up with a world that worshipped power and money. The gods of the Romans were fickle and vengeful, not much better than human beings in their actions. She wanted to believe in a God of love, but the world was filled with blood and corruption. That was why Metrodorus and his family intrigued her. They were different from the world. They possessed genuine gentleness, humility, and love. Lydia was drawn to them like a cold traveler to the warmth of a campfire.

One evening a number of Christians came to Metrodorus’ home for a prayer service. Lydia was speechless at the love she saw among them. People who would normally never associate, greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek. Slaves and laborers held hands with wealthy merchants. There were even some upper class women. The poor and the rich, the slave and free citizen, treated each other as equals, speaking of their faith in Jesus as if they were a family and he was their unseen brother.

Suddenly Lydia knew she wanted this Jesus in her life. She gave her life to him that evening, and the power of His loving presence, which she came to know as the

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Holy Spirit, filled her aching heart.

She also met Marcus that evening. He was a fourth generation Christian. His great grandfather had actually been with the Apostle Paul and had heard him preach in the final days before the Romans executed him.

Marcus was so different from Lydia. He was slow to anger, and the depth of his faith was something that Lydia instantly cherished. The two of them quickly became known among the brothers and sisters, visiting the sick and hungry, serving in any way they could. When they were married, the celebration feast lasted two days!

Now, as Lydia brought cheese, fruit, and bowls of soup to the table, Titus noticed sadness clouding her face. "What's wrong, Aunt Lydia?" he asked.

She sat down slowly at the table, as if the baby had suddenly grown heavier. The last golden light of a summer day filtered through the open window behind her. "The child has been kicking strongly all afternoon. The time is near."

Marcus reached out his strong hand and placed it on Lydia's belly. "Be glad," he said. "God has blessed us."

"I want to be glad," she said, "but my heart is heavy. What joy is there in bringing a new life into this world? Look at what happened today!"

"Do you know more about it?" asked Titus.

"Yes," she replied. "Every bloody detail. Do you remember Catus and his family?"

Titus knew them well. Catus and his sons were stone workers—tall, strong men who looked as if they could fight ten Roman guards apiece. In the church they were known as gentle giants, tender warriors. The love of Jesus poured from them in service. Whenever a brother or sister needed help in building or repair work, they offered their skills for free. If there was a need for a rescue or flight in the night, Catus and his sons were willing to risk their lives. Titus admired them greatly.

“No!” he exclaimed. “They were the ones who were taken?”

“Every one of them,” said Lydia, “including Catus’ wife and young daughter. The soldiers are becoming more brutal. The Emperor has declared that Christians are enemies of the state, and that we must be destroyed. Catus was beaten so severely that they fear he was dead before they dragged him away.”

Tears spilled from Lydia’s eyes. “This is the world our child must face,” she said. “This is what our baby can look forward to. Only God knows if this little one will even see the light of day. Maybe we’re next. Maybe they’ll come while we’re sleeping tonight and drag us to our deaths.” She began to sob.

Titus pushed his plate away from him. Hatred and fear churned his stomach. “*Jesus, help us,*” he whispered.

Daylight had faded; darkness shrouded the great city of Rome.

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Marcus stood up from the table. He spoke firmly, but Titus noticed his hands were trembling. "The Lord will not give us more than we can endure," he declared. "We need to be with others in prayer. Titus, get ready to go. I believe Justin will give us strength tonight. He will bring words from God to help us face this darkness."



CHAPTER THREE

No matter how many times Titus entered the catacombs, it still had the same effect. The cold darkness of the tunnels, along with the pungent smell of death, made his skin prickle. Most people could not stand it; they would walk for only a few yards, then gasp and scramble back to the sunlight. But Titus was a gravedigger, and after that first response faded, he could work in the tunnels all day without a thought about the gloom or stench.

No wonder the Roman guards stayed away from the catacombs. They wanted to avoid the suffocating smell, and they knew they could easily become lost in the maze of corridors. It gave Titus a sense of strength that Christians, who were tortured above ground, were masters of this subterranean world.

Tonight for this meeting with Justin, scores of believers walked together into the tunnels. Their oil lamps shed more light than Titus had ever seen underground. His heart thrilled. Perhaps Marcus was right. There *was*

strength and hope in numbers, and as the Emperor persecuted them above ground, they could rekindle each other's faith.

"Marcus!" cried Lydia, "Give me your hand."

Titus turned to look behind him. Lydia was following, her head peeping through a mass of clothing. Marcus had asked her to stay behind with neighbors because he feared that the dampness of the tunnels would be hard on her and the baby. But Lydia demanded to join them, and her strong will prevailed. She had wrapped herself in three tunics and a blanket, and when she was finished both Marcus and Titus laughed.

"I'm not sure you'll get through the tunnels," said Marcus. "You'd better bring your pick, Titus, in case we have to dig a wider passage."

Lydia also laughed, and Titus was relieved see the brightness return to her eyes.

As he watched her step carefully through the dark, he praised God for bringing such a strong woman into his life. "Here, Aunt Lydia," he said, "let me hold your lamp so you have more balance."

She smiled as she watched him walk backwards, so sure of his footing and his direction. "You must have eyes in the back of your skull, Titus."

They were headed for the crypt of Saint Paul, one of the largest rooms in the catacombs. This sacred underground vault had become a shrine for the church, a

place where believers of all ages and backgrounds could honor the Apostle who took Jesus' Gospel to the Gentiles. After traveling over much of the Empire, Paul spent his last days imprisoned in the dungeons of Rome. Emperor Nero, a vicious man, had Paul crucified upside down, adding extra humiliation to his death. The early church retrieved his body and brought it gently to its final resting place.

They reached the room and waited for the long line behind them to enter. Titus anxiously scanned the crowd, looking for Justin. He knew he would recognize him, for he had seen him once in the city. Justin had been standing in a public square, openly debating Crescens, a famous Roman philosopher. As the debate grew more heated, Crescens began to insult Justin and the other Christians who were there, even making threats on their lives. Yet Titus remembered that Justin never raised his voice. Not once did he stare with hatred at Crescens or ridicule him in front of the crowd. This only made Crescens attack more furiously. The crowd became agitated, stirring until it looked as if the debate might cause a riot. It was then the Roman guards appeared and broke up the event, warning Christians to go home or be dragged to prison.

Titus had slipped into the alleys and disappeared. As he had walked home that day, he couldn't forget the calm expression on Justin's face. He was so peaceful and confident, even under attack. *Was this the peace that*

passes understanding? If so, he wanted it his life. He wanted to wrap it around him like armor against the pain and brutality of the world.

Again, he scanned the room for Justin, struck by how the followers of Jesus came from so many social classes. The Romans ridiculed Christians as a bunch of slaves and outcasts, and it was true that poor people found in Jesus a love and self-worth they had never known before. But there were other, wealthier people, who were embracing the Savior. These were people who had a style of living Titus could only imagine—homes with tile floors, running water, servants to attend to their needs. Yet the message of a poor carpenter had changed their lives forever. Many of them had given large amounts of money to the early church, helping families who might have starved in the streets. To Titus it was a miraculous display of God's love, a challenge to the Roman belief that only the powerful would inherit the earth.

When it seemed that the underground room couldn't hold another person, Titus noticed a stir near the entrance. Then he saw Justin's face. The crowd parted for him, and he and two younger companions made their way to the back of the crypt, near the very altar that honored the Apostle Paul. Justin had a sheath of parchments in his hand. He cleared his voice and the believers grew instantly silent. Both the lamplight and the Holy Spirit burned strongly in the room.

“In this place,” said Justin, “we have communion with the greatest evangelist who ever lived. The Apostle Paul risked his life daily. He was mobbed, beaten, locked in prison. He was criticized and ridiculed. Yet he *never* took his eyes off the hope he had in Jesus Christ. In the final days of his life, chained in a Roman dungeon, he wrote these words to the church in Philippi. Listen to them my brothers and sisters.”

Justin looked around the crypt. His face was wrinkled with age, but the eyes were young and lively. They radiated the peace, strength, and confidence that Titus had admired that day in the public square. Justin turned his eyes to a parchment page while one of his younger companions held a lamp close to the words.

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain...So, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that I will know you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.

Having read the scripture, Justin paused, again

sweeping the room with his gaze, seeking out the eyes of one worshipper after another. “Brothers. Sisters. What gives a man the strength to live and speak with such confidence, such hope? What gives these qualities to any of us? Only the Holy Spirit, my loved ones! Only the Holy Spirit—who brings with Him faith and perseverance, even joy in the face of death! Most of you know that I have spent my entire life studying philosophy. As a youth and young adult in the great city of Ephesus, I read and pondered, hoping that through the thoughts of Plato and the Stoics I would come to understand God. I searched tirelessly, using all my mental energy to reach an understanding of the Divine.

“But it was not a book or philosophical system that led me to this knowledge. Instead, God used an old man—about the age I am now. I met him while walking along the beach near my home. He was a Jew who knew the Holy Scriptures through and through. What a divine appointment! God used that man to reach me. As we discussed the history of Israel and the prophecies of the coming Messiah, the old man told me that the truth I was seeking had come to this world through a single, solitary man—Jesus of Nazareth. The old man told me I would never reach God solely through my mind. I could only finish my journey through faith, through an acceptance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

“Listen, my friends. I know of what I speak. The

power of love, the power of the living God is ours through Jesus Christ. He is the end of all the searches of mankind. He is God's final Word made flesh. Each one of you here tonight possesses a treasure greater than any philosophy, greater than gold, greater than all the Roman legions combined. It is a gift we do not deserve, but it is ours! A gift given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ, who proved his love for us through the cross and the resurrection. He gives us this gift through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that binds us together here at this very moment."

Justin paused. His eyes gleamed with intensity. Titus had once heard someone describe a fellow believer as "anointed by the Holy Spirit." Surely this described Justin.

"I have sat and debated with some of the greatest minds of the Roman Empire," he continued. "Their philosophical arguments were woven together like immense tapestries. As they rolled out their reams and reams of thought, do you know what repeated itself over and over in my mind? A single verse from the Apostle Paul's first letter to Corinth: *But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.*'

"Brothers and sisters, in the eyes of this world we are weak. Under this new wave of persecution, every one of us is at risk. But I make a prophecy to you tonight. I predict that we who are being martyred for the love of Jesus will bring this great empire to its knees! I predict that

for every one of us who dies with Jesus' name on our lips, hundreds more will be gathered into the only Kingdom that matters—the Kingdom of Heaven.

“I know this is true! I have been at the Coliseum during the persecutions. I have seen slaves who were considered human waste stand up against the Empire with radiant faces. The worst thing the Emperor could do to them would not change their hearts. They had a power that could not be destroyed—the power of the Holy Spirit!

