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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HEAR ME, PILATE! ***



HEAR ME, PILATE!



LEGETTE BLYTHE

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FOR ANNE AND JULIE

ROME



11

1

The capricious flame spattered darts of thin yellow light on walls and floor as the doors swung gently closed. Claudia turned from her tall, deeply tanned, uniformed escort to address the servant who had let them in.

"I won't be needing you tonight, Tullia. You may go now. But wait ... before you leave, we shan't be wanting all these lamps. Put out all but that one"—she pointed—"and then you may go to bed. Poor thing, I know you're tired." She peered beyond the wide archway opening onto the peristylum. "I see you left a lamp burning in my bedroom. Good. Well, then, just put these others out.

"I don't know what I'd do without her," Claudia said as the servant snuffed out the flame and, bowing to them, disappeared into the now darkened corridor. "She's a treasure, Longinus, intelligent, faithful, and, most important, she's utterly loyal. She would die before betraying me. She's Phoebe's daughter, and Phoebe, you know, hanged herself rather than be a witness against my mother. Tullia, I'm sure, would do the same thing for me." She pointed toward the peristylum. "Let's sit out there in the moonlight. It seems a little warm in here, doesn't it?"

"It does," he answered. "I was hoping you'd suggest that. It would be a shame to waste that moon, and the

fountain and flowers." He was glancing around the luxuriously furnished room. "By the gods, Claudia, you have a handsome place. It's been a long time since I was here, but it seems more lavish. Did Aemilius have it redecorated?"

"Bona Dea, no. That insipid oaf? What has he ever done for me?" She acted mildly piqued but then smiled. "It has been redecorated, but I had it done. This apartment's actually an extension of the Imperial Palace, you remember. My beloved stepfather, the great Emperor Tiberius," she said sarcastically, "had it built for his little girls. When he moved them out to Capri with him—a new group, of course, for several of us were too old by then—he allowed me to stay here. But I moved away when I married Aemilius; we went out to Baiae. After we were divorced, though, I returned here, and that's when I had it redecorated. But the place was built for the Emperor's little girls." She paused, leaned against a high-backed bronze chair. "You understand?"

"I've heard stories, yes."

"Well, when poor Mother sent me to him from Pandateria—you know I was born on that dreadful island soon after Grandfather Augustus banished her there, and I really think she sent me to Tiberius to see that I got away from it. Anyway, he put me in here with the other little girls. This wing connects with his private quarters, or once did. There's a wing very much like this one on the other side; that's where he kept his boys." She shrugged; he sensed that it was more a shudder. "Tiberius, thank the gods, spent more time over on the boys' side. There's a small passage-way—few persons probably know about it now—that opened from his quarters into my dressing room. It was all quite convenient. But when the old monster moved out to Capri, I had the door removed and the opening bricked up."

"I've heard stories about the Emperor. Was he ... did he really ... I mean, you know, Claudia, did he actually do ... does he, I mean...?"

She laughed. "Yes, he did. And I presume he still does; they say old men are worse that way than young men. But he no longer bothers me and hasn't for years. I'm much too old for him; he likes them very young, or did. He's an old rake, all right, though he can't be guilty of all the things they've charged him with. Out at Capri now I really think he's more interested in his astrologers and philosophers than in his little girls and his painted pretty boys. But, well"—she shrugged—"there are things I do know about him, experiences I myself have had with him, and although I'm not close blood kin to him, my mother, poor thing, was his wife though she was that only because her father forced her to marry him." They had crossed into the peristylum, and she paused to face him, smiling. "But let's talk no more of the Emperor and me, Longinus; by the gods, there are pleasanter subjects."

"I agree; there are pleasanter subjects than Tiberius." They walked around a tall potted plant and sat down. Claudia leaned back against the plush cushions of the couch; she pushed her jewel-studded golden sandals out from beneath the folds of her white silk stola. The moonlight danced in the jeweled clasps that fastened the straps above her shoulders, while the gold mesh of her girle glittered brightly. For a moment she silently studied the fountain. Then suddenly she sat forward.

"Forgive me, Longinus. Would you like some wine and perhaps a wafer? I have some excellent Campania, both Falernian and Surrentine, in the other room. Or perhaps you're hungry...."

"No, no, Claudia, thank you. I made a pig of myself at Herod's dinner tonight."

"But it was a lavish banquet, wasn't it?" Her smile indicated a sudden secret amusement. "I wonder what Sejanus will think of it."

"Sejanus?" Then he smiled with her. "Oh, I see what you mean. He's going to wonder where Herod got the money. And why Herod gave the dinner for Herodias."

Claudia laughed. "Well, she's his favorite niece, isn't she?"

"She surely must be. But she's also his half brother's wife." Longinus paused thoughtfully. "I hardly think, however, that Sejanus will be greatly concerned with the domestic affairs of the Herods."

"As long as they keep the money flowing into his treasury, hmm?"

"Exactly. And you're right. Tonight's lavish feast may cause the Prefect to suspect that the flow is being partially diverted. Our friend Herod Antipas ought to have given a more modest affair. No doubt he was trying, though, to impress Herodias."

"No doubt," Claudia repeated. "But it was hardly necessary. She wants to marry him and be Tetrarchess."

Longinus looked surprised. "Then you think Antipas will take her away from Philip?"

"I'm sure he will. He already has, in fact."

"By the gods, that's odd. That Arabian woman he left in Tiberias is much more beautiful. And so is that Jewish woman he brought along with him to Rome. What did you say her name was?"

"I noticed you had eyes for her all evening." Claudia's tone, he thought, was not altogether flippant, and that pleased him. "Her name's Mary," she continued, "and she lives at Magdala on the Sea of Galilee just above Tiberias. But of course you know where Tiberias is. And I suspect you might remember Mary." Her smile was coy and slyly questioning. "Herodias says that this Mary is being pursued by half the wealthy men in Galilee for the artistry with which she performs her bedroom chores."

"I must confess"—Longinus grinned—"that unfortunately I am numbered among the other half. But what does Herodias think of her beloved uncle's amours? Isn't she jealous?"

"Oh, I'm sure she is ... what woman wouldn't be? But she knows that in such activities she must share him. Antipas, I understand, is a true Herod."

"Yes, and I have a strong suspicion that in such activities, as you express it, Herodias is a Herod, too." He sat forward, serious again. "But what puzzles me, Claudia, is how I happened to be one of Antipas' guests tonight. It must have been entirely through your arranging, but why on earth are you involved in a social way with any of these Jews?"

Claudia laughed. "Herodias and I have long been friends. You see, after her grandfather, old Herod the Great they called him, had her father and her uncle, his own sons, killed"—she involuntarily shuddered—"Herodias and her brother Agrippa were virtually brought up at the Emperor's court. Agrippa's a spoiled, arrogant, worthless spendthrift. Old Herod sent his other sons to Rome, too, to be educated—Antipas and Philip, Herodias' husband now, and still another Philip...." She broke off and gestured to indicate futility. "You see, Longinus, old Herod had ten wives and only the gods know how many children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Do you know much about the Herods? They're older than we, of course."

Longinus shook his head. "No, nor do I care to. I think maybe I have seen some of them a few times, including this Philip, but I happily surrender to you any share I may have in any Jew." 15

"But, Longinus, the Herods aren't orthodox Jews. They even say that some of them, including Herodias and her no-good brother, are more Roman than we Romans. They've all probably spent more time in Rome than in Palestine. Why, they have about as much regard for the Jewish religion as you and I have for our Roman gods. Actually, Longinus, the Herods are Idumaeans, and they're quite different from the rest of the Jews. The Jews are strict in their religious observances." Abruptly she stopped. "But why, Bona Dea, am I telling you about the Jews? You have lived out there in Palestine, and I've never set foot near it. Your father has vast properties in that region, while mine...." She lifted a knee to the couch as she twisted her body to face him, her dark eyes deadly serious in the silver brightness of the moon. "Longinus, do you know about my father?"

"No, Claudia, nothing."

"Of course you don't." She smiled bitterly. "That was a silly question. I don't even know myself. I've often wondered if Mother did. But haven't you heard stories, Longinus?"

"I was rather young, remember, when you were born." But immediately he was serious. "Gossip, Claudia, yes. I've heard people talk. But gossip has never interested me." A sly grin lightened his expression. "I'm more interested in your father's handiwork than in who he was."

"Prettily said, Centurion." She patted the back of his bronzed hand. "But surely you must have heard that my father was the son of Mark Antony and Cleopatra?"

"Well, yes, I believe I have. But why...?"

"And that my other grandfather, the Emperor Augustus, had him killed when he got Mother pregnant with me and then banished her to that damnably barren Pandateria?"

"I may have heard something about it, Claudia, but what of it? What difference does it make?"

"Do you mean to tell me that it makes no difference to you that I'm a bastard, Longinus, and the discarded plaything of a lecherous old man, even though that lecherous old man happens to be the second Emperor of Rome? Does it make no difference to a son of the distinguished Tullius clan...?" 16

"And isn't your slave maid, too, a member of this distinguished Tullius clan?"

His quick parrying of the question amused her. "It's funny," she said, "I hadn't thought of Tullia that way. Her grandfather belonged to one of the Tullii, no doubt. But Tullia is actually not Roman; she's Jewish. Her grandfather was one of those Jews brought as slaves from Jerusalem by Pompey. Tullia is even faithful to the Jewish religion. But that's her only fault, and it's one I'm glad to overlook. Sometimes I allow her to go to one of the synagogues over in the Janiculum Hill section."

Longinus reached for her hand. "Nevertheless, Claudia, you must know that many so-called distinguished Romans are legitimate only because their mothers happened to be married, though not to their fathers, when they were conceived?"

"Yes, I suppose so. No doubt you've heard the story of what Mother said to a friend who asked her one day how all five of the children she had during the time she was married to General Agrippa happened to look so much like him."

"If I have, I don't recall it. What was her answer?"

"I never take on a passenger unless the vessel is already full."

"I can see how that would be effective," the centurion observed dryly. "But then how do you explain ... well, yourself?"

"After General Agrippa died, Augustus made Tiberius divorce his wife and marry Mother. But they were totally

incompatible, and I can see how, under the circumstances, things turned out the way they did. Tiberius left Rome and went out to Rhodes to live. That pleased Mother; she was young and beautiful, and she was still the most sought-after of her set in Rome. So, after Tiberius hadn't been near her bed for years and a succession of more interesting men had, it was discovered, to the horror of my conventional and publicly pious grandfather and the delight of Rome's gossips, that I was expected. So the Emperor had the man who was supposed to be my father"—she smiled—"you know, I've always rather hoped he was—he had him executed, and he sent Mother off to Pandateria." She threw out her hands, palms up. "That's the story of Mother's misfortune, me. But you must have heard about all this years ago?" 17

He ignored her question. "You her misfortune? Don't be silly. You were rather, I'd say, her gift to Rome."

"You do put things prettily, Longinus. Nevertheless, my mother was banished because of me."

"But, by the gods, how could you help it, Claudia?" He caught her chin and turned her face around so that the moon shone full upon it. "Aren't you still the granddaughter of the first Emperor of Rome on one side and a queen and triumvir on the other? Aren't you still the stepdaughter of the Emperor Tiberius? Those are distinguished bloodlines, by Jove! What nobler heritage could anyone have? And aren't you the most beautiful woman in Rome? What, by mighty Jupiter, Claudia, do you lack?"

"At the moment," she answered, her serious air suddenly vanished, "a husband."

"A situation you could quickly remedy."

"A situation that Tiberius or Sejanus could quickly remedy, you mean, and may attempt to do soon, and not to my liking, I suspect. They may even pick another Aemilius for me, the gods forbid. Seriously, Longinus, I wouldn't be surprised to learn right now that Sejanus has already arranged it. He and the Emperor are desperately afraid, I suspect, that I may scandalize Rome, as Mother did, if they don't get me married quickly before I have a baby and no husband to blame it on."

"But, Claudia..."

"By the Bountiful Mother, Longinus," she laughed, "I'm not expecting, if that's what you think. And what's more, I don't expect to be expecting ... any time soon. But I know Sejanus, and I know Tiberius. It's all politics, Centurion. And politics must be served, just as it was served in my grandfather's day and at every other time since man first knew the taste of power. The same hypocritical public behavior, the same affected virtues propped right alongside the same winked-at corruption." She swung her legs around and stood up. "But enough of this speech-making. I'm going to bring us some of the Campania."

She returned with the wine on a silver tray and handed him one of the two slender goblets. He held the glass up to the light and slowly revolved its gracefully thin stem between his thumb and forefinger. 18

"Don't you like Campania?"

"Very much," he answered. "But it's the glass that interests me. This goblet comes from my father's plant near Tyre."

"Oh, really?" She smiled. "I'm glad. I knew they were made in Phoenicia, but I didn't know they came from Senator Piso's glassworks. Herodias gave me several pieces from a set Antipas brought her. They are lovely." She lifted her own goblet and admired it in the moonlight. "Such beautiful craftsmanship. You know, I've never understood how they can be blown so perfectly. And I love the delicate coloring. Now that I know they come from your father's factory, they're all the more interesting to me, and valued." She set the goblet down and sat quietly for a moment studying the resplendent full moon. "Longinus, I'm so glad you're back in Rome," she said at last. "It seems you've been away in Germania, and before that in Palestine, for such a long time. Did you ever think of me while you were away?"

"Yes. And did you ... of me?"

"Oh, yes, often, and very much. In spite of Aemilius." She picked up the goblet, then set it down again on the tripod and leaned against his shoulder. "By the Bountiful Mother Ceres"—she bent forward, slipping her feet out of the sandals—"I can't get comfortable, Longinus. I'm too warm. This stola's heavy, and I'm so ... so laced." She stood up. "Wait here; I'll only be a minute."

Diagonally across from them a thin sliver of lamplight shone through a crack in the doorway to Claudia's bedroom. She stepped into her sandals, walked around the spraying fountain, and entered the room. "I won't close the door entirely," she called back, as she swung it three-fourths shut. "That way we can talk while I'm getting into something more comfortable."

"I really should be going," Longinus said. "I have early duty tomorrow."

"Oh, not yet, please. Do wait. I'll be out in a moment. Pour yourself some wine." 19

He poured another glass, sipped from it, then set the goblet on the tray and settled back against the cushions. His gaze returned to the widened rectangle of light in her doorway. In the center of it there was a sudden movement. Surely, he thought, she isn't going to change directly in front of the open door. Then he realized that he was looking into a long mirror on the wall at right angles to the doorway; he was seeing her image in the polished bronze. In stepping back from the door she had taken a position in the corner of the room just at the spot where the angle was right for the mirror to reflect her image to anyone seated on the couch outside.

"By all the gods!" Longinus sat forward.

But now she had disappeared. The mirror showed only a corner of her dressing table with its profusion of containers—vials of perfumes, oils, ointments, jars of creams—and scissors, tweezers, strigils, razors, he presumed them to be, though because of the distance from them and the table's disarray he could not see them clearly. Now they were suddenly hidden behind the brightness of the stola as the young woman again came into view. She dropped a garment across a chair, then turned to face the dressing table and the mirror above it. The light shone full upon her back. Both stola and girdle behind were cut low, and the cold shimmering whiteness of the gown accentuated the smooth warmth of her flesh tones. Now her fingers were busy at the jeweled fastenings of the girdle; the light flashed in the stones of her rings. Quickly the girdle came off, and her hands went to one shoulder as her bracelets, their stones glimmering, slipped along her arms. The clasp gave; the strap fell to reveal warm flesh to her waist. She unfastened the other strap, and the stola slipped to the floor. Bending quickly, she picked up the voluminous garment and, turning, laid it with the girdle across the chair.

"Jove!" he exclaimed. "By all the great gods!" In the strong but flickering light of the wall lamp, Claudia stood divested now of all her clothing except for the sheer black silk of her scant undergarments.

"Are you still there, Longinus?" she called out. "And did I hear you say something?"

20

"I'm here," he answered. "But really, Claudia, I should be going." He hoped his voice did not betray his suddenly mounting tension.

"No, not yet. Just a minute. I'm coming now."

She reached for a dressing robe and hurriedly swept it around her. Fastening the belt loosely about her waist, she turned toward the doorway and stepped quickly back into the peristylum. He stood up to meet her. Gently she pushed him to the couch and sat beside him.

"Please don't go yet, Longinus. You've been away in Germania so long, and I couldn't have you to myself at the banquet. There's so much to talk about, to ask you about." She leaned back and snuggled against him. Then she looked down at her knees, round and pink under the sheerness of the pale rose robe. "Bona Dea!" She clamped her knees together and doubled the robe over them. "I didn't realize this robe was so transparent, Longinus. But it is comfortable, and there is only the moonlight out here." She reached out, caught his hand, squeezed it, and released it. "And you can lean back and look only at the moon."

"But in Germania we had the moon."

"Yes, and women. I've heard much about the women of Germania, and seen them, too. Women with yellow hair and complexions like the bloom of the apricot or the skin of the pomegranate. And women free for the asking, eh, Centurion?"

"Not often for the asking. Sometimes for the taking." He pulled her close and felt through his tunic the quick surge of her warmth against him. "But tonight is not Germania and women whose hair is the color of ripening grain, Claudia. Tonight is Rome and a woman with hair as black as a raven's wing and skin fair and smooth and warm and greatly tempting."

"A woman maybe for the asking, or the taking?" Quickly she twisted out from the arm about her waist, and her gay, impish laughter broke upon the fountain's sleepy murmuring. "I didn't know you were also a poet, Longinus." She reached for the pitcher. "Wine to toast the weaver of beautiful words," she said, filling the goblets; she handed him his, then held hers aloft. "I drink to the new Catullus. 'Let us live, Lesbia mine, and love.'"

21

"How did he say it...?"

"And all the mumbling of harsh old men

"We shall reckon as a pennyworth.

"And then, well....

"Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,

"Then another thousand, then a second hundred,

"And still another thousand, then a hundred.

"It goes on," she added, "but that's all I can repeat. Now drink with me to your own pretty words."

Longinus laughed and sipped the wine. "Were his words quoted by you for me ... from you? Remember that Catullus later wrote of his Lesbia:

"A woman's words to hungry lover said

"Should be upon the flowing winds inscribed,

"Upon swift streams engraved."

She leaned out from the shadow into which the retreating moon had pushed them. "Maybe they were quoted to spur your asking, Longinus, or"—she paused and smiled demurely—"your taking." Then quickly she sank back against him. "You think I'm a blatantly bold hussy, don't you?"

"No, Claudia," he smiled, "just experienced. And beautiful, and ... and very tempting."

"Experienced, yes, but believe me, not promiscuous, Longinus. By the Bountiful Mother, I'm not that way, in spite

of my experience." The teasing was gone from her eyes. "In spite of everything, not that."

She snuggled against his arm outstretched along the back of the couch, and gently he half turned her to let her head down upon his lap. Her eyes were wide, and in each he saw a luminous and trembling small, round moon; her mouth was open, and against his thigh he felt the quickened pounding of her heart. As he bent over her, she reached up and drew him, her hot palm cupping the back of his cropped head, down hard upon her lips tasting sweet of the Campania and desperately eager and burning. 22

He raised his face from hers and lifted her slightly to relieve the pressure of her body on his arm. She drew up her feet and, with knees bent, braced them against the end of the short couch. Her robe slipped open, and she lay still, her eyes closed, her lips apart.

His throat tightened, and he felt a prickling sensation moving up and down his spine, coursing outward to his arms and past tingling palms to his fingertips. Deftly he eased his legs from beneath her; lowering her head to the couch, he stood up.

"Oh, Longinus, please, not now," she pleaded, her voice tense, her tone entreating. "Please don't leave me now."

For a moment he stood above her, silent, and then, bending down quickly, he lifted her from the couch and started toward the still open bedroom door. He was past the fountain when a sudden, loud knocking at the entrance doors shattered the silence.

"Oh, Longinus, put me down!" She swung her legs to the floor. "Bona Dea, who could be coming here at this hour! Of all the damnable luck!" She stared in dismay at her disarrayed and transparent robe. "By all the gods, I can't go into the atrium dressed like this! Longinus, will you go? Tullia's probably sound asleep." With that, Claudia darted into the bedroom, while the pounding grew ever louder and more insistent.

Longinus started toward the door, but before he could reach it, Tullia had appeared from the corridor. She quickly opened the door, then backed away as the robust soldier stepped inside.

"I am seeking the Centurion Longinus. I was told ... ah, there you are!" he cried.

"Cornelius! What are you doing here?"

"Longinus! By Jove! I've been searching all Rome for you."

"But I thought you were still in Palestine."

"And I thought you were still in Germania!"—Cornelius laughed—"until today."

"Come, sit down," Longinus said. "When did you get back?"

"Only a week ago, and most of that time I've been out at Baiae with the family. I came into Rome today to report to the Prefect." 23

"Jove! Is he going to name you Procurator of Judaea, Cornelius? I hear that Valerius Gratus is being recalled."

"Me Procurator? Don't be silly, man. No, but I have an idea it's something concerned with Palestine that has him calling for you. I've got orders to find you and bring you to his palace immediately. So we'd best be going, Longinus."

"To see Sejanus? At this hour?"

"Yes, he said it was urgent. He's leaving early tomorrow morning for Capri, and he says he's got to see you before he goes."

"By the gods!" Longinus' countenance was suddenly solemn. "What have I done?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing to be alarmed about. Probably some special assignment or other. I don't know. But come, man, you know Sejanus doesn't like to be kept waiting. Get your toga. I have a sedan chair outside."

"In a minute, Cornelius. I must tell Claudia."

"Couldn't her maid explain...?"

But Longinus already was striding toward the peristylum. "Claudia," he called through the crack in the doorway, "the Prefect has sent for me. I don't know what he wants, but I've got to be going."

"Bona Dea!" She was just inside the door. "Sejanus?"

"Yes. Cornelius says he wants to see me tonight, right now. I don't have any idea what he could want, but tomorrow night, if I may see you then, I'll explain everything."

"What could that old devil be wanting with you, Longinus?" The question seemed addressed more to herself than to him. "Yes, of course, you must come. I'll be anxious to know."

The sound of his retreating steps echoed along the peristylum and across the mosaic floor of the atrium. Claudia listened until she heard Tullia shut the double doors, and then there was silence. She closed her own door and crossed to her still undisturbed bed; she flung herself upon it.

"Sejanus, the devil! The old devil!" With furious fists she pounded on the bed. "May Pluto's mallet splatter his evil brains!"

2

"Centurion Longinus, how well do you know Pontius Pilate?"

The Prefect Sejanus sensed that the soldier was hardly prepared for the blunt question. He had only a moment ago entered the ornate chamber. But Sejanus added nothing to qualify the question. Instead, he seemed to enjoy Longinus' momentary uneasiness. His small eyes reflected the light from the lamps flanking the heavy oak desk behind which he sat, while he waited for the centurion to answer.

"Sir," Longinus at last began, "during our campaign in Germania he commanded the cohort of which my century was a unit, but I cannot say that I know him well."

"Then you and Pontius Pilate"—the Prefect paused and smiled blandly—"could hardly be described as devoted friends or intimates?"

"That is true, sir, and I am not sure that Pilate...." He hesitated.

"Please speak frankly, Centurion." The Prefect's smile was disarmingly reassuring. "You were about to say, were you not, that you are not sure that Pilate has many intimate friends?"

"I was going to say, sir, that in my opinion Pilate is not the type of soldier who has many intimate friends. I may be doing him an injustice, but I have never considered him a particularly ... ah ... sociable fellow. I have the feeling that he is a very ambitious man, determined to advance his career...."

"And his private fortune?"

Longinus thought carefully before answering. "So far as that is concerned, sir, I really cannot say. I have no information whatever on which to base an opinion. Nor did I intend to indicate in any way that I thought Pilate was seeking advancement in the army in an improper manner." 25

Sejanus sat back in his chair. His falcon-like eyes darted back and forth as they measured and appraised the young man. "Centurion," he said, leaning forward and smiling ingratiatingly, "you are cautious, and you evidence a sense of loyalty to your superiors. Both qualities I admire, particularly in the soldier. This makes me all the more confident that you will be able to carry out the assignment I propose to give you." He stared unblinkingly into the centurion's eyes. "Longinus, no doubt you have been wondering why I sent for you, why I insisted you come at this late hour, and why we are closeted here alone."

"Yes, sir, I have been wondering."

"It is irregular, of course, even though it is with the son of Senator Marcus Tullius Piso that the Prefect is closeted." The wry smile was gone now; the Prefect's countenance was serious. "Longinus, you must be aware of the regard your father and I have for each other. You must know that we also understand each other, that we are colleagues in various enterprises widely scattered about the Empire."

"I know, sir, that my father has a high regard for the Prefect, and I have known in a vague way of your association in certain business enterprises."

"Yes, and they have been profitable to both of us, Longinus. Have you ever wondered, for instance, how it happens that whenever your father's plants in Phoenicia begin to run low on slaves, a government ship always arrives with fresh ones?"

Longinus nodded. "Whenever such a vessel arrived, I always thought I knew why. But I never asked questions or ventured comments, sir. I just put the new slaves to work."

"Excellent. You are discreet, indeed. There is nothing more valuable to me than an intelligent man who can keep his eyes open and his mouth closed." Sejanus arose, came around the desk to sit in a chair at arm's length from the centurion. "Longinus, the assignment I propose to give you is of immense importance. And it is highly confidential in nature." His expression and voice were grave. "To accomplish it successfully, the man I choose will have to be always on the alert; he will have to have imagination and initiative; he will need to exercise great caution; and above all, he will have to be someone completely loyal to the Prefect." For a long moment his quickly darting eyes appraised the soldier. "I know that you are intelligent, Longinus, and I am satisfied that you possess these other qualities." He leaned forward and tapped the centurion on the knee. "I had a purpose in asking you if you knew Pontius Pilate well. Tomorrow Pilate is to see me. If everything goes as I expect, then we shall start for Capri to see the Emperor, and the Emperor will approve officially what I shall have done already." He paused and smiled cynically. "You understand, of course?" 26

Longinus smiled. "I believe, sir, that you speak for the Emperor in such matters, do you not?"

"In all matters, Longinus. The Emperor no longer concerns himself with the affairs of the Empire." His piggish eyes brightened. "He's too busy with his astrologers and his philosophers and his"—he smiled with contempt—"his friends." But suddenly the contemptuous smile was gone, and Sejanus sat back in his chair. "Longinus,

Pontius Pilate is anxious to succeed Valerius Gratus as Procurator of Judaea.”

The centurion sensed that the Prefect was waiting for his reaction. But he said nothing. Sejanus leaned forward again. “I am speaking in complete frankness, Longinus. We must understand each other; you must likewise speak frankly to me. But what we say must go no further. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now to get back to Pilate. He’s a man well suited to my purpose, I’m confident.” Once more the Prefect hesitated, as if seeking a way to proceed. “Some years ago, before you went out to Phoenicia, the Emperor’s nephew, General Germanicus, was fatally poisoned at Alexandria. It was rumored at the time that the Emperor had ordered it. Pilate, who served in Gaul under Germanicus, came stoutly to the Emperor’s defense with the story that the poisoning had been done by supporters of the Emperor but without his knowledge, because they had learned that the nephew was plotting the uncle’s downfall. Perhaps you heard something about this?” 27

“I believe I did hear something to that effect, sir. But that was about seven years ago, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, no doubt. Time passes so fast for me, Centurion. But let’s get back to Pontius Pilate. He’s ambitious, as you suggested, and as I said, he wants to be appointed Procurator in Judaea. So he should be amenable to ... ah, suggestions, eh, Centurion? And he should therefore be a perfect counterpart in Judaea to the Tetrarch Antipas in Galilee.” Sejanus suddenly was staring intently at the sober-faced young soldier. “How well, Longinus, do you know Herod Antipas?”

“I hardly know him at all, sir. I’ve seen him a few times; I used to go into Galilee and other parts of Palestine for our glassware plants; I tried once, I remember, to sell him glassware for the new palace he was building on the Sea of Galilee. But those were business trips, you see, and I rarely saw him even then. I was usually directed to speak with the Tetrarchess or Herod’s steward.”

“But you were a guest at the banquet he gave this evening, weren’t you?”

“I was, sir.” Longinus wondered, almost admiringly, how the Prefect managed to keep so well-informed of even the most private goings-on in Rome.

“It was a sumptuous feast, no doubt?”

“It was quite lavish, sir.”

“Hmmm. I must remember that.” The Prefect puckered his lips, and his forehead wrinkled into a frown. Leaning across the desk, he drew his lips tightly against his teeth. “Soon, Longinus, you will be having two to watch.” His eyes narrowed to a squint. “Three, in fact.”

“To watch, sir?”

“Yes, that is the assignment I have for you, Longinus. I am sending you out to Palestine, to be my eyes and ears in the land of those pestiferous Jews. At intervals you will report”—he held up his hand, palm out—“but only to me, understand. You will travel about the various areas—Caesarea, Jerusalem, Tiberias, to your father’s plants in Phoenicia, perhaps other places—ostensibly on routine tasks for the army. The details will be worked out later.” He leveled a forefinger at the centurion. “It will be your task, among the various duties you will have, Centurion, to report to me any suspicions that may be aroused in your mind concerning the flow of revenues into the Imperial treasury in accordance with the terms that I shall make with Pontius Pilate, and likewise with the revised schedules I shall”—he paused an instant, and his smile was sardonic—“suggest to the Tetrarch Antipas before he returns to Galilee.” He sat back, and his sharp small eyes studied Longinus. 28

“Then, sir, as I understand it, you are suspicious that both Pilate and Antipas may withhold for themselves money that should be going to Rome?”

“Let’s put it this way, Longinus.” The Prefect leaned toward the centurion and tapped the desk with the ends of his fingers. “I don’t trust them. I know the Tetrarch has been dipping his fat hand into the treasury, though not too heavily thus far, let us say. That white marble palace at the seaside, for example, and the gorgeous furnishings, including Phoenician glassware, eh?” He shot a quizzical straight glance into the centurion’s eyes, but quickly a smile tempered it. “We don’t object to his buying glass, do we, as long as it comes from your father’s plants?”

But just as quickly the Prefect was serious again. He sat back against the leather and put his hands together, fingertips to fingertips. “Herod Antipas wants to be a Herod the Great,” he declared. “But he hasn’t the character his father had. By character, Centurion, I mean courage, stamina, strength, and ability, yes. Old Herod was a villain, mean, blackhearted, cold-blooded, murderous. But he was an able man, strong, a great administrator, a brave and brilliant soldier, every inch a ruler. Beside him, his son is a weakling. Herodias, on the other hand, is more like her grandfather than Antipas is like his father. She’s ambitious, vain, demanding. She is continually pushing Antipas. She seeks advancement, more power, more of the trappings of royalty.” He lifted a forefinger and shook it before the centurion. “Herodias will likely bring ruin upon both of them.” Then he paused, thoughtful. “But so much for Antipas. Watch him, Longinus. If he”—his expression warmed with a disarming smile—“buys too much of that Phoenician glass, then let me know.” 29

“I will, sir.” Longinus was smiling, too. Then he was serious. “But, sir, you were speaking also of Pontius Pilate....”

“Yes. I think Pilate is the man I want for Judaea. But I don’t trust him either. I want him watched closely,

Longinus. I suspect that his fingers will be itching, likewise, to dip too deeply into the till.”

“But, sir, if you can’t trust him....”

“Why then am I sending him out there?” The Prefect laughed cynically. Then he sobered. “It’s a proper question, my boy. We must be frank, as I said. I’ve told you that I believe Pilate will be amenable to suggestions. Like Antipas, he, too, is a weakling. He has a good record as a soldier, but always as a subordinate. I question whether he has the courage, the stamina, to lead and rule. He will be looking to Rome, I believe, for direction. And he will always be fearful of displeasing the Prefect. But at the same time, Longinus, I think he will be looking for ways of adding to his personal wealth. So he will bleed those Jews to get all Rome requires and some for his own pocket as well.” He paused, thoughtful for a moment. “Yes, I believe Pontius Pilate is the man I want. Certainly I shall give him a chance to prove himself.” Quickly he raised an emphatic finger. “But I want you to watch him, Longinus. I want you to ascertain whether any diversions are being made in the flow of the tax revenues to the Imperial treasury, and if so, to report it to me. Even if you have no proof, but only strong suspicions to go on, by all means report them too. I’ll work out a plan whereby you can make the reports confidentially and quickly.”

The Prefect paused, leaned back in his chair, and calmly studied the younger man. When Longinus ventured no comment, Sejanus continued with his instructions. “You will be transferred from your present cohort to the Second Italian. Your rank will remain the same; as a centurion you will be more useful to me, since you will be less observed and therefore less suspected in this lower grade. But you will be properly compensated, Longinus, with the extent of the compensation being governed in great part, let us say”—he puckered his lips again 30—“upon the degree of functioning of your eyes and ears.”

Sejanus arose, and Longinus stood with him. “You have made no comment, Centurion Longinus.”

“Sir, I am at the Prefect’s command. But may I ask when I am to be given further instructions and when I shall be sailing for Palestine?”

“Soon, Centurion, as quickly as I can arrange it. I would like you to go out ahead of Pilate and be there when he arrives at Caesarea. It will be important to observe how he takes over the duties of the post from the outset. I shall summon you when I am ready and give you full instructions.”

The audience with the Prefect was at an end. At the door, as he was about to step into the corridor, Longinus paused. “Sir, a moment ago you said there would be three for me to watch. You spoke of Pilate and Herod Antipas. Who is the third?”

Sejanus smiled blandly and rubbed his hands together. “The third, ah, yes.” His black small eyes danced. “And there will be others also. But you need not concern yourself with any of this detail at the moment. When I have completed my plans, as I’ve said, I shall summon you here and instruct you fully.”

3

Longinus sat up in bed, thrust forth an arm to peel back his side of the covering sheet, pulled up his feet, and twisted around to plant them evenly on the floor.

“Jove!” He craned his neck, blinked his still heavy eyelids, and strained to rub the cramped muscles at his shoulder blades. From the northeast, rolling down through the gentle depression dividing the mansion-studded slopes of the Viminal and Quirinal Hills, came the fading plaintively sweet notes of a trumpet. He glanced 31 toward the window; the light was already beginning to sift through slits in the drawn draperies.

Claudia opened her eyes. She pushed herself up to a sitting position. “Are you going, Longinus? Must you be leaving so early?” She rubbed her eyes and squinted into the slowly brightening window. “Do you have to...?”

“The morning watch at Castra Praetoria,” he explained, nodding in the direction of the window. “It awakened me, luckily. I must be out there before the next call is sounded. Today I’m on early duty.”

“You always have to be going.” Her lips, the rouge smeared but still red, were pouting. “You hardly get here, and then you say you must be leaving.”

“But, by the gods, Claudia, I’ve been here all night, remember.” He pinched her chin. “I had dinner with you, and I haven’t left yet.”

“Oh, all right. But if you must go, you’d best be dressing. Although, really, Longinus, can’t you stay a few minutes longer, just a few? Please.” She slid back to lie in a stretched position, her figure clearly outlined beneath the light covering.

“Temptress! By the gods, I wish I could.” He bent down and kissed her smeared lips. “Well, at least it won’t be like this when we get to Palestine. Out there I’ll be able to arrange my own schedule, and there’ll be no early morning duty then. But by great Jove, I’ve got to be going now.” He stood up and walked to the chair on which his clothing lay. “Today I’ll begin getting preparations made so that we can be ready to sail when Sejanus gives me his final orders. And the preparations will include arrangements for our wedding,” he concluded, grinning.

Languidly she lay back and watched him as he dressed. “Longinus,” she said, as he finished latching his boots, “do you really believe that your father will be willing to let you marry me?” Her expression indicated concern. “I

have no doubt but that my beloved stepfather will be quite willing, quite happy, in fact, because I'm sure he's already anxious to be freed of the responsibility he has, or thinks he has, for me. But I do wonder about Senator Piso."

"By the great and little gods, Claudia, it's not the senator you're marrying, remember? *I'm* the one," he said, thumping his chest with stiffened thumb. "Me, understand?" 32

"Of course, silly man." She sat up again and fluffed the pillow behind her. "But the senator might object, Longinus. He's a proud man, proud of his name, his lineage. He's not going to like the idea of his son's marrying a bastard and a divorcee, even though she may be the granddaughter of the Emperor Augustus."

"He won't object, Claudia; I'm sure of it. But even if he should, I'd marry you anyway, despite him, despite Sejanus, despite even old Tiberius himself." He adjusted his tunic, then came over to stand by the bed. "Remember that, Claudia."

"Even in spite of last night?" She was smiling up at him, and she said it capriciously, but he thought he detected a note of seriousness in her voice. "You don't think I'm terribly wanton, Longinus?"

"Last night makes me all the more determined." He studied her for a long moment; her expression was coy, but radiant too, a little wistful and warmly affectionate, he saw. "Wanton? Of course not, my dear." A mischievous grin slowly crossed his face. "Wanting, maybe. And wanted certainly, wanted by me. The most desirable woman I've ever known, the most wanted." He bent down to her, his eyes aflame, and gently he pushed the outthrust chin to separate slightly the rouge-smudged lips raised hungrily to his. Greedily their lips met and held, and then as the girl lifted a hand to the back of his head to crush his face against hers, he grasped the protecting sheet from her fingers and flung it toward the foot of the bed.