“Some of you are probably feeling fear tonight. Let that fear be changed into joy. Jesus told us we would suffer. In the Gospel of Luke, we read this.”

Justin opened the sheath of parchments again. *They will lay hands on you and persecute you...you will be brought before kings and governors on account of my name. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair on your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.*

Justin's eyes searched the worshippers gathered in the room. They were one body united, with a love that permeated the air. “What life does Jesus mean here?”

Something suddenly stirred in Titus. Without even thinking, he spoke up. “It is not the life of this world,” he blurted. “Jesus is speaking of *eternal life*. They can torture our bodies, but they cannot touch our spiritual bodies, which will live forever with the Lord. The Roman Empire will fall, but the Kingdom of Heaven goes on forever.” All

eyes turned to Titus. No one had expected a boy to speak such words.

“Well spoken, my son,” said Justin. “Your words are a blessing to all of us. Come here by my side.”

Titus hesitated.

“Go ahead,” whispered Lydia. “Go to him.”

Titus squeezed his way through the crowd and came to stand by Justin’s side. His heart was pounding.

“What is your name, young man?”

“Titus, sir. I am a gravedigger who works in these tunnels.”

Justin looked closely at him, a smile growing wider on his face. “How old are you, Titus the gravedigger?”

“Thirteen, sir.”

Justin laughed and the crowd laughed with him. It was not a mocking laughter, but one that brought warmth and acceptance.

“Well, Titus, I rejoice in your boldness. You remind me of myself at your age, never afraid to speak your mind. Tell me, have you no fear of the Romans?”

Titus swallowed. All of the emotions locked up inside suddenly flooded his mind and spirit. Tears welled in his eyes. “The truth is I’m often afraid, sir. They killed my parents, and I’m afraid that if the soldiers take me, I won’t be able to endure.”

Titus couldn’t hold back his tears. They streamed down his face, and as he looked at the others around him

he expected to see criticism and judgment of his weakness. Instead he saw only love. Justin's face suddenly grew serious.

“Remember this, young Titus. Courage is not the absence of fear or dread. Even our Lord dreaded the cross as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Yet he believed that the Father would deliver him. Courage is the result of faith, a belief that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

Justin took his large hands and laid them gently on Titus' head. “Here is a truth for you, Titus, child of God. Receive this blessing now, young gravedigger. *The living God stands by your side, and through the love of His Son you will not fall away. You will run the race until the end and receive the crown of eternal life. You will stand before our Lord and hear him say, 'Well, done, my good and faithful son.'* This is my blessing for you this very night.”

Titus had never felt the Holy Spirit as strongly as he did that moment. Warmth spread from the crown of his head into his entire body, melting away fear and confusion.

Justin took his hands from Titus and turned towards the others. “All of you, lift your lamps and candles high.”

All who had flames held them above their heads, and the warmth of the light bathed the room.

“Listen to these words from the Gospel of Saint John. *Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the*

light of life.’’

A strong *Amen* rippled through the worshippers and they began to sing a simple phrase, repeating the words over and over: *May the peace of God be with you, may the light of Christ guide your way...*

Titus stood beside Justin for the rest of the worship time, passing the bread and wine of communion from his hands to those of the great philosopher. More than ever before, he felt the presence of the Saints—from the Apostle Paul to his parents—gathered with them in that room.



CHAPTER FOUR

At home in bed that night, Titus' heart still pounded. His bed was near the open window, and through it came sounds of the night. During the day the amount of cart traffic along the streets of Rome had grown too congested. Many people had died beneath horses' hooves and the wheels of carts, problems made worse as the population of Rome continued to grow. Finally the government made a decree that horse-drawn vehicles could only travel at night while people were sleeping.

A riotous clattering and creaking of carts filled the dark city, accompanied by the neighs of horses and the curses of their masters. Titus hardly heard it. He was thinking only of Justin, of the spiritual strength that had flowed through the old man's hands.

Lydia's voice suddenly interrupted him. "Marcus and I are proud of you, Titus," she whispered. She sat down on a chair near the window. The moon was almost full and its liquid silver poured through the window onto Lydia's dark hair.

“At first I thought it was rude of you to blurt out an answer to such a great scholar. I almost clamped my hand over your mouth.” She laughed softly. One of her hands was slowly rubbing her belly. “There!” she said. “Put your hand here, Titus. Feel your new niece or nephew.”

Titus got off his sleeping mat and knelt near the chair. He placed his hand gently on Lydia’s stomach, which felt much harder than he had expected. Suddenly that hardness rippled beneath his palm, as if a foot or hand were trying to punch its way out. Titus jerked back as Lydia laughed.

“You see!” she said. “The new one isn’t born yet, and the two of you are already wrestling with each other.”

Titus chuckled and settled back on his mat. “Tell me another story about my mother,” he said.

“Do you think of them often?” asked Lydia.

“Every day. There are so many hours alone in the tunnel. My mind runs through all my memories until they are gone, and then all I have left are the stories you’ve told me.”

Lydia sighed. “Tonight calls for a story of faith, Titus. Your mother was a woman of few words, just like your uncle. But also like him she had a quiet courage. When you were only two years old, a hideous disease struck the city, especially around the Baths of Timothy. Hundreds of people died daily. It was horrible to witness. The fevers were so high that people wandered about

babbling like they were possessed. And the wailing! Never have I heard such a sound! It didn't matter your age—the scourge struck everyone. There was no family living in that quarter that wasn't touched by it.

“The gravediggers worked overtime to provide enough *loculi* for all the brothers and sisters who died. Your father and Marcus worked with only a few hours of sleep per night. While they were gone, your mother organized a group of Christian women to nurse the sick and dying.

“Now listen, Titus. You need to understand fully what courage that took. Some of the women Marcia asked to help her refused immediately. They were certain that if they entered the infected streets and apartments, they would die along with the rest. I can't blame them. No one knew for certain how the disease was passed from one person to another.

“But Marcia would not be swayed. Her quiet courage inspired some of us so greatly that we joined her. It was like going into a battle scene. Smoke was everywhere in the streets. People were burning clothing and sleeping mats, afraid that the disease was hiding in the folds of the linen. There was constant weeping. Children wandered around in a daze, or were found sitting next to the corpses of their parents.

“It was a living hell, Titus. We went from apartment to apartment, gathering the sick and taking them

to the home of a wealthy Christian woman who had opened her doors. I will never forget that sight. There on the tiles of a wealthy Roman *domus* lay the suffering bodies of so many. What else but the love of God would have created such a sight?

“We did what we could for the suffering, soothing them in their final minutes, mopping their brows with water or giving them cool drinks. Sometimes just a prayer was what they wanted the most. For those who passed on, we helped prepare their bodies for burial. Pagan or Christian, it didn’t matter; we treated them all as children of God.

“Late one afternoon we came upon an apartment that seemed deserted. The room was a mess, as if those who had lived there had left in a great hurry. We were about to leave when a pile of linen in the corner stirred and we heard a soft moan. God have mercy! Under that pile of cloth was a girl of three or four years, already in the clutches of the disease. What a pitiful sight! Her skin was bright red from the fever and her lips were cracked and dried. Her dull eyes couldn’t even focus on us. She simply lay there and moaned.

“After all that we had seen in a few short weeks, I don’t know why that child affected your mother so deeply. But Marcia sat down, gathered the girl in her arms, and wouldn’t move. She took a cool rag, and as she mopped the girl’s brow, she began to pray. At first the words were

soft and hard to hear, but then they grew stronger and stronger. Your mother rocked back and forth, praying with all the force of her spirit. I left them there and went with some of the other sisters to prepare bodies for burial. I was gone until after sunset, and when I returned, your mother hadn't budged. She just sat and rocked and prayed and whispered to the girl.

"I said, 'Marcia, you need some sleep. Let's move the girl to the sickroom. You can see her again in the morning.'

"Your mother only shook her head. 'We're not going to lose this one,' she said. 'God will answer my prayers. We're not going to lose this one.'

"There was nothing I could do. Your mother wouldn't budge. I sat with them until midnight and then had to leave and get some sleep.

"When I returned in the morning, your mother and the girl were in the exact position I had left them. But what a miraculous difference from the night before! The fever had left the girl! Her face was no longer flushed, and she was sleeping peacefully against your mother's breast.

"Marcia looked up at me and said, 'Our God is good, Lydia. Even in the midst of this hell on earth, he has answered a humble prayer.'

"That girl not only lived, Titus, but she was reunited with her parents. Her name was Cleo. In the confusion of her fever she had crept away from her own

home and found that abandoned apartment. I wish you could have been there to see the joyful faces of those parents.”

The sound of a baby’s cry floated in through the open window, prompting Titus to look again at Lydia’s swollen stomach. He remembered the fears she had expressed at dinner. What a world his new niece or nephew would have to face! “Aunt Lydia,” he said, “will you pray with me?”

“Of course.”

She reached over and took his hand. “Lord Jesus, we thank you this night for the words of your servant, Justin. We thank you for speaking through him to give strength and hope to all of us. We thank you for considering us worthy enough to suffer with you. Give us, Lord, the strength and courage to follow wherever you lead us.

“And one last thing, Good Shepherd. Tonight, if Cleo and her parents are still alive, hold them in the hollow of your hand.”

“Amen,” they both said.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Appian Way thronged with morning traffic. Carts, merchants, and workers of all types pushed their way in and out of the great city. The summer sun was already sharp as a sword. Titus walked with the other gravediggers, their picks, baskets, and lamps lashed to their backs. Their moods were brighter after Justin's encouraging words. His hope was contagious.

Suddenly a voice behind them shouted, "Friends, wait!"

Titus turned to see Peter, one of the younger gravediggers, elbow his way through the crowd. He was breathless, his face streaming with sweat.

Marcus grabbed him by the shoulder. "Peter! What is it? Speak!"

"It's just as we feared," answered Peter.

"What is? What's happened?"

"It's Catus," said Peter. "Not only was he dead by the time they got him to jail, but the prefect had his sons beheaded!"

“God help us,” exclaimed Marcus. “And what of his wife and daughters?”

“They’re gone,” said Peter. “Disappeared. No one knows where they’ve been taken, and the prefect and his guards won’t say a thing”

One of the gravediggers lifted his hands to heaven and cried, “My God, how long will you let your children suffer? How long?”

Hatred exploded in Titus. He pushed away the men beside him and began to run, smashing his way through the crowd. Crash! He chest struck a cart.

“Hey!” shouted the merchant. “Watch where you’re going, idiot!”

Titus didn’t even hear him. He was gasping for breath now, running for the tunnels. He found a clearer path at the edge of the road and continued running. He stumbled, his face bruising the ground, then stood and lurched forward again until he instinctively came to the opening of the catacombs.