"Oh, you beast!" she shrieked. "By all the silly little gods!"

Roaring, he darted for the peristylum. As he fled past the long mirror near the doorway, he caught in it a glimpse of the laughing Claudia struggling wildly to cover herself with the twisted sheet.

33

4

The magnificent villa of the Prefect Lucius Aelius Sejanus clung precariously to the precipitous slope high above the blue waters of the bay. The greater part of the mansion had been built some hundred years before in the days of Lucius Licinius Lucullus by one of the general's fellow patricians. This man's family had suffered the misfortune of having had the villa confiscated after the pater familias had been beheaded for making the wrong choice in a civil war of that era.

Sejanus had acquired the property—many Romans wondered how, but they were too discreet to inquire—and had added to it extensively, including a spacious peristylum with a great fountain that spouted water piped from higher on the slope and palms and flowers and oriental plants. But most interesting of his improvements was the spreading terrace pushed outward from the peristylum to the very edge of the precipice, paved in ornate mosaic with slabs of marble transported in government barges from quarries far distant—gray and red from Egypt, yellow in various shades and black from Numidia, green cipolin from Euboea—and bordered by a protecting balustrade of white Carrara.

This morning the Prefect and his guest, Pontius Pilate, a cohort commander lately returned from a campaign in Germania, sat on this terrace before a round bronze table whose legs were molded in the size and likeness of a lion's foreleg. On the table were a pitcher and matching goblets. Pilate, large, broad-framed, with a round head and hair closely cropped, a heavy man and, in his early forties, perhaps a score of years younger than the Prefect, was eyeing the unusual pitcher. Sejanus motioned to it.

"You may be interested in glassware," he said, as he reached over and with a fingernail tapped one of the delicate blue, blown goblets. "These pieces came from Phoenicia. No doubt you will have the opportunity while you're in Judaea to visit the glassworks where they were blown. It's situated near Tyre, up the coast from Caesarea and not far from Mount Carmel. One of Senator Piso's enterprises." He fastened his unblinking small eyes on Pilate's florid face. "But of course you won't be concerned with this operation. It's not in Judaea anyway, and its affairs—so far as Rome is concerned—are being supervised from Rome." 34

Pilate nodded. "I understand, sir."

"Good. It's important that you do understand fully. There should be no area, for example, in which your duties and responsibilities overlap those of Tetrarch Herod Antipas. I trust that you'll always bear that in mind."

"You can depend upon my doing so, sir."

"Then is there anything else not entirely clear to you concerning your duties, powers, and functions as I've outlined them? Do you fully understand that as Procurator you will be required to keep the Jews in your province as quiet and contented as possible—and they are a cantankerous, fanatical, troublesome race, I warn you—even though you will be draining them of their revenues to the limit of their capacities?" He held up an admonishing forefinger. "And do you also understand that it is tremendously important for you, as Procurator of Judaea, to avoid becoming embroiled in any of the turmoils arising out of their foolish but zealously defended one-god

system of religion?" Sejanus curled his lower lip to cover the upper and slowly pushed them both out into a rounded tight pucker; his eyes remained firmly fixed on the cohort commander's face. "It is a difficult post, being Procurator in Judaea, Pilate."

"It is a difficult assignment, sir, but it's one that I've been hoping to obtain, and I appreciate the appointment. I understand what is required, and I shall make every effort to administer Judaea to the best of my ability and in accordance with your instructions."

"Then you may consider yourself Procurator, Pilate. When the Emperor gives you your audience tomorrow, he will approve what I have actually already done." A sly smile overspread the Prefect's weasel face. "But there is one thing further that you must agree to do, Pilate, if you wish to become Procurator of Judaea." He stood, and Pilate arose, remaining stiffly erect. Sejanus walked to the marble balustrade and looked down at the blue water far below. "But first, come here. I want to show you something." 35

The cohort commander strode quickly to the Prefect's side. Sejanus pointed toward the north. "Look," he said, "Misenum there, and just beyond is Baiae. Over there"—he swept his arm in an arc—"is Puteoli. And in this half-moon of shore line fronting on the bay between here and Puteoli's harbor, in those mansions scrambling up the slopes"—he drew a half circle in the air that ended with his forefinger pointing straight south—"in this lower district of Campania from here to Puteoli and Neapolis and around the rugged rim of the gulf, past Vesuvius and Herculaneum, Pompeii and Surrentum out to the end of Capri is embraced the very cream of the Empire's aristocracy and wealth." He turned to face north again. "There. That is the villa for which Lucullus paid ten million sesterces. You can see parts of the roof among the trees and flowering plants. They say that some of the cherry trees he introduced from Pontus are still bearing. Yes, they rightly call this the playground of the Empire. Look down there," he said, pointing toward the gaily colored barges idling along the shore between Baiae and Puteoli. "There you will find beautiful women, Pilate, gorgeous creatures who are completely uninhibited, delightfully immoral. Beautiful Baiae, where husbands able to afford it can find happy respite from monogamy. Ah, Ovid, how you would sing of Baiae today!"

Silently for a moment now the Prefect contemplated the villa-filled slopes, the pleasure barges, the lazily lifting sulphurous fumes above Lake Avernus in the crater of an extinct volcano to the north, and the sleeping cone of Vesuvius looming magnificently in the west. Then he turned again to face Pilate, and a sly, malevolent smile crossed his narrow face. "You, too, Commander, some day can live in luxury out there on the slope above Baiae ... if you manage affairs in Judaea properly," he paused, for emphasis, "by following explicitly the instructions you have received and will continue to receive from me."

"I am ambitious, sir," Pilate answered, "and I would take great pleasure some day in joining the equestrian class here. But whether I am able to achieve a villa at Baiae or not, I am determined to follow explicitly the Prefect's instructions and desires." His hand on the marble balustrade, Pilate studied the movement in the bay. Then he faced the Prefect. "But you said a moment ago, sir, that there was still one more provision?" 36

"Yes, Pilate." Sejanus pointed to the chairs beside the lion-legged table. "But let's sit down and have some more of the Falernian."

As they took their seats, a slave who all the while had been hovering attentively near-by came forward quickly and filled the goblets. Sejanus sipped slowly. "Surely you have guessed that the Emperor and I confer at times on matters of particular intimacy, such as the problems of his household, even the affairs of members of his own Imperial family?"

"I can see, sir, how the Emperor would wish the Prefect's counsel in matters of every kind."

"That is true." Sejanus toyed with the wine glass, then abruptly set it down. "This is the provision, Pilate, and I think it not unreasonable. In fact, I might explain that it was at my suggestion that Tiberius has included it. And were I in your position, Pilate"—his eyes brightened, and he flattened his lips against his teeth—"I would be delighted that such a provision had been made. She is a beautiful woman, young, possessed of every feminine appeal, and a woman to be earnestly desired and sought, at least in the opinion of one old man who"—he smiled—"can still look, appreciate, and imagine."

"A woman?"

"Yes, Pilate. The Emperor expects you to marry his stepdaughter."

"Claudia!" Pilate said in amazement. "The granddaughter of Augustus?"

"Indeed." Sejanus was eying him intently. "And of Antony, too, and Cleopatra, I've always understood." A sly smile again crossed his face. "And, if I'm a capable judge, a woman possessed of everything Cleopatra had."

Pilate seemed oblivious to the Prefect's description. "But why should he want me, the son of a Spanish...?" 37

"But you will be Procurator of Judaea," Sejanus interrupted. "Look, Pilate," he went on, his face all seriousness now, "I'm sure you've heard the story of Claudia's mother, the wife of Tiberius. Augustus was forced to banish her when her adulteries became notorious. It's one of those paradoxes, Pilate, of Imperial life. The Emperor may indulge in any of the ordinarily forbidden delights, adultery, pederasty"—he smiled again, but this time his smile was a scarcely concealed sneer—"but his stepdaughter may not. Or she may not publicly, at any rate. And now that Claudia is divorced from Aemilius and has no husband to point to in the event that...." He paused and laid his hand on Pilate's arm. "I dislike putting the matter so bluntly, Pilate, but there is no other way to explain the situation. The Emperor wishes to forestall any scandal. The best way to do so, he thinks, is to have his stepdaughter married and sent as far away as possible from Rome."

"But, sir, doesn't custom forbid the wives of generals and legates and procurators from journeying with them to their provincial posts?"

"Custom, yes. But custom is not always followed. Agrippina, for example, accompanied Germanicus on his campaign in the north. Caligula was born while she was away with the general." He was watching Pilate closely. "But you have not said whether you accept the Emperor's final provision."

"Sir, I would be greatly honored and highly pleased to be the husband of the granddaughter of the great Augustus."

Sejanus beamed. "Then, Pilate, you may consider yourself the Procurator of Judaea."

"But...."

The Prefect held up his hand to interrupt. "The Emperor will speak to you about the necessity of your keeping your wife under firm authority. But I would like to emphasize something more important, Commander, and that is this: keep her happy, and keep her satisfied, in Judaea. I want no reports coming to me that the Emperor's stepdaughter is being kept virtually a prisoner, that she is suffering banishment from Rome." His eyes flamed again, and he licked his sensuous lips. "Do you understand, Pilate? Claudia is a modern woman. She's accustomed to the ways of Rome's equestrians. Keep her contented, Pilate; do nothing to add to her burden of living in a land that to her, no doubt, will be dull and even loathsome. If sometimes she strays into indiscretions, overlook them. Don't attempt to make of her a Caesar's wife." His stern expression relaxed into a grin. "Besides, I believe it's too late for anyone to accomplish that." Then as quickly as it had come, the levity was gone. "But I interrupted you. You were going to ask something?"

"Yes." Pilate stared thoughtfully at his hands. "I was wondering, sir, if Claudia has been apprised of the Emperor's and your wishes. What has she to say about all this?"

"Say?" Sejanus smiled and rubbed his palms together. "My dear Procurator, Claudia has nothing to say in matters such as this. Tiberius speaks for his stepdaughter. And *I* speak for Tiberius."

5

The next morning one of the fastest triremes of the Roman navy carried the Prefect Sejanus and Pontius Pilate from the harbor below the Prefect's villa straight southward across the gulf toward the island of Capri.

When Sejanus finished discussing certain other matters of business with the Emperor, he had his aide summon Pilate into the Imperial chamber. The cohort commander was nervous as he entered the great hall. It was his first sight of Tiberius since the Emperor had allowed his crafty minister to bring all nine of the Praetorian Guard's cohorts into the camp near the Viminal Gate, from which, on a moment's notice, they could sally forth to enforce the Prefect's will, even to giving orders to the Senate itself. A year ago the Emperor, melancholy, embittered, tired of rule, had left Rome and journeyed southward to Capri to seek on that island the privacy he had long craved. Since then, with the exception of the wily Prefect and a few others—the Emperor's young girls and, according to Roman gossip, his powdered, painted, and perfumed young boys and the growing circle of poets and philosophers—Tiberius Claudius Nero Caesar had seen few visitors. Gradually he had relinquished affairs of state to the scheming Prefect Sejanus.

But now Pilate saw confronting him a man vastly changed from the tall, powerful, and thoroughly able general he had known earlier. The Emperor was noticeably stooped; his once broad forehead and now almost naked pate seemed to have shriveled into a narrowing expanse of wrinkled skull. Acne had inflamed and pocked his face, and the skin lay in folds around the stem of his neck like that of a vulture's.

Tiberius greeted Pilate perfunctorily. "The Prefect tells me you're petitioning us for appointment to the post of Procurator in Judaea. Is that true?"

"Sire, if it is the will of the Emperor that I serve in that capacity, I shall be happy to undertake the assignment and serve the Emperor and the Empire to the full extent of my ability."

"That I would expect and demand," Tiberius harshly replied. "It is a difficult post. The Jews are a stubborn and intractable people. They are fanatically religious, and they resent bitterly and will oppose even to the sacrifice of their lives all actions they consider offensive to their strange one-god religion. Their priests are diabolically clever, and they are determined to rule the people in accordance with the ancient religious laws and traditions of the land." His cold eyes fastened upon the cohort commander's countenance. "Pilate, I shall expect you to govern in that province. Foremost among your functions of office, in addition to maintaining at all times Roman law and order, will be the levying and collecting of ample taxes. That, in itself, will be a burdensome duty. In addition, I charge you to see to it that Rome is not embroiled in any great difficulty with these Jews. I warn you, it will be difficult. Do you think you are equal to such a task?"

"I am bold enough, Sire, to think so. Certainly I shall do everything within my power to demonstrate to the Emperor and his Prefect that I am."

"We shall see." The Emperor's cold eyes bored into those of the officer standing before him. Suddenly his grimness relaxed into a thin smile. "Sejanus tells me also that you have ambitions to marry my stepdaughter Claudia."

"To marry your stepdaughter, Sire, should it be the Emperor's will, would bestow on me the highest honor and afford me the greatest happiness."

"Evidently he knows little about her," Tiberius observed wryly to Sejanus, "else he would not consider himself so fortunate." But quickly his eyes were on Pilate again, and the malevolent smile was gone. "I grant my permission, Pilate. The dowry will be arranged, and I assure you it will be adequate. Sejanus will settle the details. Unfortunately I shall not be able to attend the festivities of the wedding." Now he twisted his head to face the Prefect. "If there is nothing further, Sejanus?" He did not wait for an answer but arose. The Prefect and Pontius Pilate, bowing, were backing toward the doorway when Tiberius suddenly stopped them. "Wait. I wish to tell Pilate a story.

"Once a traveler stopped to aid a man lying wounded beside the road," he began. "He started to brush away the flies clustered about the wound, when the injured man spoke out. 'No, don't drive away the flies,' he said. 'They have fed on me until now they are satisfied and no longer hurt me. But if you brush these off, then other, more hungry ones will come and feed on me until I am sucked dry of blood.'" A mirthless smile crinkled the corners of his mouth. "Pilate, I want no new thirsty fly settling after Valerius Gratus upon the Jews in Judaea. Nevertheless, from them I must be sent a sufficiency of blood. Do you understand?"

Pilate swallowed. "Sire, I understand." He licked his heavy red lips.

As they were at the door, Tiberius raised his hand to stop them again. A sly grin, leering and sadistic, spread across his face. "Take Claudia with you to Judaea, Procurator. And rule her, man! Rule her!"

41

6

Languidly the Princess Herodias of the Maccabean branch of the Herod dynasty lay back in the warm, scented water so that only her head, framed in black hair held dry by a finely woven silk net, was exposed.

"More hot water, Neaera," she commanded. "But be careful. I don't want to look cooked for the Tetrarch."

Quickly the slave maid turned the tap, and steaming water gushed from the ornate eagle's-head faucet.

"That's enough!" shouted Herodias after a minute. "By the gods, shut it off!" She sat upright in the tiled tub, and the water ran down from her neck and shoulders, leaving little islands of suds clinging to her glistening white body. "Now hand me the mirror."

She extended a dripping arm and accepted the polished bronze. For a long moment she studied her image. "Neaera, tell me truthfully, am I showing my age too dreadfully?"

"But, Mistress, you are not old," the maid protested.

"You're a flatterer, Neaera. Salome, remember, is fourteen."

"But you were married very young, Mistress."

"And I was married a long time ago, too." She peered again into the mirror. "Look. Already I can see tiny crow's-foot lines around my eyes."

"But unguents and a little eye shadowing...."

"More flattery." Herodias shook a wet finger at the young woman's nose. "But I love it; so don't ever stop. But now"—she grasped the sides of the tub—"help me out. I mustn't lie in this hot water any longer, or I'll be as pink as a roast by the time the Tetrarch comes." She grasped the maid's arm to steady herself as she stepped from the tub to the tufted mat, and Neaera began to rub her down with a heavy towel. When the slave maid had finished drying her, Herodias turned to face the full-length mirror, her body flushed and glowing from the brisk robbing. Palms on hips, she studied her own straight, still lithe frame. "Really, Neaera," she asked, "how do I look?" With fingers spread she caressed the gently rounded smooth plane of her stomach and then lifted cupped palms to her firm, finely shaped breasts. "I haven't lost my figure too badly, have I?"

42

"You haven't lost it at all, Mistress," the maid assured her, as she picked up a filmy undergarment from the bench. "It's still youthful and still beautiful." Herodias braced herself as the girl bent low to assist her into the black silk garment. Neaera leaned back and studied the older woman again. "You have the figure of a young woman, indeed, Mistress," she said, "though fully matured and...."

"And what, Neaera? What were you going to say?"

"Well, Mistress, a figure to me more beautiful because of maturity, and more interesting."

"And more alluring, more seductive, maybe?" Her smile was lightly wanton. "To the Tetrarch, perhaps? But the Herods, Neaera, and old Tiberius, too, I hear, like their women very young." Her expression sobered. "I'm almost afraid he'll be having eyes for Salome rather than for me. The child has matured remarkably, you know, in the last year."

"I should think, though, Mistress, that the Tetrarch...."

A sharp knocking on the door interrupted her.

"By the gods, Neaera, it must be the Tetrarch, and I'm not ready. Tell Strabo to seat him in the peristylum and pour him wine and say that I shall be ready soon."

But the visitor was not the Tetrarch of Galilee. Strabo announced that the Emperor's stepdaughter was in the atrium.

"Claudia! How wonderful! Show her into the solarium, and tell her I'll join her in a minute. Neaera, hurry and fetch me my robe. We can sit and talk while you do my hair."

"I can't stay for more than a few minutes," the Emperor's stepdaughter announced when, a moment later, Herodias greeted her in the solarium. "Longinus is going to take me out to the chariot races, and he may be waiting for me right now. But I wanted to tell you, Herodias...." She paused, her expression suddenly questioning. "Bona Dea, I'll bet that the Tetrarch is taking you there, too, and I've caught you in the middle of getting dressed." 43

"Yes, you're right, but there's no hurry, Claudia. I can finish quickly. And if I'm not ready when he comes, he can wait."

"So," Claudia laughed, "you already have the Tetrarch so entranced that he will wait patiently while you dress."

"Not patiently, perhaps, but he'll wait ... without protesting."

"Then it won't be long before you'll be marrying him and leaving for Palestine." She said it teasingly, but immediately her expression changed to reveal concern. "But, Herodias, when you do, what will his present wife say; how will she take it? And his subjects in Galilee? Doesn't the Jewish religion forbid a man's having more than one living wife?"

"The daughter of King Aretas will resent his bringing another wife to Tiberias, no doubt"—Herodias smiled coyly—"if I do marry him. And as for the religion of the Jews, well, my dear, you must know that neither Antipas nor I follow its tenets too closely."

"Of course. But I wasn't thinking of you or the Tetrarch as much as I was of how his present wife would react. And the people of Galilee, too, how will they feel about his having two living wives, one of whom is his niece. Won't it offend them?"