Down he went into the darkness. No light. Just hatred pushing him on to escape the death and blood and torture of the Roman world overhead. He ran by memory, turning one corner after another until a strong arm captured him around the waist. He turned to strike, but found only the face of Marcus.

“Leave me alone!” Titus screamed.

“No. Stop and listen to me.”

“Why should I?” asked Titus. “So you can tell me more stories about how God loves us? So you can convince me our great Heavenly Father is in control? Where was he when my parents died? Where was he when Catus and his sons were killed? Tell me! Where?”

“You’re not the only one who feels these things, Titus. You’re not the only one who asks these questions. When I lost my sister and brother-in-law, I was furious with God for weeks. The anger burned so hot in me that I couldn’t sleep at night.

“But remember this, Titus. The scriptures tell us that the Evil One rules this world. And he has convinced many people to use violence and hatred. They choose to shed blood with their own free will. God will not force us to be good, Titus. Do you understand? We must choose this on our own. We are in a spiritual battle every day, and it is not just the Romans we are facing—it is Satan himself standing with them and goading them on.”

“But why don’t we fight?” asked Titus. “Why do we let them just take us away without even lifting a hand against them?”

“Because that is the only way to win this spiritual battle,” said Marcus. “Think of it this way, Titus. If you were to give into your anger, if you were to unleash it upon a Roman guard, if you were to kill him with all that pent-up hatred, what kind of person would you become?”

Titus grew silent, his eyes on the ground, not able

to hold his head up against the truth of Marcus' words. In his mind he saw himself striking down a Roman guard, the blood on the ground and on his hands. And then, as if in a mirror, he saw his own face twisted with revenge.

"I'll tell you what you'd become. You'd be one of them—a person of hatred. And even if you still called yourself a follower of Jesus, the truth would be that the Evil One would be your master, infecting your heart with the poison of this world. Don't you see, Titus! The victory of the cross is the victory of love! Our Lord suffered at the hands of the Romans long before your mother and father, and what did he say in his final moments? Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!

"Even if you can't fully understand this with your heart, Titus, trust me that it is true. Whether we are Roman, Jew, Greek, or slave, how long do we have in this physical world? Fifty years? Sixty or seventy if we're blessed. But if we fight the good fight, if we use the weapons of love and not the swords and arrows of this world, we will live forever in a glory that is indescribable!

"Do you understand what I am saying to you, Titus?"

Titus had raised his eyes to look squarely at his uncle, not even trying to hide the anger still burning inside him. "I understand the words. I understand them with my mind. But I don't understand them with my heart. It's just not easy."

"It will *never* be easy," answered Marcus.

Titus turned from his uncle and made his way to the cubicula to resume his work. When he lit his lamp, the warm yellow glow pushed back the darkness to reveal the painting of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Titus had given Jesus' face a look of calm strength and confidence, two emotions that seem so out of reach. As Titus' hatred subsided, the fear came seeping back. Catus and his family lived only a short distance from them. No one was safe. Who was next? Lydia? Marcus? Himself?

Titus tried to bring back the comfort of Justin's blessing. He pictured Justin's face, the believers gathered in the lamplight, the communion bread and wine passing from one to another. He tried to feel the old man's hands on his head. But each time the memory grew fainter, the colors faded, the warmth seeped away. Could it only have happened the night before? It felt like years before!

Titus tried to recall a time when his life had not been bounded by fear, a time when he had faced tomorrow without pangs of anxiety. There was no such time, even in his earliest memories.

His oil lamp sputtered. He pulled the wick out further, casting more light on his fresco that was almost finished. He looked again at the face of the Good Shepherd, and the expression of strength he had given Him. His fingers traced the contours of the lamb across the Shepherd's shoulders.

Are you really taking us to safety, Jesus? I want to believe you without doubts, but where were you yesterday when Catus was arrested? You want us to believe in heaven, but can't we have a little more heaven on earth? Can't you stop some of your best servants from dying? I know you died for us. I know you felt all the pain that we do, but we are not like you. You are the Son of God. We are just gravediggers and stone workers and mothers and father and uncles. How can you expect us to keep going under all this persecution?

"I don't want to doubt," said Titus out loud, his voice echoing in the cubicle. "I don't want to doubt, but I do! I don't want to be afraid, but I am!"

There was no response, only the fresco staring silently back at him.

* * *

At the usual time, Marcus came to fetch Titus. His uncle seemed unusually tired, the pressure and grief of recent days weighing heavily on him. Still, he took the time to say a kind word. "You're doing beautiful work, Titus. This room will be used for worship, and your painting of the Good Shepherd will touch the hearts of many people."

When they reached the Appian Way, traffic heading toward the city gates was busier than usual. The

crowd seemed agitated by something, pressing forward. The gravediggers were forced to walk in single file to avoid the many horses and carts. Even then, a merchant yelled rudely at them.

“Out of my way, filthy gravediggers! Go back underground where you belong!”

There was shouting ahead. Titus was tall enough to see over the heads of the others, and he noticed a stirring in the crowd just beyond the gates. “What’s happening?” he asked Marcus.

“I don’t know,” replied Marcus. “Stay close and keep your wits about you!”

The crowd surged, and Titus felt as if he had been swept into a river current. People pressed around him from all sides, separating him from Marcus and the other gravediggers. He tried to push back, but the force of the bodies pulled him closer and closer to the center of the crowd, the place where the shouting was louder and angrier. An elbow struck him sharply in the side, and a hand smacked him squarely between his shoulder blades. He lurched forward, unable to break his fall, his face slamming painfully against the pavement.

Flat on his stomach, he raised his head and looked around. Several other bodies were sprawled on the street around him, and it took a second before he could tell what was happening. A gang of men was attacking the fallen figures like animals—hitting, kicking, scratching, and

pulling hair.

“Christian pigs!” yelled a man whose face flamed with hatred.

“Perverts!” yelled another man dressed in an elegant toga. “We know what you do in those tunnels! Show us now! Kiss each other with your *holy kiss*.”

The man in the toga stood over a fallen woman. He kicked her savagely in the stomach, causing her to vomit on the pavement. Then he grabbed her by the hair and jerked her head upwards. The crowd surged closer, blocking out the sun.

“How about a holy kiss for me, sister?” sneered the man in the toga.

Titus’ eyes began to blur from a warm fluid. He thought it was tears until the rusty taste of blood reached his mouth. The woman near him screamed, twisting to avoid another kick. He pushed himself up with his arms, trying to reach her, trying to somehow cover her body and protect her, but a sudden pain pierced his side. He turned on his back in a spasm as a sea of hateful faces flooded overhead. They spit on him, kicked him, ripped at his tunic until it was torn from his body.

“Dog!” yelled a man directly overhead. “Child of a whore!”

Someone had a wooden staff. He could see its blurry outlines as it loomed above him. He knew the blow was coming. He tried to lift his hands to protect his head,

but they were pinned beneath someone's boots. Then it struck, a bolt of pain shooting across his head. Red, then black, clouded his vision. The faces and noises began to fade, drifting away. Darker, darker. He slipped into throbbing blackness; it was trying to swallow him completely. Then a single voice, louder than the others, caught his ears.

“Break it up! Break it up! By order of the emperor, disperse! Be gone, or you'll be taken to prison with them!”

Something cold and hard wrapped itself around Titus' ankles. Strong arms lifted him into the air. For a second, weightless in the air, he wondered if it was over, if his body was rising to meet the Lord Jesus in the sky. But there was no light, no joy, no triumph. Only the throbbing blackness. He tried to fight it off, but his strength was gone. Just before it engulfed him, he attempted to speak a word. “Marcus....” No sound came to his lips.



CHAPTER SIX

The darkness slowly cleared. It was like being at the bottom of a well looking up at a blurry patch of gray sky, blinking his eyes to make it clearer, then losing the image altogether. The throbbing in his head was duller, but that made him more aware of the pain in his back, his side, and his legs.

He mustered all his strength and sat up. Finally he could focus. All he saw was stone. Stone floor, stone walls, stone ceiling. A single door covered with bars. A tiny barred grate on the wall to his left. The cell reeked of urine and excrement from countless prisoners. A torch burned in the passageway outside; its flickering caused shadows to dance through the bars and onto the floor before him.

Marcus? Where are you? he thought

Something stirred in the room. There was someone else in the cell. Titus' eyes, trained from so many hours in the catacomb tunnels, made full use of the bare light, and he could see the dark outline of another body curled in a far corner. A single word, more like a moan, came from the

twisted form.

“Water!”

Titus dragged himself across the stones to the other prisoner. He could see that it was an older man, not Marcus. He felt disappointment and relief all at the same time. The beard on the man's face was tinged with gray, and there were deep wrinkles around his eyes. He, too, had been wounded. The left side of his tunic was wet with blood. Sensing Titus' presence, the old man opened his eyes, one of them covered with a gray cataract.

“Water, please,” begged the old man.

“I don't have any,” said Titus. “Let me see if I can get a guard.”

For the first time since the crowd's attack, Titus stood. The floor shifted and swayed beneath him, his legs like tree trunks too thin and green to support the branches above. He collapsed again on the cold floor, then crawled slowly and painfully to the barred door. “Hello! Is anyone there?”

Listening for a response, Titus became aware of myriad sounds in the passageway. Had they been there all along? It was a blending of many voices—pained voices, murmuring, moaning and weeping.

This is what hell must be like, he thought.

He tried again. “Help! Anyone! We need water.”

Loud footsteps approached from the shadowy end of the corridor. Titus focused intensely until he saw the

figure of a Roman soldier drawing near. The man was about the same age as Marcus, but much taller. He wore the uniform of the empire: scale armor covering a tunic that fell just short of his knees. Two wide leather belts circled his waist, one for his sword, and the other for his dagger. The blades of both weapons gleamed in the torchlight. His sandal-like boots, open at the heel and toe, had iron hobnails on the sole, causing them to click and scrape across the stone floor as he approached.

“Keep quiet!” the guard ordered.

“But there’s a man here who needs water desperately.”

The guard reached to his waist, his fingers curling around the handle of his dagger, then suddenly stopped, leaning over to peer closely at Titus. “You’re only a boy,” he said. “Where are your parents? Were they captured with you?”

“I have no parents,” replied Titus, trying hard to fix his eyes on those of the soldier. The man’s face had no expression. It was neither cold nor warm, like a statue that had been brought to life but given no emotion.

“No parents?” said the soldier. “Then that explains why you’re a fool three times over. A fool for following this Jesus, a fool for being captured, and a fool for asking your enemy for a drink of water.”

Titus refused to be intimidated. “I’m not asking for myself,” he said. “I’m asking for the old man over in the

corner. He's badly wounded."