"Yes, if we marry, it will offend a great many of them. But my grandfather, old King Herod, father of Philip and Antipas, had ten wives, remember, nine of them at the same time. The Jews didn't like that, but what could they do? No, we aren't too concerned about what the Jews will think. But Aretas' daughter probably will try to cause trouble. Not because Antipas will be having a new bedfellow, but because she won't any longer be Tetrarchess. Being replaced will make her furious. She cares not a fig for the Tetrarch's bedding with other women; she even gave him a harem of Arabian women, Antipas told me." She paused, smiling. "Claudia, you remember that black-haired woman at the banquet the other night, the one called Mary of Magdala?" Claudia nodded. "Well, Antipas told me that his wife not only knew that Mary was coming with him to Rome but actually suggested that he bring her. He said his wife and Mary were good friends even though the Tetrarchess knew quite well what the relationship was between him and Mary." 44

"Maybe the Tetrarchess sent this Mary with Antipas to keep his eyes from straying to other women, like you, for example."

"Keeping his eyes from straying would be an impossible task."

"Do you think Mary is jealous of you now?"

"That woman!" Herodias tossed her head. "Of course not. Nor am I jealous of her. I really don't care if he spends an occasional night in her bed. All I want is to be Tetrarchess. If he marries me, I shall insist, though, that he divorce that Arabian woman. No, our concern, Claudia"—she lowered her voice and glanced cautiously around the room, but Neaera had left the solarium—"is not what the Jews in Galilee, or his present wife, or this woman from Magdala will think, but rather what the Prefect himself will think. Sejanus could cause us much trouble. But now everything seems to be all right. Antipas assures me that we needn't worry about it any longer. He says that he and Sejanus have reached an understanding."

"And I have a good idea of what that understanding is based upon," Claudia said. "But what about your husband, Herodias? What will Philip think?"

"Philip! Hah!" She sneered. "What Philip thinks is of no concern. I've never really cared for him anyway. It's a little hard to feel romantic toward a man who's your half uncle, you know."

"But Antipas, too, is your half uncle, isn't he? And he's Philip's half brother as well. Hmm." She smiled mischievously. "That makes him both Salome's half uncle and half great-uncle, doesn't it? That is, if Philip's her father."

"Well, yes," Herodias admitted. "I suppose he's her father. Anyway, he thinks so. But he's also an old man, a generation older than I." She said it with evident sarcasm. "Antipas is old too, of course, but remember, my dear, he's the Tetrarch of Galilee, while Philip is only a tiresome, fast aging, disowned son of a dead king, dependent for

his very existence on the favor of a crotchety Emperor and a conniving Prefect. Antipas is old and fat, Claudia, but he has power and an opulence far in excess of Philip's, and a title, too. And some day, perhaps not too far away, with my pushing him, who knows, he may be a king like his father was." She shrugged. "As for romance, the world's filled with younger men." 45

Claudia studied the face of her Idumaeen friend. "Herodias, you worship power, don't you?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Herodias replied tartly. "Power and wealth, you forget, are rightfully mine. I am the granddaughter of Mariamne, King Herod's royal wife, daughter of the Maccabeans, while Philip's mother was only a high priest's daughter and the mother of Antipas was a Samaritan woman. I am descended from the true royalty in Israel." Her irritation faded as quickly as it had come. "You say I worship power. What else, pray, is there for one to worship? Your pale, anemic Roman gods? Bah! You don't worship them yourself. Why then should I? I'm not even a Roman. Silly superstition, your Roman gods, and well you know it, Claudia. And the gods of the Greeks are no better. Nor the Egyptians. If I had to embrace the superstition of any religion I would be inclined to worship the Yahweh of the Jews. He's the only god who makes any sense at all to me, but even he is too fire-breathing and vindictive for my liking. But I'm not a Jew, Claudia, even though I am descended on one side from the royal Maccabeans. I'm a Herod, and the Herods are Idumaeans. The Jews call them pagans, and by the Jews' standards, pagans we are." For a moment she was thoughtful, and Claudia said nothing to break the silence. "But I suppose you're right, Claudia," she said at last. "If I have any god at all, he's the two-headed god of power and money. And if the Tetrarch were your Longinus, well, my god would have a third head, pleasure. I envy you, Claudia! By the way," she added, as she poured wine for her guest and herself, "may I be so bold, my dear, as to inquire how things between you and the centurion stand just now?"

"That's why I came to see you, Herodias. I wanted to thank you for a most enjoyable evening too, but mainly I wanted to tell you that Longinus and I have—how did you express it—reached an understanding."

"Wonderful!" Herodias beamed. "Are you going to marry him, Claudia, or are you...?" She hesitated, grinning.

"Am I going to marry him, or will we just continue as we are without the formality of marriage vows?" She laughed. "Yes, I'm planning to marry him. But this is what I wanted to tell you, Herodias. I'm going out with him to Palestine. He's being sent there on some sort of special mission by the Prefect Sejanus." 46

"By all the gods, that is wonderful, Claudia! Then we'll be able to see each other out there. Where will you be stationed? At Caesarea? Jerusalem? Maybe even Tiberias?"

"He hasn't received his detailed orders yet. But I'll be able to visit you at the palace anyway. I hear it's a magnificent place."

"It must be. I'm anxious to see it myself; you know, I haven't been near the place since it was finished. And it will be wonderful to have you and Longinus to visit us." But suddenly her expression sobered. "Claudia, has the Emperor given his permission for you to marry Longinus? And does the Prefect approve?"

"Neither of them knows about it yet. But I'm sure they'll both be glad to see me married and away from Rome. Longinus is going to speak to Sejanus about us."

They heard voices in the atrium. Claudia stood up quickly. "That must be the Tetrarch. By Bona Dea, I didn't realize I was staying this long; I must be going. Longinus will be waiting for me. Herodias, surely we'll see one another again before either of us sails for Palestine?"

"Yes, we must. And when we do, we'll both know more about our plans."

Neaera entered. "Has the Tetrarch come?" Herodias asked.

"No, Mistress, it's a soldier sent by the Prefect. He seeks the Lady Claudia. He awaits her in the atrium."

The soldier, one of the Praetorian Guardsmen, announced that the Prefect Sejanus was at that moment waiting for Claudia in her own apartment at the Imperial Palace. He added that he hoped they might start immediately; he feared the Prefect might be getting impatient.

But when they reached her house and she entered the atrium to greet the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, Sejanus bowed low and smiled reassuringly. "I come from an audience with your beloved stepfather, the Emperor, at Capri," he said. "He commanded me to bear to you his esteem and fatherly love and to offer his congratulations upon the most excellent plans he has projected—with my warm approval, let me hasten to assure you—for your forthcoming marriage." 47

"For my marriage? But, Prefect Sejanus...." Claudia paused, striving to maintain outward composure.

"I know it comes as quite a surprise to you. But the arrangements have been completed, and I've come here to tell you immediately on my return from Capri. You and your future husband are the only ones who are being informed now of the Emperor's plans. But you will be married soon, even before you and your husband leave for his tour of duty in Palestine."

"In Palestine!"

How could the Emperor have known about Longinus and me? The Prefect? Of course, that's how. Sejanus knew that Longinus was with me at the banquet Antipas gave for Herodias; he knew that Longinus was at my house later that evening when he sent Cornelius out to fetch him, or he learned of it when they came afterward to his palace. Old Sejanus must not be so bad, after all. Nor is the Emperor, either. Perhaps I have been too severe in

judging them. Perhaps they both have their good moments, their generous impulses....

"Yes, to Palestine." The Prefect was speaking. "He has promised your hand in marriage to a Roman army officer who, if he follows my orders implicitly and remains completely loyal to me, may shortly be not only a man of wealth but also a leader of influence in the affairs of the Empire."

Claudia was about to express her thanks to the Emperor and his most excellent Prefect and to ask when the wedding would be held. But some instinctive vein of caution restrained her from mentioning Longinus' name. Now the Prefect was speaking again.

"Needless to say, I join the Emperor in praying the gods that you and the Procurator Pontius Pilate lead long lives and find great happiness with each other."

"The Procurator Pontius Pilate! Then...." But again caution stopped her just in time.

Sejanus smiled. "You are surprised, my dear Claudia? And whom did you think the Emperor had chosen to be your husband?" 48

"But I ... I don't even know this Pontius Pilate." Claudia ignored the Prefect's question. "He is to be Procurator in Palestine, succeeding Valerius Gratus?"

"Procurator of Judaea, with headquarters at Caesarea, yes." His grin was sardonically beguiling. "But what were you about to say?"

"I was going to observe that then I would be spending the rest of my life away from Rome, living in a distant provincial army post," she lied, not too convincingly, she suspected.

But Sejanus did not pursue his questioning. "Not if the Procurator conducts the affairs of his post in the manner that I have outlined to him."

"Has he been informed of the Emperor's plans for ... for us?"

"Yes. And he is tremendously happy and excited, as what man wouldn't be, my dear Claudia?" His lips flattened bloodless across his teeth, and his little eyes flamed. "Even I, with my youth long fled, envy him!"

7

Claudia, striving to be courteously casual, walked with the Prefect to the doorway where two Praetorian Guardsmen awaited him. As they went out she closed the pivoted double doors behind them, but after a moment she cautiously drew one back and peered through the narrow slit.

The Prefect's bearers and the guards who had remained outside were standing stiffly at attention, the bearers at the sedan-chair handles; one of the guards stepped forward quickly to open the door. Sejanus paused an instant and spoke to the man; then he stepped into the chair and, as the guard closed the door, pulled together the shielding curtains. The guard raised his hand, and the bearers moved off smartly.

Claudia saw, however, that the bodyguard did not march off with the Prefect's procession; instead, he peered about furtively, cast a hurried glance toward her doorway, and then merged into the traffic pushing along the narrow, cobbled way. Momentarily she lost him but in the next instant discovered him idling in front of a shop diagonally across from her entrance. But not for long did he study the wares of the merchant; she saw that he had faced about and was staring intently at her own doorway. 49

"I thought so," she observed to Tullia, who had retreated into the shadowed narrow corridor as Sejanus was leaving. "The Prefect left one of his bodyguards to watch the house. He either wishes to know where I'll be going or who will be coming here, perhaps both. I don't know what he is scheming, Tullia"—the maid had come forward and secured the doors—"but whatever it is, I don't like it. Longinus may endanger himself by coming. We must warn him. But how, Tullia? He is likely to be arriving any moment; he must have been delayed at Castra Praetoria, or he would have been here already."

Quickly she told the maid the startling news the Prefect had brought.

"Anyone who leaves this house through these doors, Mistress, then is sure to be followed. But I could go out through the servant's entrance on some contrived mission and perhaps be able to warn him."

"Good, Tullia. You can be taking something to Senator Piso's house and carry a message to Longinus. Talk with him if he is there and tell him what has happened, but say that I'll arrange to meet him later, perhaps at the house of Herodias."

"Or maybe, Mistress, at the shop of Stephanos."

"Yes. Maybe the goldsmith's would be better. But if the Prefect's men should follow and ask you questions, Tullia, what will you say?"

"I could be bearing a small gift to Philo, Senator Piso's old Greek slave who tutored his children. He's quite ill

and....”

“Wonderful! Tullia, you are indeed my treasure. Take the old man a jar of that honey from Samos; he would like that. And some wheat cakes and a bottle of the Falernian.” She was silent a moment, thoughtful. “By the Bountiful Mother! Tullia, I’ll help you get away by leading that soldier myself on a false chase. Fetch me my cloak and scarf. I’ll pretend to be disguising myself in order to slip away. Then he’ll follow me. Now find the things to take to old Philo, and get yourself ready. And do hurry.” 50

In a few minutes Tullia returned with the cloak and scarf. “The basket of food is ready,” she said. She helped her mistress put on the cloak and tie the scarf so that much of her face was concealed. “Leave the door ajar as I go out,” Claudia instructed her, “and when you see the soldier following me, close the door and slip away yourself through the servants’ entrance. And return the same way, as quickly as you can.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“And, Tullia, say to Longinus that I instructed you to tell him that what has happened changes nothing, that as far as I am concerned everything is just as it was with him and me. But say as little as you can to anyone else, Tullia, and nothing concerning the Prefect’s visit.”

Claudia walked to the entrance doors and turned to face her maid again. “You go out and look around furtively as though you were seeing that the way was clear for me. That will likely warn the guardsman that something is afoot, that we suspect someone may be watching the house. Then I’ll go out, and because I will not have my bearers summoned, he’ll surmise that I am trying to leave unnoticed.”

Then she puckered her rouged lips into a thoughtful bud. “But why is old Sejanus having us watched? Did he think that I would slip out to tell Longinus? Does he want me to tell the centurion and perhaps deliberately prejudice him against Pilate?” She shook her head slowly. “But how can he know about Longinus and me?”

“Perhaps, Mistress, he only suspects,” Tullia answered. “It may be that he is trying to find out just what your relationship is.”

“Maybe so. But little he’ll discover now, by the gods!” She opened the door and peered out. “Now.”

Tullia slipped through the doorway, looked up and down the narrow street, then stepped back into the atrium.

“Now I’ll go,” Claudia said. “Be careful, Tullia. And do guard your tongue.” Outside she readjusted her scarf and pulled her cloak more closely about her. Then she stepped into the cobble-stoned way and walked rapidly along it. 51

Tullia, peeping through the slit in the doorway, saw the Prefect’s man emerge from the shadows of a shop entrance and move off quickly to follow her. When the two had disappeared around the turn, Tullia closed the doors and hurriedly recrossed the atrium. A moment later she slipped out through the servants’ entrance. A freshly starched napkin covered the food in the basket she carried.

8

An unexpected assignment, fortunately, had delayed Longinus’ departure from Castra Praetoria, and he had just reached home when Tullia arrived at Senator Piso’s. Quickly she told him of the Prefect’s visit to her mistress.

He listened attentively, outwardly calm but inwardly with rage mounting as her story progressed. “Go back to your mistress, Tullia,” he said, when she finished, “and tell her that with me, too, nothing is changed. But warn her to make no attempt, until I tell her, to communicate with me. The Prefect is diabolically clever; he may suspect that we will try to thwart his plans. I don’t understand just what he’s scheming; we must be careful. But assure her that I will find some way of getting a message to her.”

“Centurion Longinus, if I may suggest, sir, should you send the message, or bear it yourself, to the shop of Stephanos in the Vicus Margaritarius....”

“I know that shop, Tullia, and the goldsmith, too.”

“Then, sir, from there I could take your message verbally to my mistress. Stephanos is the son of my father’s brother. He can be trusted, you may be assured, sir.”

“That’s a good arrangement, Tullia. And should your mistress wish to send me a message, you can leave it with the goldsmith. But do warn her to be careful. The Prefect may be setting a trap for us.” 52

The goldsmith Stephanos was, like his cousin Tullia, a Greek-speaking Jew who had been reared in the Jewish colony in Rome. Although a young man, he had already established a profitable business in the capital, and his customers numbered many of the equestrian class, including members of Senator Piso’s family. Consequently, Longinus, were he being watched, could go to the goldsmith’s shop without arousing suspicion.

Longinus discovered how fortunate they had been in taking such precautions when, a week after Tullia’s visit to him, he was again summoned to the palace of the Prefect.

Sejanus gave little time to the formalities of greeting the Senator's son. "I am now prepared to hand you your orders, Centurion Longinus," he said. "But before I do so I must ask you if you have any reservations whatsoever concerning this mission I propose to send you on." The Prefect's cold little eyes were studying him, Longinus realized, and he was determined that he would reveal neither fear nor surprise.

"None, sir. I'm a soldier, and I await the Prefect's orders."

But Sejanus was not satisfied. "When last I talked with you, you said that you were hardly acquainted with Pontius Pilate, that you were in no sense an intimate friend. But I ask you now, do you have any hostility toward him?" He leaned forward, and his eyes bored into the centurion's bland countenance. "Has anything happened since then that would cause you to change your feeling toward him?"

"I know nothing that he has done, sir, that would cause me to feel hostility toward him. Has he, sir?"

The question seemed to surprise Sejanus. He leaned back against his chair. "He has done nothing. But something has been done that may have caused you to feel bitter toward him." He was studying the centurion intently. "Bitterness toward the Procurator would render you unfit for the assignment I am proposing for you, just as close friendship for him would do the same." He smiled, changing his stern tone to one of fatherly interest. "Frankly, Longinus, I had expected to find you bitter toward Pilate, the Emperor, and me." 53

"But why, sir, should I be bitter?"

"I had thought that perhaps you would be jealous of him, resent his...."

"Jealous of Pilate?" Boldly Longinus ventured to interrupt. "But why, sir?"

"Pilate is going to marry the Emperor's stepdaughter and take her out to Judaea when he goes there to begin his duties as Procurator. I had thought that you yourself might be planning to marry Claudia."

"I, sir?" Longinus affected sudden surprise. "May I respectfully ask why you thought that?"

"You have been seeing her since your return from Germania. She accompanied you to the banquet Antipas gave for his brother's wife." Sejanus shrugged. "That suggested it to me." His lips thinned into a feline grin. "Since I made known to her the Emperor's plans I have had you both watched; if you have met or communicated with one another, it has escaped my men's sharp eyes." His piggish eyes brightened. "I want you to understand, Longinus, that I am not the protector of either Claudia or Pilate. I am not the least concerned with their private lives so long as what they do doesn't harm me or the Empire. And let me add"—his eyes were dancing now—"I'm not concerned with your private life either. I am determined, however, that nothing be done to interfere with our plans for Pilate and Claudia. But if after they are married and gone out to Judaea, some evening in Caesarea or Jerusalem you should find yourself in Pilate's bed when Pilate is away, that will be no concern of mine, nor shall I care one green fig's worth." Suddenly the lascivious gleam was gone from his eyes, and his countenance was grave. He raised a stern hand and leaned forward again. "But I'll require of you a true and unbiased report on Pontius Pilate, Longinus. If you think you may be prejudiced against the man because he will have taken Claudia away from you, then I charge you to tell me now and I shall give you some other assignment."

"I assure you, sir, that I have no hostility toward him. But I do wonder why Claudia is being required to marry him and be virtually exiled from Rome." 54

Sejanus studied the senator's son a long moment. "Longinus, I shall be entirely frank with you, as I shall require you to be with me," he replied, lowering his voice, though there were no other ears to hear. "The Emperor and I want Claudia exiled, though we would never employ so harsh a word for her being sent away from Rome. Claudia's the granddaughter of Augustus, remember, and also—it's generally believed, at any rate—the granddaughter of Mark Antony and the Egyptian Cleopatra. She's in direct descent from strong-willed, able—and in their day tremendously popular—forebears. Tiberius, on the other hand, is not. Nor does he have any strong following. As you know, Longinus"—he paused, and his small black eyes for an instant weighed the centurion's expression—"in everything but name, I am the Emperor."

"Indeed, sir, but were Rome to overthrow the Emperor, the gods forbid, would the people enthrone a woman? Surely, sir, they would never...."

"Of course not. It's not likely, under any circumstances. But you don't understand, Longinus." The Prefect's grim countenance relaxed a bit, but he kept his voice low as he sat back against his chair. "Claudia is no longer married. While she was married to that fop Aemilius there was no cause for concern. But now she's divorced and in a position to marry again." He smiled, and the wanton flame lighted once more. "And beautiful. Gods, what a figure!" He rolled his eyes. "If I were young again, with her I could be Emperor of Rome!" He was silent a moment. "But I am Emperor of Rome—in all but title." Now Sejanus was suddenly grave, and old, and the flame was only of an innate cunning. He leaned toward the centurion. "Longinus, any man in Rome, any man, would be happy to marry Claudia. She's beautiful, rich, highly intelligent, and the granddaughter of Rome's greatest Emperor. Being that, she remains a threat to us as long as she is in Rome. What if some strong, ambitious general or senator, for example, should marry her and undertake to displace Tiberius?" He sat back and gestured with outspread palms. "Don't you see, Centurion? And displacement of Tiberius—and me—would be disastrous 55 for your father, of course, and for you. You and I must work together just as your father and I have been doing. So I shall look forward not only to your frequent reports of a military and administrative nature, particularly with respect to the collection of revenue, but now that Claudia is going out there, to tidbits of information concerning her and Pilate." His sensual lips thinned across his teeth. "Claudia must be kept away from Rome, Longinus, but she must be kept happily away, too. So if you can help make her stay in Judaea pleasant, if you can help Pilate keep her satisfied, or if you can keep her satisfied," he added with a leer, "you will

be serving the Emperor and me, your father, and yourself. And I don't care *how* you do it. Be careful to avoid scandal, though, that might reach Rome." He grinned again. "I think you need have little fear of Pilate." His lips were twisted in an evil smile. "Now have I answered your question, Longinus? Do I make myself entirely clear?"

"You do, sir." Longinus' countenance was impassive, he hoped, but his palm itched to be doubled into a fist that would smash the leer off the Prefect's face.

"Then these are your orders. Three days hence the 'Palmyra' sails for Palestine. Aboard will be a maniple of troops to relieve two centuries of the Second Italian Cohort. You will command a century that will be stationed at Caesarea under Sergius Paulus. Centurion Cornelius will command the other. Also aboard will be Tetrarch Herod Antipas. You and your century will go ashore at Caesarea, but Cornelius and his will accompany Herod to Joppa. There they will land, and Cornelius will escort the Tetrarch to Jerusalem. Ostensibly Herod will be going up to the Temple to worship, but he will be bearing a message from me to old Annas, the former high priest." He paused but did not explain further. "From Jerusalem," he went on, "Cornelius will escort Herod to Tiberias, where the century will be stationed, with a garrison post at Capernaum supporting it. And now, to get back to you, Longinus, I have dispatched orders to Sergius Paulus that although you will command a century, you must be allowed leave any time you request it to undertake special missions. I indicated to him that these missions would be concerned primarily with the government's interest in the operations of your father's factories in Phoenicia. This work understandably could take you to the plants in Phoenicia and also to Tiberias, Jerusalem, and other regions in Palestine. The cohort commander must never suspect, nor anyone else, including Claudia, remember, that you are keeping sharp eyes and ears on Pilate and Herod Antipas. I'm sending you ahead on the 'Palmyra,' Longinus, so that you will be in Caesarea when Pilate and Claudia arrive there." He studied the centurion. "Is everything understood, Centurion?"

56

"Yes, sir, I understand." His forehead creased into small wrinkles. "When you talked with me before, sir, you said that I would be expected to keep watch on the activities of three persons, Pilate, Antipas, and...."

"Claudia, of course, was the third." He twisted his vulture-like head to scan the large chamber, a habit developed during long years of caution. "Watch her, too. Know what she is doing, what she is thinking even, if you can." He lowered his voice. "Be careful, Centurion. She's a clever woman, with brains worthy of old Augustus. I am not concerned, as I said, with her morals, or Pilate's, or yours. But be careful." His little eyes fired again, and a wry grin twisted his face. "Don't let Pilate catch you in bed with her. Such carelessness might destroy your effectiveness."

Sejanus stood up, a signal that his business with the centurion was finished. Longinus arose quickly to stand at attention, concerned that even yet he might reveal in the Prefect's presence the revulsion mounting within him.

"Send me reports as often and as regularly as you have valuable information to give, Longinus. Use great care to see that your messages are well-sealed and not likely to go astray. Watch those three. Let nothing of significance escape your notice, and let nothing be omitted from your reports. Keep Claudia under surveillance, but don't get so occupied with her that you aren't fully alive to everything that is happening. Watch her, regardless of what else you two may be doing!"

57

9

Longinus led his century from its quarters at Castra Praetoria westward through the Viminal Gate along the way that skirted the leveled-out northern extremity of Esqueline Hill.

At the point where this way joined Via Longa the procession entered the cobblestoned street and moved westward and then straight southward. Longinus glanced over his shoulder and had a glimpse, between shops that crowded the lower level of Quirinal Hill, of his father's great house high on that elevation. But quickly he lost sight of it as his century became virtually submerged in the dense traffic fighting its way slowly along Via Longa. Fortunately, the legionaries were bearing only their lightest armor; the heavier gear had been sent ahead and put aboard the "Palmyra." But even thus equipped, in the narrow, packed street, though it was one of Rome's important thoroughfares, they were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain a steady march.

As the century began to pass north of the crowded Subura, that motley district of massed tenements, shops, taverns, and brothels already being pointed out as the birthplace more than a century ago of the great Julius Caesar, the press of the throng so increased that the soldiers were almost forced to fight their way forward. But progress became easier in the area below the Forum Augustus, and as the troops were pushing past it toward the Forum Romanum, Longinus glanced toward the summit of Palatine Hill crowned by the sprawling great Imperial Palace; his eyes went immediately to the northeast wing and to the window in Claudia's bedroom through which he had heard, one recent morning, the rising trumpet call from the post.

Longinus had not seen the Emperor's stepdaughter since the day the Prefect had visited her, though they had exchanged messages left with Stephanos the goldsmith at his shop in Vicus Margaritarius. Claudia's last message had assured him that she would contrive some plan for seeing him immediately upon her arrival with Pilate at Caesarea; that shouldn't be too difficult. Tullia had relayed Claudia's message to Stephanos, and Longinus had received it verbally from the goldsmith. "We will have the Great Sea between the Emperor and Sejanus and us," she had sent word to the centurion. "It will be much safer then; as for Pilate, I am little concerned with what he thinks or does; in fact, he'll do nothing."

58

Before the Forum Romanum Longinus led his troops straight southward. At the northwest end of Circus Maximus

they veered westward and went along the way leading across the Tiber on the ancient Pons Sublicius, fashioned of great stones fitted together to span the swiftly flowing muddy water. Near the bridge entrance the column turned left and paralleled the stream to halt at the pier just below the Sublicius. Quickly the legionaries went aboard the "Palmyra."

Longinus' troops were the last to embark, and within an hour the "Palmyra" began slowly to shove its stern out into the stream. When the ship was safely away from the pier, the hortator gave a sharp command, and the long oars, manned by galley slaves chained to their three-tiered benches, rose and fell in perfect cadence, with the starboard oarsmen pushing forward and those on the port side pulling hard, so that the "Palmyra's" bow came around; soon the vessel was moving steadily downstream.

Longinus and Cornelius, having stowed their gear, returned to the deck to stand together on the port side near the stern. By now the vessel was rounding the slight westward bend in the river and was passing the Aventine Hill. Cornelius, watching the yellow waters churning in the wake of the "Palmyra," raised his eyes and pointed across the stern toward the Imperial Palace, the western front of which they could see jutting past the squared end of the Circus Maximus. The upper section of the great palace was visible above the race course. "Longinus, I'm surprised you're leaving her in Rome. I thought that if you ever went back to Palestine, you'd be taking Claudia with you."

Longinus wondered if by some chance Cornelius had learned of the Emperor's plans for his stepdaughter and was trying now gently to probe further. "But the night you came to her house for me was the first time I'd seen her after returning from Germania," he protested, laughing. "Wouldn't that be a little fast? She's the Emperor's stepdaughter, you know." 59

"Well, maybe I was imagining things." Cornelius shrugged. "But she is a beautiful woman."

"I agree, Cornelius. The Bountiful Mother was lavish with her gifts to the Lady Claudia." He turned to lean against the rail. "What I'm wondering, though, is why Herod didn't marry Herodias and bring her along."

"Maybe he has married her. But I suspect that whether he has or not, he'll be returning to Rome for her before many months. That is, after he's made peace with the Tetrarchess and old King Aretas, her father." He grinned. "I'd wager, too, that you'll be coming back for Claudia."

Longinus laughed but made no comment. His friend, he reasoned, did not know about Claudia and Pontius Pilate. Nor would he tell him yet.

Now the "Palmyra" was moving swiftly, its cadenced oars rising and falling rhythmically to propel the vessel much faster downstream than the current unaided would have borne it. They had come opposite the thousand-foot-long Emporium huddled on the Tiber's eastern bank, its wharves crawling with slaves moving great casks and bales of merchandise into the warehouses or bringing them out to be loaded aboard ships preparing to slip down the Tiber and into the Great Sea at Ostia. Black Ethiopians and Nubians, their sweating bodies shining as though they had been rubbed with olive oil and naked except for brightly colored loincloths, straggled at their tasks. Blond warriors brought from Germania as part of some Roman general's triumph, their skins now burnt to the color of old leather, and squat, swarthy men from Gaul and Dalmatia, from Macedonia and the Greek islands, captives of Roman legionaries ranging far from the Italian mainland, pulled and shoved to the roared commands of the overseers and the not infrequent angry uncoiling of long leather whips.

"Did you ever realize, Longinus, what a comprehensive view you get of Rome and the Empire from a ship going along the Tiber?" Cornelius nodded toward the stern. "Look at those marble-crowned hills back there, literally overrun with palaces, billions of sesterces spent in building them, hundreds, thousands of lives used up, sacrificed, raising them one above the other. The people in them, too, Longinus, and the rotteness—smug hypocrisy, adherence to convention, infidelity, unfairness, utter cruelty, depravity. Rome, great mistress of the world. Hah!" He half turned and pointed toward the Emporium. "Those sweating slaves over there would agree." He gestured with opened hands. "Ride down the Tiber and see Rome, glorious Mother Rome, from Viminal's crown to Emporium's docks, eh?" 60

"You're right," Longinus smiled. "And it's only because the gods have decreed for us a different fate that you and I are not over there heaving crates, or chained here pulling oars." He leaned over the rail and studied the rhythmical rise and fall of the long, slim oars. "No doubt there are among these slaves several whose intelligence, education, and culture are considerably greater than the hortator's, and I'm sure.... Look!"

Cornelius followed the direction of Longinus' outstretched arm. One of the oars had come up beneath a floating object and sent it spinning and twisting in the churning muddy flood. Now another oar's sharp blade struck the object, ripping apart its once carefully folded wrapping; as the oar cleared the surface, the wrapping unrolled, exposing the body of a tiny infant, chalk-white in the yellow water. It spun giddily for a moment, then sank.

"By the gods!" Cornelius shouted. "It's an exposed baby girl!"

But now the small, lifeless body bobbed to the surface and for one unruffled moment lay on its back, eyes wide-open and fixed, staring upward unseeing toward the two centurions leaning over the ship's rail. In that same instant the oars descended, and the knife-sharp edge of one near the stern sliced diagonally across the drowned infant; the oar shivered with the unexpected added burden, but it bore the mangled small corpse beneath the thick waters, and up through them rose a trickle of dark crimson.

"She wasn't dead when she was thrown in," Cornelius said, "and that wasn't long ago. Perhaps from one of the bridges back there, or maybe a wharf. Or even a boat ahead." His shoulders trembled in an involuntary shudder. "Longinus, I could kill a man in battle without blinking, but I couldn't throw an infant into the Tiber. By 61

the gods, how can any man do it?"

"Nevertheless, hundreds do it every year, Centurion. We were speaking of those slaves over there on the Emporium's docks and these galley slaves rowing us. And this drowned baby, and countless others who simply lost when the gods rolled the dice. The fickle gods, my friend, the unfeeling, stonehearted gods."

"Don't blame the gods, Longinus. Blame rather Rome's mounting vanity and greed, her selfishness, cruelty."

"You know I'm not blaming the gods, Cornelius; I have no more faith than you have even in their existence. They are nothing but pale nobodies, fabrications in which not even intelligent children believe."

"Fabrications, yes. Our gods are inventions, but they serve a purpose and are necessary."

"Necessary?" The centurion's face had twisted into a heavy scowl. "Why, Cornelius?"

"Because they fill a place, supply a need, Longinus. It's the nature of man to look to some higher power, isn't it, some greater intelligence? Else why would one invent these gods; why would primitive peoples carve them from wood and stone; why would we and the Greeks and the Egyptians raise great temples to them?"

"Do you contend then that people worship these carved sticks and stones as symbols of some higher intelligence and power rather than the carved objects themselves, even primitive peoples? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. Some—many, in fact—have become confused, of course, and in seeking to worship this mysterious divinity they go through a form or ceremony of worshiping the symbol. But what I'm trying to say, Centurion, is that it is the nature of mankind to look to something higher, something more intelligent, more powerful, better, yes, than man himself, better even than such an exemplary man as our beloved"—now his tone was sarcastic—"Emperor, or his most worthy Prefect. And if man seeks such a being to worship—and all men, mind you, even savages, even those wild tree worshipers in Britannia do it—doesn't it stand to reason that there should be such a being?" 62

The "Palmyra" had entered the smooth bending of the Tiber and was moving rapidly toward the river's nearest approach to Janiculum Hill, Rome's Jewish quarter on the west bank of the stream. Longinus pointed to the steep rise of the hill and the plane before it cluttered with the densely massed homes of thousands of Jews, many of them born in the capital, others newly settled there. "It seems to me, Centurion, that you've become an adherent of the Jewish one-god religion."

His words amused Cornelius. "Other Romans at our post in Galilee have charged me with the same thing. It came about, I suppose, from my helping the Jews at Capernaum build their new synagogue."

"Then surely you must be a member of their fellowship or synagogue ... whatever they call it?"

"No, I'm no convert to the Jews' religion, Centurion. I don't belong to the synagogue. I helped them, I told myself, in order to promote good relations between the Jews in Galilee and the members of our small Roman post. But maybe I had other reasons, too. There are many things about their one-god religion that seem sensible and right to me. But there are also practices among the Jews that I don't approve of at all, practices that seem cruel and senseless. Their system of sacrifices, for instance. I can see no act of proper worship in slitting the throats of innumerable sheep and cattle to appease an angry god...."

"I agree. But we do the same thing. Doesn't the Emperor dedicate the games by slitting the throats of oxen?"

"Exactly. But what is the good of such worship or ceremony or whatever you may choose to call it? If there is a god to whom the sacrifice is being made, what good does it do him, what pleasure could he possibly receive from it?"

"I see nothing to any of it, Cornelius. Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Jewish, forest worship in Britannia, whatever the system is; it's all superstition, delusion...."

"I grant you, maybe it is. But, Longinus, don't you feel deep down inside yourself that there must be some intelligence, some power, far above man's very limited intelligence and power, that created the earth and the heavens and controls them? Else how did they get here in the first place?" 63

"I don't know, Cornelius. You've gone ahead of me, my friend. I never gave much thought to matters like this." The lines of his forehead wrinkled into a frown. "But even if you *should* feel that way, how could you ever *know*? Have you seen a god, Centurion? Have you ever felt one or heard one speak?"

"I've never seen one, Longinus. But I think I have felt and perhaps heard one. There have been times when I was confident that I was communicating with one." Cornelius watched the spume thrown up by the flashing oars as they cut into the muddy waters. He turned back to face Longinus. "That's the difficulty, you know, communication. How can one get a grip upon a god—the god, if there be but one, and the way I see it that is the only sensible answer—like those slaves down there grip the oar handles? How can one hear a god, see him, taste him? Obviously, one cannot, for this god, whether there be one or many, must be different from man; he must be a spiritual being rather than a physical one. But if he is a spirit, how can we of the physical world communicate with him and he with us? There, my friend, is the problem."

Longinus shook his head. "You've got me, Cornelius. I cannot imagine a spirit, a being without a body, a something that is nothing."

"Many persons can't, Centurion. And that's the main difficulty in accepting the Jews' Yahweh, their one god. He is

a spirit, they say, without physical form or substance. They believe in him, but how do they know him, how do they learn what he's like? In a word, if he does exist, how can he be made comprehensible to man?"

Longinus smiled indulgently. "But you say you think you have felt one and maybe heard one. Why?"

"I don't know if I can explain. Maybe it goes back to the fact that my first lessons were taught me by a Greek slave. He was purchased by my father from a lot brought to Rome after one of those early rebellions. This man was one of the wisest I have ever known. I shall never forget his teaching concerning the gods. When we would speak lightly of our Roman gods, old Pheidias would scold us. 'Don't speak disparagingly of the gods,' he would say, even though he himself did not believe in them. I can still remember his words. 'The gods,' he said, 'are symbols of man's efforts to attain a higher life, a more noble plane of living. The good gods are the symbols of the good attributes in man; evil gods symbolize the base passions. Therefore, hold communion with the good gods, and seek to avoid contact with the evil ones.'"

"But how does that teaching explain what you feel?"

"Wait," Cornelius smiled, then continued. "Sometimes Pheidias would confide in us and talk in more intimate terms of his own philosophy. At such times he would tell us that his own gods were merged into one omnipotent and omniscient good god, a spirit without a body, everywhere present. This one god was a synthesis of the good, the true, and the beautiful. And though he could not be felt, as I feel this rail here"—Cornelius ran his hand along the ship's rail—"and though he was not to be seen or heard as one sees or hears another person, he was nevertheless even more real. 'For the only things that are real,' my tutor would say, 'are the intangible things, and the only imperishable things are those that have no physical being. Truth, for example. Truth has no body. Who can hold truth in his hand? And yet truth is eternal, unchangeable, indestructible. And love? Who can destroy love; who can defeat it? Yet can you put love in a basket and carry it from the shop? And who can measure a modius of love or weigh out twelve unciae?'" Calmly he regarded Longinus. "And I ask you, my friend, who can? What, after all, is more indestructible, unchangeable, immortal than the intangible?"

The "Palmyra" was moving around the river's bend now and gaining speed as it came into the straight stretch at a point even with the right-angled turning of the city's south wall. "But forgive me, Longinus," Cornelius said lightly. "I hadn't meant to be giving you a lecture on the nature of the gods or the one god."