The guard suddenly pulled the dagger from his belt, knelt swiftly, and brought the steely point of its blade to Titus' throat. Titus expected a look of anger, even hatred, but the soldier's face and eyes were still emotionless. Only his voice gave away his feelings. "You are as ignorant as the others. You don't seem to know what you are up against. We hold your lives in our hands. Don't you see that? We have been ordered to crush every last one of you."

Just as words had sprung from his lips to answer Justin, Titus now found himself speaking without thinking. "I *do* know what I'm up against. My own parents were crucified."

The soldier was so close that Titus could feel his hot breath. The man said nothing, still holding the knife to Titus' throat, but something changed in his face. His eyes took on a questioning look, searching Titus as if he were looking for the answer to a riddle. His hands gradually relaxed their grip. "What is your name?" asked the soldier.

"Titus."

"Do you know where you are, Titus?"

"In a dungeon."

"Not just any dungeon. You're in one of the underground holding cells of the Coliseum. Tomorrow, you and the others in this group of fools will be flogged and fed to lions. Or you will be forced to walk across nails

and sharp stones. Or you may be burned slowly. Tens of thousands of people will come with their families and enjoy the spectacle as you die. They will eat their picnic lunches and cry for your blood.”

Titus’ skin began to crawl with fear, but he kept his eyes trained on the soldier.

“Do you think you will die bravely, Titus?”

“Would you die bravely if you were in my place?” he responded.

“How dare you speak to me that way!” said the soldier.

He tightened his grip again, his face twisted with anger, but just as Titus feared the man might slit his throat, he let go of him altogether, pushing him down to the floor. The soldier rose to his feet, towering in the torchlight as a low chuckle rumbled from his huge chest.

“I don’t understand any of you. What glory is there in dying for a god you’ve never seen? What makes you so sure you’ll go to heaven? I, Fabian, have personally seen dozens of you die, and I can’t understand you. Either you are the greatest uprising of fools this empire has ever seen, or the rest of us are missing something that is right before our eyes.”

Fabian laughed again, but it wasn’t a laugh that sprang from humor. Instead, it was a cold sound, like a chain dragging across stone. “Fools. All of you. Dying in your foolishness while thinking you are heroes. No wonder

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you draw such crowds to the arena. Who could ask for better sport?"

He spat on the ground near Titus' head, then turned on his heel and walked away. He had gone only a few steps when Titus mustered his strength and called out: "Water. We still need water for the old man in this cell."

Fabian stopped dead in his tracks. Titus swallowed hard, wondering if he had spoken his last words. Slowly the soldier turned—a Goliath in gleaming armor—and began to chuckle once again, a chuckle that turned to full laughter ringing through the stone passageway.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Titus had never known a longer night. Sleep was impossible. Pain wracked his body and his throat ached with thirst. The ghostly shadows from the torchlight joined the drifting murmurs and groans of other prisoners. Numerous times he crawled to his cellmate, but the old man was unconscious, breathing hard and raspy through parched lips.

Worse than the pain and the smells, or even his fears of what the morning might hold, were his questions about Marcus. Had his uncle escaped the crowd? Had he made it home to Lydia, or was he lying unconscious on the floor of another cell, his body bleeding, needing someone to tend to his wounds?

Do you think you will die bravely, Titus?

Fabian's question ran through his head. Titus let it sink to the deepest part of him. In simple words, this had been the question hovering over all his life, the one that clouded his days and woke him up in the middle of the night. *Will you have the courage? When the time comes,*

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will you be able to die with honor? The pounding question was as persistent as the pain that beat against his skull.

For years, the answer to that question had been *I don't know! I don't know if I have the courage. I'm afraid! Afraid of what each day might hold, afraid for myself and Marcus and Lydia, afraid of ever reaching the moment of testing.*

Now that moment was near, and the dreaded question had been voiced by the very lips of his enemy. *Do you think you will die bravely?*

Still sinking deep within him, the question hit bottom, fanning out to search every nook and cranny of his spirit. Lying on the floor of a Coliseum cell, his worst fears realized, Titus found himself actually waiting for an answer, expecting the old dread and fear to rise up inside him like ice water through his veins. But all he felt was calmness, a strange quietness untouched even by his physical pain. He couldn't understand it. Was this peace or was he simply numb from the beating he had taken? When the morning came, would he feel the same?

Footsteps echoed in the corridor. Titus propped himself on one elbow and watched the barred door. The hulking shape of Fabian came into view, his sword and dagger glittering cruelly in the torchlight. He stopped at the door and Titus noticed that his hand held something. The soldier leaned down and placed the object through the bars, quickly removing his hand and walking away as suddenly

as he had appeared.

Titus crawled to the object, and before he could touch it he knew what it was. A cup! He reached out and lifted it to his lips, dipping his tongue into the cool water inside. His throat ached for the liquid, but instead he held the cup carefully and slid his way across the cell to his companion. “Wake up,” he said, shaking the old man’s shoulder. “Wake up, old man. I have water for you.”

Slowly the old man opened his eyes, focusing the only good one on Titus’ face. “Water?”

“Yes,” said Titus. “Lift your head slightly so I can bring it to your lips.”

With a groan of pain the man lifted his head. Titus pressed the cool water against his lips, and the man sucked it down greedily, draining the deep cup in a matter of seconds. Titus placed his hand behind the man’s head and gently helped him lay it back on the floor.

“Are you a follower of the Lord Jesus?” whispered the old man.

“Yes, I am,” replied Titus. “That’s why I’m here. A crowd was beating me to death until the soldiers broke it up.”

“Yes,” said the old man. “It is happening all over the city. Not since the reign of Nero has there been so much persecution. Are you badly hurt?”

“I don’t think so. My strength is coming back.”

The man lifted one of his hands and groped until he

found Titus' arm, squeezing it gently. "You're just a boy. How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"What is your name?"

"Titus."

"I am Jason," said the man. "They came for me at my home because I had openly spoken of Jesus in the public square. They followed me right to my doorstep and I didn't even see it coming. It doesn't matter to them whether you are an innocent boy or a blind old man whose family is gone and whose life is almost over. They don't care. Young or old, we're enemies of the state—vermin they feel they must extinguish."

The water had brought some strength back to the old man. He rolled to his side and looked squarely at Titus. "Do you know what they really fear?" Jason asked. "It is not us. We have never lifted a weapon against them. What they fear is the Holy Spirit! What they fear are the teachings of our Lord, which break down the walls between people and make them equal. What they fear is that they can't control us. Roman legions have marched across the globe, conquering people with languages and skin colors you can't even imagine, Titus. It is the greatest empire the world has ever seen, all based on control and fear.

"And now, not even their worst threats will make us bow before them. They fear a power they have never

seen before—the power of the Spirit living inside us.”

Jason clasped Titus’ arm again, as familiar as if he had known him all his life. “I feel the Spirit’s power in you, Titus. It has given you courage and peace beyond your age. How did you get me the water?”

“I asked the guard named Fabian for it.”

“He told you his name? He listened to you?”

“I didn’t think so. He laughed and threatened me with his dagger, but just a few moments ago he brought the water anyway.”

“We need to pray for him,” said Jason. “There’s a spark of kindness in his heart, a door that is slightly open. We must pray that Jesus will walk through that door and enter fully into Fabian’s heart.”

Jason squeezed Titus’ hand harder and began to pray. “Lord Jesus, you are here with us in the darkness of this cell. I thank you for bringing Titus to my side, and for the water he secured at the risk of his life. We believe, Lord, that even Fabian is your child. We remember the centurion whose faith you admired. We remember that you told us to love our enemies. And so we pray for Fabian now. Let your salvation come upon him this night. Let your Holy Spirit, released through the lives of the prisoners in these cells, touch Fabian’s heart and convince him of his need to change. Save him, Lord! Save him! Amen.”

“I have never had a single kind thought for my enemies,” said Titus. “I’ve always hated them or feared

them.”

“I understand,” said Jason. “I felt the same way for years. Then one day I heard Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount, and it was as if my ears had been opened for the first time. I memorized those words and wrote them on my heart. *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. For if you love only those who love you in return, what reward do you have?*”

“Do you have ears to hear these words, Titus? Can you understand the power in them? They are not of this world, and only those who have received the Spirit can understand them fully.”

The old man suddenly winced, clutching his side. Titus noticed that the bloodstain on Jason’s tunic had grown larger. “You are bleeding to death,” said Titus.

“I don’t think so,” answered Jason. “The flow is slowing down. I just need to sleep. Lay near me, Titus, so I can feel your presence in this wretched place.”

Titus lay down at Jason’s side as the old man rolled on his back and fell quickly into deep sleep. The ceiling of the cell twisted and writhed with shadows, and as if all the prisoners had finally fallen to sleep, an eerie quiet settled over everything.

Of all the images and thoughts that might have

filled Titus' mind at that moment, the last one he expected was the face of Fabian. He had never prayed for his enemies before, and he suddenly realized that many of Jesus' prayers must have been for those who persecuted him. When the Lord's hands and feet had been pierced, draining blood like the wound in Jason's side, had he not said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do?"

"Lord Jesus," he said out loud. "I, too, pray for the salvation of Fabian. Wherever he is at this moment, Lord, enter his heart and change him. Draw him to you, so that he can receive the joy of your love.

"Please protect Marcus and Lydia and Justin. Hold them close in your arms. Protect the baby so that it will live to see the light.

"And one more thing, Lord. I pray that the calmness I am feeling tonight will not disappear when the morning comes. Give me the strength and the courage to honor you no matter what happens. Amen."

Peace settled over Titus in the stillness of the cell, and he finally relaxed into a sleep that covered even his pain. As he began to breathe the slow rhythm of slumber, he did not hear the departing footsteps of the man who had been listening silently at the cell door. He could not see the face of a Goliath streaked with tears.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Titus awoke with a splitting headache, every cell of his body crying out for water. How long had he slept? It was impossible to guess the time of day. Only a slight gray light at the barred grate suggested it was morning.

He turned on his side to face Jason, who was curled up with his knees close to his chest. The old man's bleeding had slowed during the night, but it hadn't stopped. How much more blood could he lose? Titus placed his hand on the old man's forehead. The skin there was cold and clammy. He removed his outer tunic and carefully covered Jason's upper body. *Please Lord, don't let him die!*

The prison corridor stirred with new sounds. Titus sat up, then tried standing, ignoring the sharp pains in his back and lower legs. This time he was able to stretch to his full height without growing dizzy. Slowly he walked to the cell door and craned his head to get a view of the corridor's full length.

It was much longer than he had expected, extending far to both the right and left before it curved out of view. For the first time, Titus caught glimpses of the other prisoners. Arms reached into the corridor, faces pressed against the bars, voices clattered against the cold gray stone. Then a chilling sound overrode them all—the roar of an animal from somewhere down the corridor.

Directly across from Titus, about four feet to the right, was a cell much larger than the one he and Jason shared. He could see about half its interior from where he stood. On the floor of the cell were two men and a woman, their clothes stained with mud as if they had been dragged across the countryside. A fourth person, a man dressed in the finer clothes of the merchant class, suddenly appeared at the bars. His face was plump, the extra folds of his chin hiding his neck. His dark eyes peered out from under bushy brows. His tunic was stained with blood and mud, and yet he held his head high with a sense of pride.

He looked directly at Titus. “I heard the guard called Fabian as he spoke to you. I also heard you and the old man praying for him. I suggest, instead, that you pray for yourself and the rest of us. A Roman soldier will not change. He has been raised and trained like an obedient dog to follow every command of the emperor. He has a thirst for blood, just like the thousands of spectators that will fill this Coliseum in a short time. The Evil One has stirred them up, and they will not be satisfied until this

arena is soaked with our blood. Pray for yourself, young man. Pray that you will not crumble when you face the test." The plump man spat into the corridor, and then disappeared into his cell.

As if his words were an announcement, Titus now became aware of a new sound rising above the noises of the corridor. It was a low roar, slowly growing louder, the crowd beginning to fill the Coliseum. And suddenly the old fear rose up in his stomach, sending cold fingers of dread through his whole body. *Is this how it will end, Lord? Dying before thousands of people? Is this how you will send me to meet my parents?*

A sharp sound shot through the corridor—a metallic clang like that of a hammer on an anvil—coupled with the cries of prisoners. At the far end of the corridor on the right, just at the place where it began to curve, two Roman guards appeared. They were striking at the bars of the cells, barking orders at the prisoners.

"Please give us water! Please!" cried a woman's voice.

"You don't need water where you're going!" laughed one of the soldiers, taking a metal rod and beating against the woman's hands where they clasped the bars. Her scream ripped through the corridor.

"That's right," said the second soldier. "You don't need food *or* water. You'll soon be in your precious heaven and then you'll have everything you need! Not

much longer to wait.”

“Unless you’d like to go there right now,” said the first soldier, striking the bars again with a brutal slash.

The second soldier turned and looked down the corridor towards Titus. “Which of you dogs would like to be first?” he shouted. “Which of you wants to take the first trip to heaven?”

“I say we let the Fates decide,” said the first one. “Let’s cast lots.”

“Good idea,” said the second one.

The first soldier pulled something from his pocket, knelt near the ground, and threw it across the floor. “Cell number seven,” he laughed. “The Fates have given you the first trip to heaven.”

The soldiers walked in Titus’ direction. Was this cell number seven? His heart quickened as they grew nearer, but they stopped some distance away. One of them pulled a ring of keys from the belt around his waist and opened a cell door. “Come on,” he shouted. “Out with you. The law-abiding citizens of Rome have paid good money to see you die. We won’t keep them waiting.”

Three men and a woman filed out of the cell as the soldiers prodded them from behind with the wooden clubs. The noise of the crowd was now like a wave crashing overhead. The Coliseum could hold 50,000 spectators, and Titus knew it would be full on a day like this. The four prisoners were pushed ahead of the soldiers until they

reached the far curve of the corridor. Then they turned left and filed through a door. Titus' heart was still racing. *Who will be next?*

“What’s happening, Titus?”

It was Jason’s weak voice. Titus turned to find the old man sitting upright, clutching his side and wincing with the pain. “They’re beginning to take us into the arena,” said Titus. “They’re casting lots to see which cell goes next.”

Jason smiled weakly. “It’s fitting,” he said. “When our Lord was crucified, they cast lots for his clothing. It’s fitting.”

The old man coughed, a raspy rattling sound, as if something were loose in his rib cage. He wiped his mouth with his hand. “Come, Titus,” he said. “Give me your arm. Help me to the door.”

Titus moved to Jason and helped him slowly to his feet. The few steps to the door took a long time. The old man slumped against Titus, his wobbly legs unable to move more than a few inches at a time. Jason’s blood-soaked tunic rubbed against Titus’ undergarment. They reached the cell door, where Titus wrapped the old man’s fingers around the bars. Jason gripped tightly and was able to stand by himself. The old man’s determination surprised Titus, but he was even more surprised by what came out of Jason’s mouth.

“*May the peace of God be with you,*” sang the old

man. *“May the light of Christ guide your way.”*

It was the song they had sung in the catacombs with Justin. It seemed to bring strength to Jason as he sang it, for his body straightened up and his hands held firmer to the bars. *May the peace of God be with you. May the light of Christ guide your way.*

Other prisoners began raising their voices, the simple chorus filling the stone corridor. Over Jason’s shoulder, Titus could see the door of a nearby cell being opened and the prisoners being prodded from within by the soldiers. One of the captives was a girl about Titus’ age. Her hands had been tied in front of her, and she had been stripped of everything except her undergarment. A reddish-brown gash ran the length of her forehead, and her legs and thighs were deeply bruised. She glanced down the corridor, her eyes catching Titus’ for an instant. She was smiling and singing.

May the peace of God be with you. May the light of Christ guide your way.

* * *

Waiting was the hardest part. All morning and into the early afternoon, soldiers prodded, dragged, and pushed prisoners toward their deaths in the arena. Each time they drew near, Titus thought he would be next. His heart would pound from the adrenaline, and he would close his

eyes, regretting only that he had not had been able to say goodbye to Marcus and Lydia. The sounds of the soldiers' boots on the hard stone would near his cell, and then pass by. He was forced to wait once again.

Outside, the savage sounds of the arena struck fear into the prisoners' hearts. They couldn't hear the cries of others prisoners, but they could clearly hear the crowd's reaction. It was like the roar of a beast—crescendos of bloodthirsty hatred and rage. If Titus had been able to hear the responses of those who were dying, he would have felt better. Instead he could only wonder, and his mind filled with the worst images imaginable, gathered from gruesome stories he had heard about these “days of sport” in the arena. He longed to know if his fellow believers were dying faithfully, refusing to bow before the Emperor? Was the Holy Spirit giving them the strength they needed?

Sometime about midday, a different group of soldiers came marching into the corridor. This time they had a prisoner in leg chains, a younger man who had been worked over with a whip. He was stripped to his loincloth, his muscular upper torso mapped with bloody streaks. The soldiers pushed him directly towards Titus' cell. Titus moved back away from the door, standing near the weak body of Jason, who was curled in a corner. The door opened. Without even glancing at Titus, the soldiers shoved the man into the cell. He sprawled headlong, his chained hands unable to break his fall. The door closed

again with a heavy clang.

Titus knelt down and helped the young man roll onto his back. His face had been beaten so severely that his eyes were nearly swollen shut. His front teeth were broken and blood oozed from the corner of his mouth. As Titus rolled him over, the man gripped Titus tightly. “Where am I?” he asked.

“In the cells of the Coliseum,” replied Titus.

“Are there many here with us?”

“It’s hard to tell,” answered Titus. “But it seems that most of the cells are full.”

“Then I’m thankful. The worst way to die is to be separated from the Body. When they dragged me into an alley, I was afraid I would die there, surrounded only by Roman guards.”

The young man turned his head to the side and coughed—a mixture of phlegm and blood gurgled through his lips. He made an extra effort to open the slits of his eyes as he turned again to face Titus. “You’re nearly as young as I am,” he said. “What is your name?”

“Titus.”

“I’m Antonius. It was my hotheaded temper that landed me here. I asked for it. But what about you?”

“I’m a gravedigger. My uncle and I were returning through the city gates with the other *fossores* when a crowd attacked us. I never saw whether or not they captured my uncle.”

Antonius tightened his grip on Titus' arm. "This is one of the darkest days of persecution. We have lost a great light. A great light."

"What do you mean?" asked Titus.

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what? What's happened?"

"They have killed Justin and some of his best students. The greatest voice of our fellowship has been silenced."

The news was a dagger to Titus' heart. He hung his head and began to weep. "Not Justin," he cried. "Not Justin!"

"Do you know him?" asked Antonius, struck by Titus' strong reaction.

Titus couldn't answer. If the Emperor had killed the greatest Christian in Rome, who would lead the believers now? Who would be their voice against the false gods of the empire? Titus wept not only for Justin, but also for those like Marcus and Lydia and Jason who had taken strength from Justin's passion for the Gospel.

"Do you know him?" asked Antonius again. "It will help you to speak about it."

"I met him just two nights ago," Titus was finally able to say. "He laid his hands on me and blessed me."

With great effort, Antonius rolled to his side, so that now he could grip Titus' arms with both his hands. "Don't weep, Titus. Justin's blessing will live on in you. It

will live on in all of us. Listen to me. Let me tell you how our teacher died, so that you will know that our faith is true.”

Titus lifted his chin from his chest and looked into Antonius’ swollen eyes. “Tell me,” Titus said.

“Justin was in the middle of teaching a class when the soldiers broke into his school. He did not struggle at all. They arrested him and some of his best students and dragged them into the court before the prefect Rusticus. Many of us were outside the building. As each word was spoken, it passed through the crowd like a wave.

“Rusticus hates the Christians. Like the Emperor, he wants to see us bow before the empire. That is exactly what he said to Justin: ‘Come forward and sacrifice to the gods. Submit to the Emperor.’

“Justin answered, ‘No one in his right mind will give up his faith for faithlessness.’

“Then Rusticus asked, ‘And what is this faith that you profess?’

“‘I worship the God of the Christians, the maker of all creation, visible and invisible, and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the bringer of salvation and the teacher of good disciples,’ Justin replied.

“‘And where do you and the Christians assemble?’ asked Rusticus.

“‘Wherever we choose and wherever we can. Do you think we all meet in the same place? No—because our

God cannot be confined to one place. He fills all of heaven and earth, and we worship Him everywhere.'

"'Listen to me,' said Rusticus. 'If you do not obey, you will be tortured without mercy. Do you think that if you are whipped and beheaded you will go to heaven?'

"'I do not just think so,' said Justin. 'I know it. So this is our desire, to be tortured for our Lord, Jesus Christ, and to be saved. For then we will have the greatest confidence when we stand before him in the final court—the court of our Lord and Savior.'"

Antonius paused. He was running out of energy. "Then all of Justin's students, one after another, said 'Do as you wish with us, for we are Christians, and we do not sacrifice to idols.'"

Titus could imagine the scene. Everyone in Rome knew of Rusticus, a man whose hatred for the Christians was legendary. "Tell me," asked Titus. "What happened then?"