"It has been entertaining and enlightening, my friend. And it has convinced me that you do hold with this one-god idea. Those Jews at Capernaum, cultivating the plant that came up from the seeds that old tutor sowed in your childhood, have brought it along to blooming." He laughed and tapped the rail with the palm of his hand. "Well, perhaps it's an advance—from the Roman gods to the Jews' one god—in superstition." But then the patronizing smile was gone, and he was serious. "I don't know, Cornelius. This one-god scheme does have its merits, I can see. I would like to believe, and I wish I could, that such an all-powerful, all-wise, all-good being rules the universe. But"—he paused, and a heavy frown darkened his countenance—"Cornelius," he began again, "I keep thinking of those slaves back there on the Emporium docks, countless slaves all over Rome and throughout the Empire, beaten, maimed, killed at the whims of their masters, yes, and that baby thrown into the Tiber, numberless unwanted babies exposed to die—drowned, thrown to the beasts, bashed against walls—and yet you say that one good god rules, one all-powerful and all-knowing god, one *good* god." He thrust forth a quivering, challenging forefinger almost under his friend's nose. "Then tell me, Cornelius, why does your good one god send all this ignorance, this stupidity, this cruelty, this despicable wickedness on the world? Tell me why; give me one logical, sensible reason, and I'll fall down at the invisible and intangible feet of your great one god and worship him in utter subjection."

"I can't tell you, Longinus. That very question has troubled me, too. I have wondered, and I've tried to explain it for myself. I don't know how old Pheidias explained it, or even if he did. I don't recall our ever challenging him on that point. But it may be that this one god—if there be one, mind you—does not ordain all the things that happen in the world. It may be that he is even sorrowful, too, because babies are thrown into the Tiber, because men are cruel and heartless toward other men...."

"Then if he is all-powerful, Cornelius, why does he permit it? You say he doesn't will it. Then why does he allow it?"

Cornelius looked across the deck to the shore line on the starboard side and for a long moment silently considered his friend's question. "I cannot say, Centurion; it's a mystery to me. Could it be, though, that the answer, if there be any answer, lies in this god's determination to give man his freedom? Could it be that even though he is hurt when man abuses the freedom given him, he feels that his children must be free, nevertheless, to work out their destinies? Maybe some such reasoning might explain it. I don't know." He shook his head sadly. "What do you think?"

"I disagree, Cornelius. You say that this one god would not order an infant thrown into the river. I agree, but that is not enough. A good god would not permit it." His grim expression relaxed, but he was still serious. "No, when one sees the condition in which countless men live, the utter unfairness of things, one cannot logically believe in the existence of such a god as you have described. Indeed, it is more logical to believe in our Roman gods than in the god of your old tutor or the Yahweh of the Jews, in our good ones contending with the evil ones"—he shrugged—"with the evil ones usually winning. But it is even more logical, Cornelius, to believe in no gods at all."

"You have a good argument, Longinus. But it seems to me that we invariably come back to what I said when we started this gods discussion. If there is no higher intelligence, no supreme power, then how did all this"—he swept his arm in a wide arc—"how did we, the world, the sun and moon and stars, everything, how did it all come into existence in the first place? By accident? Bah! And if not by accident, how? Answer me that, Longinus."

"I can't answer you. But why should I? What difference does it make? If this good god does exist but does not rule, if he does not enforce a good way of living among men, if he does not protect helpless babies or captured peoples—and obviously he doesn't—is the world any better off than if no gods existed in the first place?" He smiled complacently. "But, Cornelius, I have no quarrel with your attachment to your tutor's strangely Yahweh-like god. Some day when I visit you in Capernaum I may go with you to the synagogue or even the Temple at Jerusalem. I may even," he added with a grin, "offer a brace of doves for the sacrifices. Or would your Yahweh insist on my offering a young lamb?"

"My Yahweh? But I'm no Jew, Longinus. The god of old Pheidias has a greater appeal to me than Yahweh. Yahweh is too stern, too unbending, as they interpret him. But maybe they interpret him wrong, the priests who lead the worship, or maybe I interpret their interpretation wrong. It may be that the true one god"—he smiled 67—"if there be one, my friend, has never been properly interpreted to man. Maybe we just don't know him, what he's like." He shrugged and stepped away from the rail. "But I think we've had enough of gods for one day, don't you agree? Let's go inside. I've got some work to do before we reach Ostia; you probably have some, too."

As they started toward the cabin, Longinus turned to look back. Rome was entirely behind them now, off the port stern, but still clearly in sight. Above the city wall and the Aventine Hill beyond and now lifted clear of the Circus Maximus, the sprawling great Imperial Palace atop Palatine Hill flaunted itself in the sunshine.

Had Claudia arisen? Was she now in her bath or in the solarium having her hair dressed or her nails manicured? Was she in the peristylum or on the couch in the exedra? Was she making preparations, not too reluctantly perhaps, for her wedding with Pontius Pilate?

... Yes, and back there somewhere in that press of humanity were Pontius Pilate and the Prefect Sejanus, by all the gods. By all the gods, indeed. Good gods and evil gods, good to Pilate, evil to me...

Longinus abruptly faced about. Ahead, straight over the bow of the "Palmyra," gaining momentum now in a channel clearing of the jam of traffic within the city's walls, was Rome's port of Ostia, where the great mainsail would be hoisted aloft to catch the winds that would help speed the vessel eastward. Ahead and many days and long Great Sea miles distant were the coasts of Palestine ... and Caesarea. Ahead, too, despite all the gods, real or fancied, and despite Sejanus and Pontius Pilate, was Claudia.

PALESTINE



71

10

Longinus and Cornelius strolled over to the port bow rail as the "Palmyra," its mainsail sliding slowly down the mast behind them, swung around the end of the north breakwater and skimmed lightly across the harbor toward the docks at Ptolemais.

"I thought Caesarea would be our first stop."

"We're putting in here only long enough to drop some passengers and a quantity of goods Herod's brought from Rome," Cornelius revealed.

Longinus looked up in surprise. "Herod's goods?" he asked.

"Furnishings for the palace at Tiberias—bronze tables, chairs, decorative pieces, of Herodias' choosing, I suspect. In fact, some of it probably came from her house, favorite things to make her feel more at home in Tiberias. Putting those crates ashore here will save us the trouble of carrying them on to Joppa and Jerusalem."

"But when the Tetrarchess discovers that Herodias had a hand in selecting the things..." Longinus grimaced, laughing. "Say, are you letting your men go ashore here?"

"Only for a few minutes, just to let them stretch their legs while the vessel's unloading. Don't worry, they've been told to stay in the wharf area. If they were to get near the taverns and brothels, we'd be here all night!"

Already the soldiers of the two centuries, impatient to get ashore ever since they had first spotted Mount Carmel towering above the promontory jutting out from the Phoenician coast, were lining the "Palmyra's" rails. Cornelius beckoned to one of his legionaries.

"Decius, call out a detachment—twelve men should be enough—to be ready as soon as the 'Palmyra' docks to take charge of transporting the shipment of goods the Tetrarch Herod is sending to his palace at Tiberias. His steward Chuza will put several of the palace servants to unloading it and will arrange for obtaining carts and 72

beasts to move it. You will be concerned only with guarding the caravan. But be on the alert every moment, Decius. See that you aren't surprised by some lurking band of thieves lying in wait for you. If anything should happen to this shipment, by the gods, we'd never hear the end of it; word would get back to Rome and the Prefect himself would know about it." Upon delivering the goods at the Tetrarch's palace, he added, Decius should take the detachment to the garrison post and there await his arrival with the remainder of the century, which would be escorting Herod to Jerusalem and from there northward to his Galilean capital.

When some two hours later the unloading had been completed and the other legionaries had returned to the ship, Decius stood with his detachment beside the piled crates and casks and waved good-bye to his comrades as the "Palmyra" moved slowly away from the wharf and then, gaining speed, headed on a straight course toward the harbor mouth. The next day the vessel cleared the long breakwater thrust far out into the Great Sea to provide a safe harbor at Caesarea, and Longinus and his century went ashore. While the legionaries were assembling their gear, Cornelius stood with him on the pier.

"Come visit us at Tiberias, Longinus. You can contrive some mission that will warrant your being sent, can't you?" he asked, then added, "Herodias will probably be coming out from Rome before long. I suspect Herod will be going back for her as soon as he can arrange with the present Tetrarchess for her to be supplanted...."

"If he can—which I doubt."

"Whether he can amicably or not, I'd wager that he'll be bringing Herodias to Tiberias as Tetrarchess. Then Claudia can visit her and you can meet her there. And marry her and keep her out here until you've completed your tour of duty." Cornelius winked and playfully nudged his friend with an elbow. "By the gods, maybe that's what you and Claudia have planned all along. Is it, Longinus?"

"No, we haven't planned any such thing." Longinus stared thoughtfully out at the shore before them. "But I'll contrive some reason for getting up to Tiberias. And we're bound to meet in Jerusalem during one of the festivals; they bring in the troops then, you know. Or perhaps some mission will bring you to Caesarea; at Tiberias, after all, you'll be nearer us than we will be to Jerusalem." He clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "My love, and the blessings of the gods—including your Yahweh—to your family." 73

Cornelius stood at the "Palmyra's" rail as the vessel slipped away from the wharf. When it was nearing the rounding of the breakwater, he heard Longinus' sharp command, and the century moved off smartly. The tapping of the legionaries' heavy boots in rhythmical, perfect cadence came clearly to him across the water. Longinus turned and lifted his arm high in salute; Cornelius returned it, as the century, swinging along the cobblestoned way, gained a street corner and turned, then began to be swallowed up into the maze of stone buildings beyond the piers.

The sun was dropping low into the Great Sea when the "Palmyra" sailed into the port at Joppa. Relieved and happy that the long voyage was safely ended, the passengers disembarked to seek refreshment and rest for the night. Early on the morrow Herod Antipas with Mary of Magdala and the others of his company, escorted by Centurion Cornelius and his century, would set out on the forty-mile journey southeastward to Jerusalem.

74

11

Centurion Cornelius pointed to a horseman hurrying toward them along the narrow road east of the river. "The advance guard must have run into trouble, maybe Bar Abbas and his gang or some other waylaying zealots."

"Then you'd better send out a patrol to overtake and destroy them," Herod Antipas scowled. "I have no patience with those rebel cutthroats."

The caravan trudging up the deep trough of the Jordan had paused for the midday refreshment. Four days ago it had descended the Jericho road from Jerusalem to encamp for the night on the plain before the city. Horses had been provided for the Tetrarch and certain of his household, but the soldiers of the century, with the exception of the small advance and rear patrols, were on foot. Heavily loaded carts and donkeys transported the supplies, gear, and tents. The journey had been made without incident; another day of uninterrupted progress would bring the caravan to the Sea of Galilee, or, if they were lucky, perhaps even as far as Tiberias.

Cornelius stood up and signaled the approaching rider. The horseman rode straight up to him, reined in his mount, and saluted. "Centurion," he reported, "up ahead at the river crossing there's a motley crowd of about a hundred persons, most of them men. Judging by their appearance, they must have traveled a long way. They appear to be peaceful, but there's a wild-looking, hairy fellow haranguing them, and they're drinking in his every word; they hardly noticed me when I joined them."

"What was the fellow saying, Lucilius?"

"I couldn't understand him, Centurion. I'm not familiar with the speech of this region, which I presume it was. But I thought he might be one of those Galilean revolutionaries trying to incite the crowd against our Roman rule." 75

"One of those zealots, you mean? No, hardly, Lucilius. Those rebels don't stand up delivering speeches; their way is to thrust a knife between somebody's ribs and then slink quickly away. More than likely this fellow's a religious fanatic, and I would guess his language is Aramaic. There's probably no harm in him, but you did well to report. I

understand Aramaic; I'll return with you and investigate."

"I believe I know who the man is, Centurion," the Tetrarch volunteered. "There was a desert fellow from the Wilderness country beginning to cause a stir here when I was leaving for Rome. I had reports then that he was thundering invectives against everything, even the Tetrarch and his house. He may be inciting the people against Rome. At any rate, I want to hear him, and perhaps you should, too."

Mary of Magdala, seated near-by, had overheard. "I, too, would like to hear the strange prophet."

"But surely even your irresistible charms would not tempt this mad Wilderness preacher." Antipas winked at the centurion.

"I am not interested in charming him. But if this is the man you think he is I have heard much about him. I would like to observe him for myself."

Cornelius turned back to Antipas. "If the Tetrarch wishes, I'll send up a patrol to be near-by in case of any trouble. But I think, Sire, you should disguise yourself. Then you will be able to mingle safely with the throng, and the preacher, not knowing the Tetrarch is hearing him, will talk freely."

Antipas, agreeing, quickly exchanged his purple mantle for the simple Galilean garment of one of his servants and wrapped about his Roman-style cropped head a bedraggled scarf to form an effectively concealing headdress. The servant cut a reed to serve as a walking staff. Mary, too, changed garments and veiled her face in the manner of a Galilean peasant woman.

Cornelius sent a patrol ahead. "Stop this side of the ford," he instructed Lucilius, "and try to avoid being noticed by the throng down there. But keep on the alert for any commotion that might develop." Then he, Antipas, and Mary all mounted horses and rode toward the place where the multitude had assembled. At a bend in the road some two hundred paces from the ford the three riders dismounted behind screening thick willows that came up from the river bank; from there they quietly made their way down to the ford and slipped unobtrusively into the crowd.

Every burning dark eye seemed to be focused on the gesticulating, fiercely intent preacher. He stood in the center of the circled throng on the river bank, and his words came to them clear and sharply challenging, angry and pleading, denunciatory and promising.

"You generation of vipers!" he thundered, shaking a gnarled fist in their teeth, "have I not warned you to escape from the wrath that is coming? Do you contend that because you are Abraham's seed you are secure from the judgment of a righteous God?" He lowered his voice, strode two steps forward, and dramatically wheeled about. "What are Abraham's descendants to God? Could he not raise up from these very stones"—he pointed toward the smoothly rounded small rocks lining the water's edge—"children for Abraham? And is not the ax ready at the foot of the tree to cut down every one that does not bear fruit?"

Cornelius nudged a bent Jew, his face streaked with perspiration that ran down in soiled small beads into his grizzled beard, his whole frame seemingly so absorbed in the speaker's thundering words that he had not even noticed the centurion's arrival beside him. "That man, who is he?"

The old fellow turned incredulously to stare. "Soldier, you have been in Galilee long enough to speak our tongue, and yet you do not know *him*?"

"But for many weeks I have not set foot in Galilee," Cornelius replied. "I am just now returning, by way of Jerusalem, from Rome."

"He is the Prophet John, soldier, the one sent of God to warn Israel to repent and be baptized." The old man turned back to give his attention for the moment to the preacher. Then, his face earnest, he confronted Cornelius again. "He is not concerned with Rome, soldier. He preaches only that men should cleanse their hearts of evil and walk in the way of our Yahweh." Once more he turned to stare at the prophet whose eyes were wildly flaming in his burnt dark face; ignoring Cornelius, the old man leaned forward and raised a knotted hand to cup his ear.

John was tall, and his leathery leanness accentuated his height. The prophet, it was immediately evident to the centurion, was not a man of the cities and the synagogues; he was a son of the desert and the wastelands of Judaea, and the sun and wind had tanned his skin to the color and hardness of old harness. Nor did he appear any more afraid of the proud and opulent Pharisees and Sadducees who confronted him with their disdainful smiles than he must have been of the wild animals of his Wilderness haunts.

"Repent! I say unto you. And bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. Try not further the patience of God. Forswear evil and do good."

"But what are for us fruits worthy of repentance? What must we do?"

The questioner, his countenance heavy with pain, stood at the river's edge facing the prophet. His garb revealed him to be a man of means, but it was evident also that the thundering words of the baptizer had stirred him deeply and that he had asked the question in all humility.

John thrust forth a lean forefinger and shook it sternly. "You are of a calling unloved in Israel, and justly so. You have sold your birthright as a son of Israel to join your heel to the conqueror's to grind Abraham's seed into the earth. You are a publican; I know you, and I know the publican's heart." His voice was almost a hiss, and around

the clearing beards nodded in agreement with the prophet's harsh appraisal. "I call upon you to repent!"

"But what, Rab John, are the fruits of my repentance?" The perspiration was running freely down the man's face and dripping into his beard. "What must I do?"

"Demand only that which is legally due you."

"I swear that this I shall henceforth do, Yahweh being my helper. By the beard of the High Priest, I swear it." The man sighed deeply, and from the fold of his robe pulled forth a kerchief with which he mopped his forehead, his whiskered cheeks, and the dampened long beard. 78

"But we are not great ones," ventured a gnarled and grizzled fellow who leaned twisted on his staff, "neither are we publicans. We are the plain and the simple and the poor of Galilee. What shall we do worthy of repentance?"

"You have two coats, though they be worn and patched with much wearing? Then give one to him who has none. And you have food, though it be coarse and not plentiful? Share what you have with him who is hungry."

Cornelius had noticed, standing not far from the prophet but somewhat withdrawn from the throng as if to avoid contamination with these men of earth such as the one who had just questioned John, a knot of resplendently robed Israelites, their beards oiled and combed and carefully braided, their fingers heavily ringed. Now one of these men, his hands clasped in front of his rounded, sagging paunch, stepped forward a pace and bowed. "Rabbi, we are priests and Levites sent by the rulers in Jerusalem to hear and observe your teaching. We perceive that you speak with great authority. Tell us, Rabbi"—his smile was as unctuous as his beard was oiled—"are you that great One for whom we are looking?"

"I am not the Messiah," John answered evenly.

"Are you then the Prophet Elijah returned to us?"

"I am not he."

"Then, Rabbi, who are you? We have been instructed to come and see and carry back our report to the Temple rulers. What then shall we say of you, who you are?"

"Say that I am:

"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,
"Prepare ye the way of the Lord,
"Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
"Every valley shall be exalted,
"And every mountain and hill shall be made low:
"And the crooked shall be made straight,
"And the rough places plain:
"And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
"And all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

"You speak the words of the great Isaiah," the pompous questioner declared. 79

"Yes," John agreed. "And other words he said also.

"The voice said, 'Cry,'
"And he said, 'What shall I cry?
"All flesh is grass,
"And all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field.
"The grass withereth, the flower fadeth....
"But the word of our God shall stand forever."

"Then you, like we, yet look for the coming of the Messiah of God?"

John raised a lean and burnt arm and the haircloth robe slid down along it to his shoulder. He pointed a darting forefinger toward the Temple's emissary, and his countenance was solemn. "I tell you, that One is now among us, though you have not recognized him as the Messiah of God. And though he comes after me in time, he ranks before me; indeed, I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose his sandal straps. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!"

"Then, Rabbi, why do you baptize with water?" The unctuous one smiled broadly and, pleased with his cleverness, looked from one member of the delegation to another.