"Rusticus stood," said Antonius, "and read the sentence so many of us have heard. 'Those who will not sacrifice to the gods and obey the Emperor will be scourged and beheaded according to the laws.' Then they placed all of them in chains and dragged them from the court to the place of execution. I followed at a distance, mingling with the crowd, and I saw them whipped and beheaded—every one of them."

"And what about you?" asked Titus. "How did you

get caught?”

“There were people weeping in the crowd as they watched Justin, but no one was speaking out for fear of the guards. I could not help myself. I started shouting, ‘Praise to the Lord Jesus Christ! Praise to the Lord Jesus Christ!’ The soldiers arrested me and dragged me into an alley. They beat me until I blacked out, and then I woke up here.” Antonius released his hands from Titus’ arms and slumped back to the ground.

“Rest,” said Titus, “we don’t know when they’ll come for us.”

Antonius closed his eyes. Titus felt numb. The story of Justin’s death may have given courage to Antonius, but it left Titus with a great emptiness in his gut. Every word of Justin’s blessing was still fresh in Titus’ ears.

The living God stands by your side, and through the love of His Son you will not fall away. You will run the race until the end and receive the crown of eternal life. You will stand before our Lord and hear him say, ‘Well done, my good and faithful son.’

Titus tried hard to remember the warmth and encouragement he had felt as Justin laid hands on him, but it wouldn’t return. Only the cold of the cell and the realization of Justin’s death remained. Justin had said the Kingdom of Heaven, not the Roman Empire, would be the one to last. And now he was dead, beheaded by the empire

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he said would fall. What was the truth?

Perhaps, thought Titus, it will be the Roman Empire that survives. A thousand years from now, when Rome is still the most powerful empire on earth, maybe every Christian will be forgotten. Maybe there will be none of us left to tell the stories of what happened to the believers.

With Antonius' body before him, Jason's body behind him, and the roar of the crowd surging over the arena outside, Titus waited quietly in the cell for the arrival of the soldiers. The emptiness opened such a hole inside him that he felt he would fall into it and disappear.



CHAPTER NINE

Titus felt he had already died. The gaping emptiness inside him numbed all his feelings, even fear. He lay on his back in the cell, and the sounds of the drama going on around him faded into the distance. The voices of the other prisoners, the thud of the soldiers' boots, the jangling of chains, the roar of the Coliseum crowd—none of it mattered anymore. It was as if a heavy stone had been rolled on his chest and it was slowly crushing the life out of him.

It was more than the loss of Marcus and Lydia, more than the death of Justin, even more than the fear of waiting for death that weighed so heavily on him. The worst of it all was that he had failed. The moment of his test had come as Antonius told him of Justin's death. It was that *exact* instant when Justin's blessing should have given him the strength to endure. And it was at that instant that he failed, losing all hope and courage.

The moments passed slowly, or quickly, Titus couldn't say. He had never felt so alone, not even during

all the hours he had worked in the catacomb tunnels. *Lord Jesus, where are you?*

It was a long time before Titus noticed that the noises around him had ceased. The roar of the crowd was gone, and so were the sounds of soldiers coming and going in the corridor. He shifted his gaze to the grate at the top of the cell and saw something he thought he would never see again—a fading gray light. It was dusk in the great city of Rome. His life had been spared, at least for the moment, but the thought brought no joy to his heart. It only meant he had to wait in the center of his emptiness for another day. Another day of torture.

“It wasn’t our time,” said Antonius.

With great effort, Titus sat up and looked at his cellmate. Antonius’ face was a horrible mask, streaked with blood, swollen and bruised.

“What I wouldn’t give for a cup of water,” said Antonius.

Water. Titus suddenly realized how thirsty he was, and the physical craving for a drink roused him out of his depression. “Last night a guard brought us some. I asked him and he came back later and slid a cup through the door.”

“Do you remember the guard’s face?” asked Antonius. “Maybe you will see him again and he will have mercy.”

Of course Titus remembered the guard’s face. How

could he forget Fabian's stone-like expression and the eyes that seemed to look straight through him? Now that it was night, would Fabian return? Would he show compassion toward the three of them, or scoff at their suffering? Would the prayers that he and Jason had offered make any difference, or simply fall short on their way to a God that now seemed so far away?

Titus stood and walked to the cell door. At least he had a task, some work to do for the moment, and it took his mind off thoughts of Marcus, Lydia, and Justin. Torches burned brightly in the corridor. They hissed and sputtered as the walls writhed with shadows. It was impossible to tell how many of the other cells still had prisoners, but Titus could clearly hear the weeping of some of those around him.

He stood for a long time, hands grasping the iron bars, his eyes searching the corridor from one end to the other. He heard a grating noise far to his left, and the silhouette of a very large person entered the corridor. Titus knew immediately it was Fabian—there was no mistaking that hulking figure. The guard moved slowly down the corridor, checking one cell after another as cries for water rang out from the prisoners. Fabian said nothing, just continued to walk in Titus' direction. When he was only a few feet away, Titus could see his face clearly in the torchlight.

Fabian was smiling. "So, young gravedigger," he

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said, "God has spared you."

God? Why didn't Fabian say gods?

"My wife and my son will be pleased," Fabian continued.

"Why?" Titus asked.

"Because they are both believers in your Lord Jesus Christ."

Titus' eyes widened. Fabian moved closer to the cell door, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching. His stone expression had melted away, and for the first time, Titus saw the man behind the soldier's mask.

"You're surprised?" whispered Fabian. "Perhaps even glad? I can tell you that it has brought nothing but grief to me. My dream, even when I was your age, was to grow up and become an officer in the Emperor's army. I have been a good soldier, following orders exactly, serving with loyalty. It is possible that I could soon be promoted to centurion."

He paused, again glancing over his shoulder. "But who would promote a soldier who is living with the enemy?"

Fabian grew more agitated. He moved away from Titus and paced the corridor back and forth, his hand clenching and unclenching the hilt of the sword at his side. Then he moved again to stand even closer to Titus. "You're the same age as my son, Titus. And when you

faced me last night and spoke without fear, I felt something that I have been trying to fight. *I felt I wanted to know this Savior of yours.* I don't know why it was you who caused me to feel this. Both my wife and my son have been speaking to me of Jesus, but their words only made me angrier. I yelled at them, I threatened them, I even thought of turning them into the authorities!"

He leaned closer, and Titus could see large beads of sweat on his forehead. "Do you understand, Titus? Can you even imagine? I was so dedicated to the Emperor that I thought of turning over my own family to be killed!"

Then Fabian did a strange thing. He stepped back from the cell and held his hands before him, palms upward, closing and opening his fists, closing and opening, staring at them as if they were the hands of a stranger. "One night as I lifted my hands to strike my wife, I simply froze. I couldn't do it. My love for her and my son wouldn't let me. And then I knew it was hopeless—that I was caught between the Emperor and this Jesus who had invaded my house."

Fabian dropped his hands to his side in a gesture of surrender. "I don't know why God used you to reach me, Titus. When you spoke last night, I saw courage greater than that of the soldiers I work with. It was courage unlike theirs because it was not based on hatred or fear. It was *peaceful*. Later, after I brought you the water, you didn't realize that I stayed at the cell door and listened."

Fabian drew closer, and Titus could see tears running down the guard's cheeks. "As you and the old man prayed for me, I felt something I have never felt before. It was a great power moving around me, surrounding me. I have occasionally prayed to the gods, especially Mars, god of war, but I have never felt a power like that. It was *real*, Titus. Not something I made up in my head.

"When I got home, my wife and son could see that something had happened, that something had changed in me. I sat them down and told them the whole story. They just sat there quietly with tears running down their cheeks. Their faces had that same expression I saw in you, Titus."

Fabian suddenly stood taller, as if he had heard some distant command. "But I still wasn't convinced. I told them to pray for you and the old man, and that if by some miracle, both of you were alive when I returned, I too would follow this Jesus no matter what consequences it brought to me."

Fabian reached to his belt, pulled off a ring of keys, and inserted one in to the lock on Titus' cell door. Titus backed away. He had been listening to Fabian's story in stunned amazement, his heart gradually warming to the miracle that God had placed right before his eyes. And yet as Fabian turned the key in the door, Titus felt a tinge of fear. Could a Roman soldier really give his heart to the Lord? How was it possible?

Fabian entered the cell, no longer glancing over his

shoulder. He noticed the way Titus pulled back from him. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “There is more. I told my son that if you were here, I would release you and the old man. I am counting on the fact that there is a lot of confusion on these days in the Coliseum. It’s difficult for our guards to keep an accurate count of the prisoners. I am going to release you and the old man. It was your prayers that finally reached my heart of stone, Titus, and this is my way of thanking you. My son is waiting in a side alley for a signal. I will take you to him and he will guide you secretly to my house. My wife will care for the old man, and you will be free to return to your family...if they are still alive.”

“But there are three of us now,” said Titus. “Today they brought in Antonius.”

For a brief second, a look of anger flitted across Fabian’s face. Then it was quickly gone. “I understand, Titus. But I can only release two of you. It will take both you and my son to help the old man to my house.”

“Then will you let the two of them go while I stay?”

“No,” said Fabian, looking down toward the motionless body of Antonius. “I will bring him some water, but it would be impossible for my son to support both this one and the old man. *You* must go, Titus. Save the old man’s life.”

Antonius stirred, turning his swollen face toward

them.

"He's right," said Antonius with a hoarse voice. "I'm in God's hands, Titus. Take this gift and make the most of it."

"You must hurry," said Fabian. "More guards will soon be coming for the night watch."

Titus moved to Jason's side and knelt down. He shook the old man's shoulder, afraid for a second that Jason had died. Then the old man stirred, recognizing Titus through his one good eye.

"What is it? Have they come for me?"

"No, Jason," said Titus. "God has answered our prayer. He has touched Fabian's heart. We're free to go now, but you must get on your feet."

"I can't. There's no energy left in me. This wound has drained my life."

"Then we'll carry you."

Titus and Fabian lifted the old man to his feet, one on each side of him, and moved toward the cell door.

"Peace be with you," said Antonius as they passed.

"And with you," said Titus.

They stepped into the corridor.

"This way," said Fabian. "There is an exit on the right side just at the point where the corridor begins to turn."

Jason was remarkably light, unconscious now, as if life had finally been drained from him. The threesome

moved quickly in the torchlight. As they passed various cells, Titus could hear muffled words and weeping, but he kept his eyes trained directly ahead at the spot Fabian had mentioned. A large door came into view on the right side of the corridor. Fabian pushed it open with his shoulder, and they stepped through into another lighted passageway that had no cells. At the end was a stairwell leading upwards. Finally they pushed through another door and were looking across an expanse of gravel toward the mouth of an alleyway.

“Anaesus,” hissed Fabian in a loud whisper.
“Anaesus!”