"It is a sign that those who enter upon it have repented and been cleansed in their hearts." He looked the man in the eyes. "Have you repented, my brother? Is your heart changed? Are you ready for the coming of Him of Whom I have this moment spoken?" John whirled about, and his lean arm described an arc that embraced the multitude. "Repent, ye men of Israel! Ye who dwell in great houses, repent! Ye men of earth who know not where your next mouthful will be found, repent. For the clean in heart do not all dwell in palaces or attend upon the Temple worship, nor do they all go about hungry and naked and shelterless."

As the prophet paused, he looked toward the centurion and the disguised Tetrarch, who stood beside Mary and within a few paces of the portly questioner from Jerusalem. Cornelius wondered what Herod was thinking of this strange Wilderness preacher, this fiery denouncer of evildoers. But in that same moment John 80

resumed his discourse. "No, sin and wickedness abide in the high places; evil reigns even in the great marble pile built above the graves at Tiberias where the Idumaeen pawn of the conqueror despoils and seduces the people of Israel! He, too, my brothers, even he must repent his wicked ways; he must seek the Lord while yet He may be found, or he and his evil associates will be cast into outer darkness!"

The fleeting thought came suddenly to the centurion that the prophet had recognized the large man in the soiled Galilean robe, and perhaps the notorious woman of Magdala as well. But then would he have dared utter such a denunciation? Was the desert preacher really a man of dedication and courage, as people said? Perhaps. Cornelius scrutinized Herod's face. The Tetrarch's normally pale complexion had turned an ugly shade of red beneath the twisted turban, while beads of perspiration ran down his heavy jowls. But Mary, though little of her face showed because of the veil, appeared more amused than angered.

The prophet's interrogator from Jerusalem was still unsatisfied. "But, Rabbi," he began again, "you say that the Messiah of God is already among us. Why then has he not declared himself, why has he not consumed with holy fire the Edomite who possesses us and tramples into the dust of utter subjection our ancient land?"

John's eyes flashed angrily, but he controlled his tongue. When he spoke his voice was calm. "It is not for me to explain or defend the will and works of the Messiah. I am but His messenger who goes ahead to announce His coming, to call upon His people Israel to repent that their eyes might be whole to see Him when He comes, that their hearts might be clean to know Him!" With bronzed fist he smote the palm of his left hand, his ardor mounting. "You leaders of the people"—he stabbed a lean forefinger toward the haughty group from Jerusalem—"cleanse your own hearts; let fall from your eyes the scabs of greed and hypocrisy so that when He comes you may recognize Him!"

Cornelius felt a gentle tug on his arm; it was Mary. "The Tetrarch is going back," she whispered. "He's 81 furious at the man's denunciation of him. If it hadn't been for the fact that he would have had to reveal his identity in doing it, Antipas would have had him arrested. But he didn't want those puffed toads"—she inclined her head to indicate the Jewish delegation—"carrying stories back, and he wished to avoid provoking a commotion; so he overlooked the...."

"Behold, the Lamb of God!"

Cornelius and the woman, her report to him startlingly interrupted by the prophet's ejaculation, faced about quickly to look in the direction toward which he was pointing. In that instant the others had whirled about, too. Cornelius and Mary strained forward, trying to see above the heads of the multitude.

"He is the One of Whom I have been speaking!" shouted John. "Behold, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. Yonder is the Messiah of God!"

They saw coming along the path that led down from the road above the river, walking with long, easy stride as he descended the grade toward the clearing at the ford, a tall, sunburned young man, well-muscled but lithe, broad of shoulders, erect. He wore a plain, brown, homespun robe, belted at the waist with a length of rope, and coarse, heavy sandals. He was bareheaded; his reddish brown hair fell away from a part in the center of his head in locks that curled almost to his shoulders. In his right hand he gripped a long staff cut from a sapling. As he strode down the pathway and across the open space toward the prophet, he seemed deep in thought, almost insensible to the throng about him. He walked straight up to John. Cornelius and Mary could see the two talking in subdued tones, but they could understand nothing of what was being said by either man.

"What are they saying?" It was the bent old Jew; he still stood near-by, and he had cupped his palm to an ear lost in grizzled earlocks. "Soldier, can you hear them?"

"No, not a word," Cornelius answered. "They aren't talking loudly enough for us up here."

At that moment a youth who had been down at the water's edge standing a few feet away from the prophet 82 approached them. He heard the old man's question. "They are arguing about baptizing the tall one," he explained. "He wants the desert preacher to baptize him, but the preacher claims it should be the other way around; he says he isn't worthy to baptize the Messiah."

"The Messiah!" The old man had been peering intently at the tall young man standing calmly beside the prophet. "Is that the one the prophet called the Lamb of God, the one long expected of Israel?"

"Yes, the tall one."

"Why do you ask?" Cornelius inquired of the bent one. "Do you know the man?"

"Do I know him?" The old man chuckled. "Soldier, I come from Nazareth. Many's the day I have worked with Joseph, that boy's father, planing one end of a beam while he was shaping the other end. But Joseph's dead now, been dead a long time. That boy there lives with his mother, the widow Mary."

"What does he do?"

"He's a carpenter, too, like his father before him. And he's a good boy and a hard-working boy, soldier. But Jesus ben Joseph the Messiah of Israel...." The old fellow, both hands braced on his gnarled stick, shook his head incredulously. "Soldier, my faith in that John the Baptizer is weakening. He must be"—he removed one hand from the stick and with bent forefinger tapped his forehead—"a little touched."

Cornelius laughed. "I don't know much about this Messiah business, but, I agree, he must be." Then he turned to

Mary. "Are you ready to go? I mustn't let Herod get too far ahead. I'm responsible for his arriving in Tiberias, you know."

They started retracing their way along the path to the road; where it joined the broader way, they turned southward. When a moment later they came out from behind a clump of shrubs grown up in an outcropping of small boulders, Cornelius glanced over his shoulder toward the ford and the throng. He caught Mary's arm and pointed.

The haircloth mantle and the brown homespun robe had been thrown across small bushes at the river's edge. In the center of the little stream, with the water up to their loincloths and their faces lifted heavenward, stood the gaunt Wilderness prophet and the tall bronzed young man from Nazareth. 83

12

The Procurator's Palace sat high on a promontory overlooking the harbor at Caesarea. A marble-paved esplanade led from the cobblestoned street up to the palace, and on its west side facing the Great Sea an immense terrace of colored, polished stones went out from the peristylum.

In the days when King Herod, father of Antipas, determined to build here on the Palestinian coast a fabulous port city to honor his patron, the Emperor Augustus, the place was an insignificant town called by the unusual name of Strato's Towers. Then there was virtually no harbor. But at tremendous cost in the lives of slaves and artisans and money wrung in taxes from his already poor subjects, Herod built of huge stones sunk in twenty fathoms of often rough water a tremendous mole that went out and around like a protecting arm to form a safe shelter for countless ships of every type.

Quickly old Herod had transformed Strato's Towers into a beautiful and busy city more Roman than Jewish. A stranger unfamiliar with the region and just landed from a trireme in the harbor at Caesarea, in fact, would hardly realize that he was in a Palestinian city. Not only were its great public buildings and lavish homes Roman—its Procurator's Palace, its immense hippodrome for athletic sports and gladiatorial combats, its theater, its gleaming marble temples to pagan gods—but Roman, too, were many of its people. Its population actually was of varied nationalities—Roman, Greek, Syrian, Idumaeen, Ethiopian, and many others; there were countless slaves from conquered provinces—Germania, Gaul, Dalmatia, even here and there one from Britannia—a motley multitude from every region on the rim of the Great Sea and even from lands farther away. Caesarea was a metropolitan city set down upon the coast of this ancient homeland of the Samaritans and their more peculiarly Hebrew cousins the Judaeans. 84

Today the newly arrived Procurator Pontius Pilate and his wife sat in the warming sunshine on the terrace and looked down upon the busy harbor and the Great Sea stretching westward into the blue haze. Obliquely facing them, so that he could see both the harbor and a portion of the maze of buildings pushing one upon the other from it, sat their guest, the Centurion Longinus.

Claudia pointed to a large merchant ship being tied up at one of the docks below. "This is a tremendous harbor, rivaling Ostia's, isn't it? Look at all those vessels, and that one that has just sailed in. Judging by its size, I'd say it was an Alexandrian grain ship."

"It is a great harbor, and wonderfully protected. In fact, I was amazed to find Caesarea such a modern city." Pilate smiled broadly. "I had feared that it would be another typical provincial outpost."

"On the contrary, Excellency, it's quite a metropolis," Longinus observed. "You'll discover people here from every part of the world, and far fewer Jews, I suspect, than you had anticipated finding. Of course, you've hardly had time yet to learn much about the city."

Pilate laughed, but with little humor. "The fewer Jews the better. I'm glad the capital of the province is here rather than at Jerusalem; it would be galling, I suspect, to be forced to spend most of one's time in that nest of Jews. Speaking of Jerusalem, Centurion, I plan to visit the city shortly and have a straight talk with that High Priest. I wish it known at the very beginning of my Procuratorship that I intend to demonstrate clearly and forcefully, if that be necessary, that Rome cannot be trifled with by these obstinate and pestiferous Jews. You, of course, have been to Jerusalem?"

"Not since I came out this time. But on many occasions previously, including visits during the festivals. If you go there during Passover week, you'll see Jews from every part of the world." 85

"I have already seen enough of them for a lifetime," Pilate said, scowling. But quickly he smiled again. "Centurion, I am going to the cohort's headquarters; I wish to talk with Sergius Paulus." He clapped his hands, and a slave came running. "Summon my sedan bearers," he commanded. "May I take you to your quarters," he asked Longinus, "or will you stay longer and entertain Claudia?" He turned to his wife and smiled warmly. "A familiar face, and a Roman one, is particularly welcome in this strange outpost of the Empire, isn't it, my dear Claudia?"

"Yes, indeed, Pilate." She reached over and put her hand lightly on the centurion's arm. "Longinus, do stay and talk. You can give me instructions on how to act out here in this strange region, strange to Pilate and me, at any rate."

In a few minutes the servant announced that the sedan bearers were awaiting him, and Pilate excused himself.

When he was gone, Longinus moved his chair nearer Claudia. "I wonder why he invited me to stay," he said. "Does he suspect us, do you suppose? Or," he added with a wry smile, "is there no longer any occasion for his doing that?"

"I don't think he suspects us, although I haven't yet learned how to weigh his words or actions. But what if he does?" She shrugged. "With me everything is just as it was before you left Rome. But maybe"—coolly she looked up at him from beneath her long lashes—"you have discovered some woman out here...."

"No. And I haven't looked. But I wonder how much he knows or suspects." He told her of his last conversation with the Prefect, of the determination of Sejanus to keep her happily away from Rome, of that wily rascal's invitation—in fact, almost command—to do whatever might be necessary, including the invasion of the Procurator's bed, to detain her in contented exile. "But I don't think he suspected then that we were planning to get married almost immediately. And I'm sure Pilate didn't." His forehead wrinkled in deep study. "By any chance, Claudia, have you let slip...?"

"About us, to him? Of course not."

"To anyone... Herodias maybe, the gods forbid. I wouldn't trust that woman as far as I could throw that grain ship over there. Could you, without realizing it, have let slip...?" 86

"Yes, I did tell Herodias. She does know that you and I were planning to marry and come out to Palestine. But I'm sure neither she nor Antipas has said anything to Pilate about it ... if they've even seen him since. And certainly they haven't talked with Sejanus."

"Anyway, Claudia, we must be doubly careful. So long as Sejanus thinks I'm simply keeping you ... satisfied, he called it, it's all right. But should he get the notion that I might be planning to take you away from Pilate and back to Rome ..." he broke off, scowling. "And here there'll be other eyes and ears watching and listening, too. But when Pilate goes to Jerusalem, can't we arrange...?"

"I'll be going, too," she interrupted. "And so must you. We can contrive some excuse for your accompanying us." Her eyes were bright with smoldering fires, he saw, and her lips warm, he knew, and red and eager, and he remembered the taste of the Falernian upon them. But adamantly he turned his eyes away to look toward the great harbor. "And in Jerusalem, Longinus, beloved"—her hand had caught his arm and was squeezing hard—"we'll find some way."

13

Sergius Paulus, who commanded the legionaries escorting Procurator Pontius Pilate and his party to Jerusalem, halted his column several hundred paces west of the great market square outside the Joppa Gate.

"Sheathe the cohort's emblems!" he commanded, and quickly down the line of march the soldiers began covering the banners of the Second Italian—the likenesses of the Emperor Tiberius, the screaming eagles, the fasces with their bundled arrows and axes, everything that flaunted the proud victories of this cohort of Rome's conquering armies. 87

"But Commander Sergius," Pilate began to protest, "by whose orders must Rome thus bow to these haughty Jews? Is this, by any chance, *your* scheme for forestalling possible disorder?"

"No, Excellency, the sheathing of the emblems in Jerusalem is not of my devising; it follows a long established custom, started, I believe, by the Emperor Augustus as a result of a pact with the Jewish leaders and continued by the Emperor Tiberius through orders transmitted to us by the Prefect Sejanus." His smile was coldly professional. "I assure you, sir, covering our emblems before the gates of Jerusalem is as distasteful to me as it must be to the Procurator, but this is an order I dare not violate."

The round face of the helmeted Procurator reddened with fury. He shook his head angrily and banged his heavy fist against the apron of the chariot in which he stood beside his wife. "I am not accustomed to seeing Rome display humility—abject humility—which is what this action seems to me to be. But I shall not countermand the order you have given, though to me it is both humiliating and exasperating that our legionaries are forced thus to yield to these outrageous Jews." He raised his hand to signal. "When you are ready, Commander, let us proceed into the city." Then he turned to address Longinus, who had halted near the Procurator. "Centurion, will you exchange places with my driver? Claudia and I are entering Jerusalem for the first time; would you be our guide and point out the principal places of interest?"

Quickly the exchange was accomplished, and the detachment, its emblems shielded now from view, resumed its march. Crossing the market place at the gate, a suddenly stilled large square that a moment before the Romans' arrival had been a hubbub of shouts and shrill cries of bargaining, the procession moved through the gateway to enter a narrow cobblestoned street also strangely deserted.

"But where are the people to welcome us?" Pilate inquired, his balding high forehead creased in anger and consternation. "Why this unnatural calm?" 88

"They have retreated inside their shops and houses and closed the shutters; right now they are peering at us through lattices and from the roof tops, Excellency. This is the way they show their scorn for their conquerors. It will be our good fortune if we are not pelted with rotten vegetables and fruit thrown from the house tops, or even

tiles from the roofs." He smiled, not too happily. "The Jews, Excellency, don't have much affection for us Romans."

The veins in the Procurator's neck swelled as though they might burst, and his countenance was livid. "In every province in which I have formerly entered with our troops," he declared, "the populace has welcomed us thunderously, often with flowers and branches of trees thrown in our way, and many times they have even prostrated themselves before us." He knotted his fist again. "By all the gods, I shall teach these Jews better manners. Nor shall I delay long in setting them to their lessons!"

Claudia laid a soothing hand on her husband's arm; with the other she pointed to the right. "Those huge buildings! Longinus, they appear to be towers. And what tremendous stones. I didn't know these Jews were capable of raising such structures."

"Yes, on the contrary, the Jews are good artisans, and old Herod, who built many great edifices here as well as at Caesarea and other cities, also employed many foreign workers of great skill. He evidently wished to emulate Augustus in raising magnificent public buildings." They were coming now to a great square tower, one of those to which Claudia had pointed. "This first one is the Hippicus Tower, named, I have heard, for a friend of Herod. The next one, in the middle, is Phasaël, called that in honor of Herod's brother. But that one"—he pointed in the direction of a third—"is the most famous, perhaps because he built it to the memory of the only wife he really loved. It's called the Mariamne Tower, after the one he had killed. They say that the old reprobate almost went insane with grief after he'd executed her. Claudia, this Mariamne was the grandmother of Herodias and her spendthrift brother Agrippa. Mariamne was a member of the ancient Hasmonean line of Israelite rulers. 89 Very soon now we'll be passing the old Hasmonean Palace; it's over near the viaduct that connects Zion Hill with the Temple."

"But, Longinus, where is the Procurator's Palace?"

"Yes, Centurion, I'd be interested in seeing it."

"It's behind that wall joining the three towers, sir. And it's a tremendous place, too, with fountains and flowers and grass and trees—you will love it, Claudia—it serves as headquarters of the Procurator when he visits Jerusalem, though it's called Herod's Palace. When the Tetrarch is in Jerusalem, especially if the Procurator is here at the same time—for instance, during Passover feasts—the Tetrarch usually stays at the Hasmonean Palace. Excellency"—he faced the Procurator again, for he had been busy with the reins in an attempt to dodge a heavily loaded cart being pulled by a trudging donkey—"do you plan to stop here at Herod's Palace, or will you stay in the Procurator's quarters at the Tower of Antonia?"

"What was the custom of Valerius Gratus? Where did he stay?"

"He usually lodged here, I believe. It's more comfortable, of course, and perhaps will be quieter than the quarters at Antonia."

"Perhaps"—Pilate faced Claudia, his expression questioning—"then we should stay at Herod's Palace. But, pray the gods, why should it be called Herod's Palace now? The Herods no longer have authority in Judaea."

"It was built by old Herod, sir, and the name persists. Things change slowly out here; tradition and custom rule in Judaea. I'm sure you'll realize that more the longer you remain in Palestine." They were nearing a gate in the high wall that gave admittance to the palace. Several guards at the gate, seeing the procession of Roman troops, straightened and raised their arms in salute. Longinus lifted the reins to halt the chariot.

"No, not yet," Pilate said. "Claudia wishes to see the Temple and Antonia Tower before we stop. Don't you, my dear?"

"I do. Then, after I've had a look at them, we can return, can't we? And if the Procurator is kept at Antonia Tower longer than he expects to be, perhaps the centurion would fetch me back here?"

Longinus smiled. "Of course," he murmured, then turned to Pilate. "But, sir, you won't be able to proceed far with the chariots. You'll have to change to horseback or be borne in a sedan chair. These Jerusalem streets are very narrow, and many of them ascend and descend stairs that a chariot could scarcely manage." 90

Pilate nodded. "Thank you, Centurion. In that case we'll leave the chariots here, and I'll ride horseback. Claudia can take a sedan chair." He looked toward his wife, and his eyes were questioning. "That is, if she still wishes to go on to Antonia."

"Yes, I'd particularly like to see the Temple; I've heard stories of what a marvelous structure it is. I'll go on, and Longinus can bring me back." She smiled. "Would you?"

"As you wish," he said.