A shadow moved out of the gloom, approaching quickly across the gravel. When the figure entered the torchlight near the entrance, Titus saw a youth his own age. The boy was shorter than Titus, but he had wider shoulders. His dark hair clung in tight curls to his head, almost like a sculpted helmet. His dark eyes were bright with anticipation.

“Our prayers were answered, son,” said Fabian.
“This is Titus. Now do as we planned.”

“Yes, Father.”

Anaeus moved to take Fabian’s place under Jason’s shoulder. Fabian quickly moved toward the door again, but he paused briefly and placed a hand on Titus’ shoulder.
“Peace be with you, Titus,” he said.

“And with you, Fabian. God bless you for doing

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this.”

“I am already blessed,” said Fabian, then he disappeared through the entrance

Anaeus’ turned to Titus. “Follow me.”



CHAPTER TEN

With Jason's body hanging between them, they moved steadily through the side streets of Rome. A full moon shed its light, and the summer evening air felt refreshing after the stench of the Coliseum cell. Titus had never been out this late without his parents or Marcus and Lydia. The traffic of horse carts was greater than he expected. The main thoroughfares were so congested that he wondered how anyone could reach their destination. It was a blessing in disguise, camouflaging their movements.

"This way," whispered Anaeus, moving toward a street that had a slight uphill grade.

They began to climb upward, Jason's body growing heavier each step. The old man began to moan, and his blood spread to Titus' tunic. Titus was impressed by Anaeus' stamina. Fabian's son was strong, the weight of Jason and the climb up the hill barely winding him. The son of a soldier.

"Our *domus* is just ahead on the right," said Anaeus. "My mother is expecting us."

They reached a heavy wooden door. Anaeus knocked four times rapidly, paused, then added another knock. The door opened slowly to reveal a young woman's face. "Come in, come in," she said quickly.

They stepped through the doorway, and for the first time in his life, Titus entered an actual home rather than one of the apartments of the poor. The salary of a Roman soldier could not afford luxury, but the small three-bedroom house seemed like a mansion to him. Oil lamps set in niches along the wall provided ample light. The home consisted of a small side room reserved for the worship of family ancestors and gods, a main room that included the kitchen, and a narrow passage that led to a single bedroom. An additional bed in the main room was probably where Anaeus slept. The floor was covered with blue and white tile that gleamed in the lamplight. Titus' eyes took it all in quickly.

"Titus," said the woman. "You are welcome in our home. My name is Vesta. Come, lay the old man on the bed so I can attend to him."

Vesta led them to the bed at the side of the room and they gently lowered Jason onto his back. Vesta had bandages and a fresh pitcher of water on a nearby table, along with a small bowl filled with a greenish paste. She quickly stripped Jason's soiled and bloody tunic from his body and carefully washed his wound with a rag. Titus could see the wound was wide, but not as deep as he had

feared, a gash that extended from the middle of Jason's ribs to the top of his hipbone. The old man was now fully conscious, and his eyes turned to Vesta. "Good woman," he asked. "Where am I? Who are you to care for an old man?"

"You're with your sisters and brothers in Christ. Tonight, God and my husband Fabian have spared you from the Coliseum."

"Fabian?" Jason's eyes searched the room until he saw Titus. "The soldier we prayed for?"

"Yes, Jason," said Titus. "This is his home and his family."

"Praise God. He heard the prayers of a boy and an old man."

Vesta reached for the bowl of green paste. "This is a mixture of healing herbs," she said. "It will sting sharply as I put it on you, Jason, but it will help stop the bleeding."

She dipped two fingers in the bowl, scooped out a portion of the paste, then spread it across the wound like plaster on a crack in a wall. Jason winced, but he did not cry out. Beads of sweat glistened on his brow. When the wound was completely covered, Vesta quickly took long strips of cloth and wrapped them over Jason's torso. She then took a clean rag, dipped it in cool water and draped it over Jason's forehead.

"Anaeus," she said. "Get a cup of the tea I made."

Anaeus went to the kitchen and returned with a

stone mug of dark liquid. Vesta gingerly lifted Jason's head and pressed the mug to his lips. Whatever was in it must have tasted good, for the old man gulped it greedily.

"Now you must rest, Jason," Vesta said. "You must regain your strength."

She took a blanket that was folded at the foot of the bed and covered Jason.

"The Lord bless you," whispered Jason as he closed his eyes.

Vesta motioned for the boys to follow her into the small room near the front entrance. She sat in the room's only chair. Anaeus sat on the floor and Titus settled next to him. On the wall above her head was an arched alcove, a niche where families placed small statues of the gods. There was a statue of Mars there, but the god of war was laid on his side, the spear in his hand protruding from the niche. Vesta looked at Titus with a bright smile. She had the blond hair of someone from the north of Italy, and her blue-green eyes sparkled in the lamplight. She wore jewelry—a necklace and earrings—and she had applied a reddish shade of makeup to her eyelids. Titus knew that her dress was simple, but she seemed like royalty compared to the lower class people he lived with on a daily basis.

Vesta looked at Titus and smiled. "What did my husband say to you?" she asked.

"He told me that you and Anaeus are believers and

that you have shared our faith with him. He told me that he has not known what to do with enemies of the state living in his own home.”

“What else did he say?” she asked.

“He told me how he had listened at the cell door as Jason and I prayed for him.”

“Yes,” replied Vesta. “You have no idea how that prayer touched him. It was the power that rolled away the stone from the tomb that held his heart. Go on.”

“He told me what he said to you—that if Jason and I were alive when he returned, he would follow the Lord no matter what happened.”

“Then he kept his promise!” exclaimed Anaeus.

Vesta reached out and took her son’s hand in her own. “And he will be true to it,” she said. “Your father is a man who keeps his promises.”

Vesta had tears in her eyes as she turned again to look at Titus. “Anaeus and I have prayed for this day more than you can imagine, Titus. Tonight the Lord has given our family eternal life. He used you, Titus. It was the prayers that you and Jason spoke—prayers for your enemy—that God used to change my husband’s heart. We can never repay you for that.”

She stood up from the chair, reached into the niche above her head, and removed the small statue of Mars. “Ever since Anaeus and I were baptized, we have wanted to remove this stone idol from the house. But Fabian

forbade us from touching it. Last night, after he made his pledge regarding you and Jason, he turned it on its side. He said that if the two of you ever entered our home, then the idol would be smashed forever.”

Vesta took the plaster god and suddenly crashed it on the floor near her feet. The pieces skittered across the tile. “You shall have no other gods before me,” she said, quoting the first commandment. “May the Lord God bring down all the idols of this Roman Empire.”

Vesta’s eyes had a fierce energy. She reminded Titus of Lydia when she spoke of Rome and its government.

“Come, Titus. You must be hungry and thirsty.”

She led him to a table in the kitchen that was spread with fish, cheese, and fresh fruit from the marketplace. There was also a flat loaf of bread and a mug of milk. Titus sat and ate, trying to chew slowly and not gulp his food in a rude manner. But it was hard. He had hidden his hunger and thirst away from his conscious mind, trying to ignore them, but now they both came back full force.

Vesta laughed. “It’s all right,” she said. “Eat with enthusiasm. You must be starving.”

Titus ate and drank his fill. Vesta watched him from nearby, and when he was finished she moved toward the table with the pitcher and bandages. “Now it’s your turn,” she said. “Let me wash your wounds.”

Vesta gently washed each of the bruised and bloody areas on Titus' face, arms, and legs. As she nursed him so graciously, he remembered the story Lydia had told him about his mother and Cleo. His heart ached to see Lydia and Marcus. If they were still alive.

"You're thinking of your family," said Vesta.

"Yes," he replied.

"Tell me about them."

"My parents are gone," he said. "They were crucified, so I live with my Aunt Lydia and my Uncle Marcus. Two days ago, Marcus and I were together with the other gravediggers when a crowd attacked us. I lost track of him. I don't even know if he and Lydia are alive. And Lydia is pregnant with their first child."

"Where do you live?"

"In the insulae near Caelian Hill," he replied.

"Anaeus will take you there."

"What about Jason?"

"Don't worry," Vesta said. "It will be days before he gets his strength back. Anaeus will know where you live and we'll send word to you about Jason. Come on, change into a fresh tunic and you can be on your way."

She went into the bedroom and returned promptly with a straw-colored tunic. It was one of Fabian's, but Vesta had altered it to be shorter and slimmer. In her faith that God would answer prayer, she had arranged every detail for Titus' arrival. Titus changed in the bedroom and

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then went to Jason's bedside. Jason was sleeping deeply, his hoarse breath rattling through his parched throat. Titus placed his hand on the old man's forehead.

"God bless you, Jason. You have been my teacher, and I will never forget your lesson."

Titus turned to Vesta. "Thank you," he said. "Will I see you and Fabian again?"

"Only God knows," replied Vesta. "With so much danger around us, only He knows what will happen now that Fabian believes. We'll contact you if it's possible. It will be safer that way."

"Peace be with you," said Titus.

"And also with you," said Vesta.

Anaeus was waiting at the door. Titus joined him and together they walked into the summer night. Titus' skin prickled with excitement.

He was going home, and he had no idea what he would find.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

It wasn't necessary for Anaeus to guide Titus through the streets. He was familiar with this area of the city because Marcus and Lydia had taken him occasionally to the Trajan Baths. He could easily find his way home. But he welcomed the company of someone his own age; it created a buffer between him and the awful events of the past two days. As they hurried along without the weight of Jason between them, Anaeus began to talk.

"I have heard about the gravediggers and the tunnels. What is it like down there? How can you work all day in such darkness?"

"I grew up around it," said Titus. "My father was a gravedigger and he would take me there when I was little. After awhile I got used to it. Now I don't even think about the darkness or the smell. I only think about the work. It's good work, a way to serve the saints, making sure they have a safe place of burial."

"What happened to your parents?" Anaeus just blurted it out.

Titus didn't answer. Ever since they had stepped back out into the night, he had been consumed with fears about what he would find at home. His body felt weak, and he wasn't sure he wanted to open up the memory of his parents.

"I'm sorry," said Anaeus. "I understand if you don't want to talk about it."

They had come to the end of a side street and were facing the busy cart traffic of a main avenue. Street lamps lit the cobbled road, and in their dim illumination Titus could see the horses and faces of merchants passing by. The smell of manure was strong. They waited for a gap in the traffic then ran quickly to the opposite side, entering a side street again. The dark shapes of *insulae*, four and five stories high, rose up on both sides of them.

"It happened one evening after work," said Titus. "I had gone to eat dinner with my uncle and aunt who lived a few streets away from us. My uncle was walking me home, and when we turned the corner we saw a large group of soldiers surrounding the entrance to my building. They had dragged my mother and father into the street. I reacted without even thinking. I started screaming, 'Stop! Leave them alone!' Two of the soldiers turned and started after me, but the crowd was so heavy that they had trouble getting through."

Titus felt the flood of emotions from that evening—the fear, the panic, the anger boiling over into

hatred. Though the scene had run through his mind countless times, it had been a long time since he had spoken about it. How could feelings stay so fresh? Would they never release their hold on him?

“Marcus clamped his hand over my mouth and started pulling me backward. I fought him to get away. I didn’t care what happened to me, I just wanted to be with my parents. The crowd had closed in around them so that I couldn’t see. But there was the sound of a whip and my mother screamed.”

They were only a few streets away from the apartment now. Titus turned suddenly to Anaeus as they walked. “It could have been your father that night,” he said. “It could have been him who cracked the whip against my mother’s back. Have you ever lost someone, Anaeus? Do you know what it’s like to hate your enemies so much that you imagine smashing their skulls against stones? Every time I hold a coin in my hand and see the face of Marcus Aurelius, my heart burns with anger.”

Anaeus shook his head slowly and turned his eyes away from Titus.

“I’m not judging you, Anaeus. I praise God that your father has changed. I only hope that somehow God will use him to stop this persecution.”

“Yes,” said Anaeus. “But he is only one man, and the Emperor’s forces are great.”

“Then tonight, Anaeus, you know how your

Christian brothers and sisters feel all over this empire.”

The five-story building that housed his apartment was up ahead. After all that had happened in the last forty-eight hours, Titus had imagined chaos surrounding his home. In his mind he had seen soldiers clustered around the entrance, perhaps dragging Marcus and Lydia away from him just as they had taken his parents. But the side street outside the *insulae* was quiet. All he could hear was a baby crying in an upper story apartment. It seemed there was always a baby crying in the night.

There was a single oil lamp burning near the entrance that led from the street. It was there for residents to borrow as they made their way up the stairs and lit the lamps of their homes. In its dim flicker, Titus saw the stairs leading up to the second floor.

“You can go now if you want,” he said to Anaeus. “This is my home.”

“I want to come with you,” said Anaeus.

“No. Just wait here.”

Titus moved quickly now. He took the steps three at a time, his desire to see Marcus and Lydia giving him new energy. He reached the door to their apartment, pushed it open, and entered with the oil lamp.

No one was there. Again, Titus had expected to find the room in disorder, the beds and tables overturned, plates and cups smashed to the ground. As he had lain in the cell of the Coliseum, he had even imagined walking

through this door to find Marcus and Lydia murdered, their bodies stripped and left behind by the soldiers. But all he found was silence, nothing out of order, as if life in the city had followed its normal routine during the hell of these last two days. *Where are they? In the middle of the night, where can they be?*

There was only one answer. They must have been arrested. Or perhaps the people of this insulae, fueled by the hatred of other citizens, had turned on Marcus and Lydia. Perhaps they had captured them both and dragged them to the authorities.

Titus sat on his bed and hung his head. The suffocating wave of emptiness and loneliness he had felt in the cell now overwhelmed him. It was so powerful and heavy that he didn't hear the soft footsteps of someone entering the apartment. A hand lightly touched his shoulder. He looked up to see the face of Dora, a neighbor who had always been kind to Lydia during her pregnancy.

"I never thought I would see you alive again," she said. "Your God must surely be with you."

Titus choked back his emotion. "Marcus...Lydia... Are they alive?"

"Yes," she replied. "As far as I know. Marcus escaped the crowd that took you, and when he got here he was afraid he had been followed. He quickly took Lydia and left. I didn't see him again until earlier this evening when he came back and packed a few more things in a bag.

He was very secretive, but on his way back out he stopped at my apartment and told me this, 'If by some miracle, Titus also escapes, tell him to look for us at the tomb of the Good Shepherd.' Does that make any sense to you?"

As far as Titus knew, there was no Tomb of the Good Shepherd. The gravediggers had names for many of the tunnels, crypts, and tombs, but this one he had never heard of. Maybe Marcus meant the tomb that Titus had been preparing, the one adorned with his fresco of the Good Shepherd. It was worth a try.

"Thank you, Dora," he said, jumping to his feet.

He retrieved his oil lamp from a niche above his bed, then quickly descended the stairs to the front entrance. Anaeus was still waiting there. "Have you never been in the catacombs?" asked Titus.

"Never," answered Anaeus.

"Do you want to come with me now?"

"Let's go!"



CHAPTER TWELVE

This time it was Titus' turn to lead, and he moved so quickly that both of them were winded when they reached the catacomb entrance. They had encountered no resistance on their way past the city wall. Though it was late evening, a full moon bathed the Appian Way, and the silhouettes of the two boys stood out clearly.

"Follow me," said Titus.

He heard Anaeus gasp as they took their first steps into the inky blackness. No matter how many times you imagined it, nothing could prepare someone for their first descent into the tunnels.

"Stay close," instructed Titus. He wanted to move more quickly than he could; he wanted to race through the tunnels to the spot he had been working for weeks. But he had to hold the light for Anaeus, who was now breathing more regularly.

"It's the darkest place I've ever been," Anaeus said. "How far do we have to go?"

"Don't worry, just stay close. We'll be there soon."

They came to a juncture where three tunnels suddenly angled in different directions. The gravediggers had added two of the tunnels as dead ends, a way of confusing outsiders who ventured underground. Titus veered into the only one that led onward. The light from his lamp bounced over the images painted above the tombs and crypts: the Alpha and Omega, the anchor of hope, the doves. As they took a sharp turn, Titus' favorite painting of Daniel loomed ahead of them, life-sized and vivid.

"Watch out!" yelled Anaeus.

"It's only a painting," said Titus. "Believe me, you won't find enemies down here."

As if to underline his words, they suddenly heard the sound of voices singing. It was a beautiful melody, out of place in the dark and smelly corridor. Judging by the volume, there were many worshippers up ahead. It was all Titus could do to stay close to Anaeus. His impulse was to run with wild abandon. "Hurry," he urged Anaeus. "We're almost there!"

The sides of the tunnel up ahead began to glow with the light of many lamps and candles. When they came into the room where Titus had been painting, his picture of the Good Shepherd was the first thing they saw. It rose above the heads of the worshippers, gazing down with love on the flock. The space was packed with people singing and passing the bread and wine of communion. The ones nearest to Titus and Anaeus greeted the boys with

outstretched hands.

“Welcome,” said an older woman. “The peace of Christ be with you.”

“And with you,” Titus mumbled, barely noticing the woman’s face. He was too preoccupied, his eyes scouring the crowd, searching for Marcus and Lydia. He was desperate for a glimpse of them, but there were so many people in the room that it was hard to see. He knew it was the middle of a worship time, but he *had* to find out if they were there. “Marcus!” he yelled. “Marcus!”

From the opposite side of the room, a voice answered. “Titus! My God, is it you!”

The crowd stirred as a man began to move toward Titus. Finally, Titus found Marcus’ face, and the sheer relief of seeing his uncle released tears of joy.

Marcus reached him and held him in a close embrace. “Titus! Praise God! I thought I would never see you again!”

“I was in a cell at the Coliseum, but a soldier released me.”

“A soldier released you?”

“It’s a long story,” said Titus. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. When the crowd swarmed around you, I was separated. It was like being caught in the current of a strong river, and before I knew it I was in a back alley. I tried to push my way back, but a group of men started after me. All I could do was run and pray that you had slipped

out somehow. When you didn't return that evening, I feared the worst."

"What can we do now?" asked Titus. "What is left for us if we can't even walk in the streets?"

"Remember, Titus, not all the citizens are joining in this persecution. Your attackers were actually few in numbers, but others were afraid to stop them and get involved. The gravediggers have been meeting to decide what to do. For awhile, we will probably work at night to avoid traveling so openly in daylight."

The cry of a baby suddenly filled the room. Marcus' face lit up with a brighter smile than Titus had ever seen from his uncle.

"Lydia?"

"Yes," replied Marcus. "And your new nephew."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was just about to. Come!"

They moved through the worshippers to the far side of the room, and he could see Lydia's face anxiously searching for them. When her eyes met his, she lifted one arm in a gesture of praise. Then he was at her side. "Titus! It really is you! Our prayers were answered!"

She smothered his forehead and cheeks with kisses. In her arms was a bundle of blankets, and as Titus watched, she peeled back the outer layer to show a small, red wrinkled face. Two dark eyes peered up at Titus.

"We named him after your father," said Lydia.

“Here. Hold Crispus, your new nephew.”

“But...”

“Go ahead. He won’t bite you.”

She passed the wriggling bundle to Titus. He was amazed at how light and fragile the baby felt. The worshippers continued singing.

May the peace of God be with you. May the light of Christ guide your way.

For so many hours, his body had been wracked with such pain and fear that the joy and warmth of the room seemed unreal. He wanted to let go, to release himself fully into the embrace of light and love, but a single thought reared itself up in his mind, taking on a life of its own.

“I failed,” he cried out loud. “When the moment of my death was closest, I felt alone, like God had abandoned me. I had no peace and no courage, only my doubts. I failed.”

May the peace of God be with you. May the light of Christ guide your way.

“You didn’t fail,” said Marcus, placing his hand on Titus’ shoulder. “Even Jesus quoted a painful Psalm in his final moments on the cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Remember what Justin told you...”

“But he’s dead,” interrupted Titus. “He was killed by...”

“We know all about it,” said Marcus. “His physical

body is gone, but he's still here. Don't forget what he told you. Courage isn't the absence of fear or dread. God uses us, Titus, even in our moments of greatest weakness. He turns the failures of his children into victories we could never have imagined."

Titus looked across the room and saw Anaeus singing beside the woman who had first greeted them. Perhaps Marcus was right. *During my worst moments of doubt, God was using me to save Fabian.*

"Understand the meaning of grace," Marcus continued. "God does not save his love for us until we are worthy. He loves us in the middle of our sins and failures. I am sure he used you tonight, and I am certain he will do great things with you in the future. Titus...remember the blessing Justin gave you."

The blessing. Yes. Every single word. Though Justin was gone, the spirit-filled strength of the old man remained in Titus' heart. It opened up his spirit to receive the full power of God's love moving through the room. He looked down at Crispus who was wriggling in his arms. He placed one hand on the forehead of his new nephew and began to speak.

"Here is a truth for you, Crispus. *The living God stands by your side, and through the love of His Son you will not fall away. You will run the race until the end and receive the crown of eternal life. You will stand before our Lord and hear him say, 'Well, done, my good and faithful*

son. ' This is my I blessing for you tonight.'

Crispus began to cry, his young lungs bursting with life. As their candles pushed back the darkness, the worshippers sang. *May the peace of God be with you. May the light of Christ guide your way.*