Pilate nodded. "If you will, Centurion. Or I can send someone to bring you here, Claudia, if the centurion finds that he cannot get away from his duties. I'll probably be detained for some time at the Tower. I am determined to see the High Priest before the sun sets. I had planned to call on him at his palace, but now, after the reception Jerusalem has given me, by all the gods"—his face was reddening again—"I shall summon him to come to me!"

So the column was halted along the narrow way in front of the sprawling Herod's Palace. The chariots were driven inside the palace grounds and left there, and a sedan chair was brought out by bearers quickly recruited from the palace's staff of servants.

"Centurion, if you will ride in the sedan chair with Claudia," the Procurator said, "you can point out to her the

places of importance in this nest of obstinate Jewry." He mounted a gaily caparisoned horse and rode forward to the head of the column.

"Perhaps, Excellency, it would be best for me to go ahead with the advance guard"—Sergius Paulus smiled grimly as Pilate came abreast of him—"to absorb the stones that may be hurled at the new Procurator, not that there is any personal animosity toward you, sir, but because you are a symbol of Rome's dominion...."

"No! I'm not afraid of them!" the Procurator angrily interrupted. "And, by great Jove, I'll teach them to respect the dominion of Rome!" He spurred his horse several paces ahead of the cohort commander.

Meanwhile Claudia and Longinus had settled themselves in the sedan chair. As it moved off, they did not draw the curtains. "It isn't because I am afraid to draw them," Claudia said to him. "I'm not afraid of Pilate, nor am I afraid of the people out there. It's because I want to see Jerusalem." 91

"You don't think Pilate might become suspicious, do you, or even jealous?"

"Pilate thinks only of Pilate and how he can advance his own fortune. He's ambitious and egotistical; he craves authority, and he covets riches. He'll do nothing to displease me, not because of affection for me, but because I'm the stepdaughter of the Emperor and because our marriage was arranged by the Prefect. If he's ever jealous of me—and I think he never will be—I'm quite certain he will make every effort not to show it."

"Which means?"

"That it should not be difficult for us to contrive to see each other...."

"Tonight?"

Claudia laughed. "Are you, I hope, that eager?"

"I've been that eager for many weeks, Claudia." He leaned across to take her hand. She drew it back.

"Not now, Centurion. The soldiers, you know...."

"Then you are afraid of the Procurator's knowing...."

"Not afraid, Longinus. Say, rather, discreet."

Now they were being borne down a flight of stone steps. The hoofs of the horses in front of and behind them clattered and slipped, and sometimes an animal would go to its knees, though the heavily burdened donkeys coming up the stairs and keeping close to the buildings managed to scramble forward on nimble, sure feet. Sometimes a swaying load piled high on a donkey's back would be overbalanced and topple as its containing straps burst, and in a moment the merchandise would be trampled to bits by the soldiers' steeds.

When they reached the bottom of the steps and began to move along a level portion of the street where there was an open space between the buildings on the right, Claudia suddenly pointed. "That must be the old 92 Hasmonean Palace where the ancestors of Herodias' mother lived."

"Yes."

She scowled. "It's a stern and forbidding pile of stones."

"You'll find that most Jewish public buildings are that way, the palaces especially. But once you get inside them, you're bound to find them enchanting. Herod's Palace has a sumptuous array of grass and flowers and fountains; you should enjoy your stay there."

"Perhaps." She smiled coyly. "It depends." Then she pointed. "What on earth is that next building? It, too, looks like a fortress."

"That place is called the Xystus; it's a Roman-style gymnasium built by King Herod, who also constructed down this way"—he pointed off toward the south—"an open-air theatre and"—he nodded in the opposite direction—"northeast of the Temple area a large hippodrome where he held games and gladiatorial sports modeled after ours at home. But the orthodox Jews will have nothing to do with any of these things; they won't even go near the places. To do so would violate some of their religious laws."

The sound of the horses' hoofs pounding ahead suddenly changed.

"Are we on a bridge?" Claudia asked, as she leaned out left. She rode facing forward, while Longinus sat opposite her, his back to the streets unwinding ahead of them. "Yes, I see we are," she answered her own question. "And it's a high one. Look, Longinus, by the Bountiful Mother! That structure across there! It's ... it's unbelievable!"

"That's the Temple," he announced. "It's the Jews' temple to their Yahweh. And it is one of the most gorgeous—if that's the proper word, Claudia—and costliest buildings in the world. It's made of white marble, the finest cedarwood, and untold bronze and other materials of the most extravagant quality, and trimmed with sheet gold and precious gems. You'll see when we cross the bridge and enter its walls." Their sedan chair was nearing the middle of the viaduct now. "See, it's a high bridge. It connects Zion Hill, which we've just left, with the Temple region. Over there"—he twisted about to point to the Temple on his right and behind him—"is Mount Moriah. Between the two hills is this sharp drop called the Tyropoeon Valley; some call it the Valley of the 93 Cheesemongers. In festival times these hillsides swarm with pilgrims coming from all over the world to

worship at the Temple, which they consider the residing place of their Yahweh.” He laughed, then gestured with outflung hands. “But we should have Cornelius here to be your guide. He knows far more about the religious customs and beliefs of the Jews than I do; in fact, we had quite a talk about it on the boat coming out, and I charged him with being a worshiper of the Jews’ god himself.”

Near the end of the towering viaduct the procession stopped, and the soldiers dismounted. Quickly a litter was provided for the Procurator, and then the marching column, with Pilate’s sedan chair in the vanguard and Longinus and Claudia some paces behind him, moved off the viaduct and passed beneath a great arch.

“This is called the Gate Shalleketh,” Longinus told her. “It’s the main gate into the Temple area from the Zion section of the city.”

“I’m amazed that you know so much about Jerusalem,” Claudia began, then suddenly stopped as, startled, she caught sight of a veritable forest of marble columns, gigantic, reaching upward out of her range of vision from within the constricting sedan chair. “Bona Dea! Longinus, this is unbelievable! What a majestic structure! And look how far it extends! It’s mammoth, breath-taking!”

“And that’s only one of the porches, as they call it,” Longinus hastened to explain. “This one is styled the Royal Portico of Herod. Its marble columns, as you can see, are more than a hundred feet high. And look, Claudia”—he pointed behind, over his shoulder—“the colonnade itself runs almost a thousand feet. Have you ever seen anything so fantastic?”

“No, and I’m sure the High Priest couldn’t be a bit more effective than you in singing the Temple’s praises,” Claudia declared, laughing. “But it really is a marvelous structure these Jews have built to their superstition.”

“Yes, I agree. And that’s exactly what I told Cornelius.”

The procession turned squarely to the left and started to emerge from beneath the great roofed colonnade into the strong sunlight of an immense open square.

“This is called the Court of the Gentiles,” Longinus explained. “And over there is the Temple proper. Inside 94 it is a place they call the Holy of Holies. Only the High Priest himself, they say, is permitted to enter it, and then only on a feast day, maybe once a year.”

“I’ve heard that inside that room there’s a golden head of an ass and that the Jews actually worship this ass’s head.”

Longinus smiled. It was an old story he had heard many times, he explained, though never from a Jew. Perhaps it started, so far as Rome was concerned at any rate, with the time that Pompey, searching for treasure, invaded the holy shrine of the Jews. “But he found no golden head of an ass. He found only an empty chamber, severe and forbidding, with nothing in it but a few golden vessels and some furniture that was probably used as an altar. That’s the story the Jews tell, anyway.”

“But this one god, Longinus, what did you say they call him?”

“Yahweh, or Jehovah.”

“Yes, I remember. But where is he? Don’t they have any statues of him somewhere in the Temple, Centurion?”

“No, according to what I’ve heard from the Jews themselves and from what Cornelius has told me—and he knows far more about their religious customs and beliefs than I do—statues are one thing they definitely do not have. They declare that their god is a spirit without body and to them any sort of representation in physical form—whether it be statues, carvings, or whatnot—would be sacrilege. That’s why they were so violently opposed to our bringing in unsheathed emblems. They have the strange belief that our army emblems are what they call ‘graven images,’ and their laws expressly forbid any such thing. They won’t even engrave the head of a man or an animal on any of their coins.” He shook his head, as though scarcely able to believe his own words. “Strange, these Jews. But you will discover that for yourself before you’ve been out here many weeks.”

They were coming opposite the eastern face of the Temple proper. “Look at that gate, or door!” Claudia pointed again. “Whatever it is, it’s tremendous! And it shines as though it were gold!”

“They call it the Beautiful Gate. It’s made of Corinthian brass and plates of gold, and it’s so heavy it takes a score of strong men to open and close it. They say it was given by a rich foreign Jew. It must have cost many 95 a sesterce, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure it did.” Her eyes were wide with disbelief. “The whole place is magnificent; why I’ve never seen anything like....” Suddenly she clamped a hand to her nose. “By all the gods, Longinus, what an odor!” She leaned her head out. “Bona Dea, all that cattle. No wonder that awful stench. What on earth are cattle and sheep doing in this beautiful place, Longinus? Can it be for sacrificing, by all the great and little gods!”

“Yes, it’s for sacrificing.” Longinus grimaced. “The Jews think that slitting an animal’s throat and throwing the blood on that great altar somehow cleanses them of their sins. I don’t understand how it could....”

The young woman’s laugh was derisive. “Bringing all those poor animals in here to befoul this beautiful place, these gorgeous mosaics, to pollute the very air, and they call that cleansing themselves. Bona Dea, their Yahweh, if he demands this sort of worship, must be a bloodthirsty god. It just goes to prove, Centurion, that this one-god religion has less sense to it than even our silly superstitions.”

"That's what I told Cornelius. I see no efficacy in slitting the throats of poor beasts and slaughtering countless doves and pigeons in order to serve some god. Of course, so far as the priests are concerned, it's a highly profitable business. But, of course, why should we criticize the Jews when we do it in Rome, too, though not on such a grand scale?"

A few paces farther on, the procession turned squarely to the left again and proceeded along a third side of the Temple enclosure, past the stalls of the lowing, frightened cattle and the cages of birds and the money-changers seated behind their tables. From the long portico the marchers pivoted to the right, then ascended steps that led to a wide, paved esplanade.

"This is the platform before the Tower of Antonia. We're coming to it now." He motioned behind him. "It's the Roman military headquarters in Jerusalem. But Pilate must have told you all about it." 96

She leaned out and looked westward along the platform. "Pilate tells me very little," she answered. "By the gods, it's a tall structure and a grim-looking one. Doubtless overrun with soldiers, too, even in the Procurator's private apartments." She winked and smiled. "I'm glad Pilate decided to stop at the Herod Palace during our visit to Jerusalem. He'll probably be here at Antonia much of the time. It should be easier then to arrange things over there."

"Things?"

"Well"—her tone was playful, her eyelids fluttered teasingly—"yes, things for people to do ... two people."

14

It was past midnight when Longinus returned at last to the now quiet Tower of Antonia. Before leaving Caesarea he had arranged with Sergius Paulus to have little more than token duty during the stay in Jerusalem. In the weeks since his arrival in Palestine, he and the cohort commander had come to an understanding; although Sergius knew little of the centurion's reasons for being in this far eastern province, he did know that Longinus had been sent out by the Prefect Sejanus, and Sergius was not disposed to challenge, or even question actions of the Prefect.

Pontius Pilate had not returned to the palace; presumably he had eaten his evening meal at the tower with the officers there. At any rate, Longinus and Claudia had not been disturbed.

But when Longinus was admitted by the guards at the tower's outer gate, he deliberately walked past the stairs leading to the southwest tower, where the administrative offices, including the Procurator's quarters, were situated. Going by the southeast tower would take him a bit out of his way, Longinus reasoned, but he would 97 be less likely to run into the Procurator at this late and embarrassing hour.

The centurion had been assigned quarters in the officers' section on a floor level with a great gallery along the Temple side of Antonia; a protective rampart ran the length of this gallery, and a door opened onto the gallery from each officer's quarters.

The air in the small chamber was musty and warm, and Longinus, too, was warm from the exertion of his walk back to the tower. He sat on the side of his bed for a moment, then stood up and opened the outer door. When the draft of fresh air swept in, he stepped out onto the gallery to wait there until his chamber had cooled.

As he stood leaning on the rampart, Longinus heard a door open behind him. Turning, he saw a soldier coming out. Another man too warm to fall asleep, he thought, as he turned back to stare at the still and almost deserted Temple enclosure. Fires smoldered on the great altar, and flickering lamplight from the region of the cattle and sheep stalls gave a look of eeriness to a scene that just a few hours before had been a bedlam of sound and movement.

The other soldier halted near him to look down also on the somnolent Temple. The man pointed over the parapet. "Still an amazing picture, even in the nighttime, isn't it?"

"Cornelius!" Longinus said, recognizing the voice and whirling around to face the other. "By all the gods, man, I thought you were in Galilee!" He clapped a heavy hand on his friend's shoulder. "But I'm glad to see you, Centurion."

"And I had no idea you were in Jerusalem, Longinus!" Cornelius responded with a shoulder-shaking slap. "How long have you been here? Did you come today with the Procurator?"

"Yes, we arrived here a little past midday; we marched out of Caesarea at daybreak day before yesterday. But, by Jove"—he pointed to a stone bench set against the rampart—"let's sit down, Cornelius. I've had a hard day, and I'm sure you have, too. When did you get into Jerusalem, and did you bring your century?"

"We came only an hour before sunset. Yes, I had orders from the new Procurator to meet him here with my century."

"But why, pray Jove? It's no festival occasion. Can Pilate be expecting trouble? He didn't indicate any such thing to me." 98

"There's no reason why he should be anticipating any trouble, so far as I can see ... unless he's planning to provoke it himself."

"But why would he do that? He must know that Tiberius and Sejanus are determined to keep our conquered dominions at peace, if for no other reason than to insure the uninterrupted flow of revenue. But"—Longinus shrugged—"maybe Pilate wants to make a show of force in the hope of increasing that very flow—with the increase going into his own pockets, of course—which might be why he's been conferring at such length with Caiaphas and old Annas." He pointed toward a lighted window high in the southwestern tower. "Look, they're still up there. Pilate didn't even go to the Herod Palace for the evening meal with his new wife."

"New wife? I didn't know Pilate was married."

"Yes. Since we left Rome. And you'll be surprised to learn who she is."

"Who?"

"Claudia."

"By all the great gods! Longinus, I thought you would be marrying Claudia."

"We had planned to be married." Longinus paused. "But Tiberius and Sejanus made this other arrangement."

Cornelius shook his head. "But what does Claudia say about it?"

"What can she say? To them, I mean. But to me she declares that nothing has changed between us. And judging by this afternoon and tonight—I've been with her ever since we reached Jerusalem until a few minutes ago—nothing has."

"But couldn't that be dangerous for you two?"

Longinus shook his head. "I hardly think so. Their marriage was an entirely arranged one, and furthermore, I'm convinced Pilate would do nothing to offend Claudia."

"Tell me"—Cornelius leaned forward and tapped his friend's knee—"you knew before we left Rome that this arrangement had been made?"

"Yes, but I couldn't say anything about it then, Cornelius."

"I understand. You were in some kind of cross fire, weren't you?"

99

"Yes."

"And you have an understanding or arrangement with Sejanus, don't you—I don't mean about Claudia? Wait...." He held up his hand. "Don't answer that. But I do want you to remember, Longinus, that regardless of what may happen, I'm on your side ... yours and Claudia's."

"I know that, my friend. And I'm on your side ... regardless. And it may be that sometime we'll need one another's support. With old Tiberius and crafty Sejanus on the one hand and this vain and ambitious Pilate on the other, and perhaps Herod Antipas...." With mention of the Tetrarch's name, he paused. "I assume you got him delivered to Tiberias in safety. What did his Arabian Tetrarchess say about Herodias?"

"She had heard about it before we reached Tiberias, perhaps from some of that fellow Chuza's servants, the ones who fetched the furnishings from Ptolemais, you remember. But that was only the beginning. Now they're wondering at the palace what she'll do when Antipas gets back with his new wife; he's already left for Rome, they say, to fetch her, and when Herodias arrives, she'll probably be taking over as Tetrarchess."

They sat for a long time in the coolness of the gallery high above the sleeping Temple, and Cornelius related his experiences in escorting the Tetrarch up the narrow defile of the Jordan River and their encounter that day with the strange Wilderness preacher. He described the man's bitter denunciation of Herod and his sudden and dramatic pointing out of a tall young Galilean carpenter as the Jews' long looked for Messiah, the man foretold by the ancient Israelite prophets as he who would redeem their historic homeland from its bondage.

"As we were leaving the place, I turned and looked back," Cornelius added. "The strange prophet and the tall Galilean were standing in the river with the water up to their loincloths; the tall one had asked to receive something they call baptism, a symbolic cleansing of one's sins, as I understand it." Cornelius paused and stared thoughtfully at his hands. "I shall never forget the look on that man's face, Longinus. Ever since that day I have been wondering about him. The Jewish Messiah." He said it slowly, as though he were talking more to himself than to his friend. "Do you remember that day on the 'Palmyra' when we were talking about this Yahweh of the Jews, this one-god spirit? You said then that you would never be able to imagine a being without a body."

100

"Yes, I remember it quite clearly. But what are you going to say," Longinus demanded, "that this tall fellow might have been a god turned into a man? By all the gods, Cornelius, you don't mean to tell me you think this Galilean could be the Messiah of the Jews? Their Messiah, if I understand it correctly, will be a great military leader who will drive us pagan Romans out of Palestine and re-establish the ancient Israelite kingdom. Even the Jews don't believe he'll be a god, do they?"

"I don't know, Longinus. I think most Jews believe he'll be a great earthly king, as you say. But listening to that wild fellow and seeing the look on that young man's face"—he paused, then ventured a hesitant grin—"well, those

strange words, the prophet's evident sincerity, his intense manner...."

"Jewish gibberish." Longinus shook his head and scowled. "This superstition has captured you, my friend. This eastern mysticism that comes to a head in that cruel and extravagant circus down there." He pointed toward the great Temple, whose gold-plated roof shone brilliantly in the light of the moon now emerging from behind a cloud. "A carpenter from Galilee to overthrow imperial Rome! What with, pray great Jove! A hammer and a chisel and a flat-headed adz?"

101

15

For two days after his long meeting with the High Priest Caiaphas and the former High Priest Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas, the Procurator Pontius Pilate was in a sullen mood. He said little and kept close to his quarters in the Antonia Tower. Now and then he would walk out onto the gallery overlooking the Temple enclosure and, leaning upon the parapet, would stare balefully at the magnificent structure and the stir of life within and around it.

The orderly movements of the priests, set through the long years into an inexorable pattern as they followed the prescribed routine of their duties, seemed almost to infuriate him. "Look at them, Centurion!" he snapped to Longinus on one of these occasions when the centurion happened to be sunning himself on the gallery. "See how smugly they go about their mummery, as if it were the most important thing in the world. They seem studiously to ignore our all-powerful Rome and lavish every attention upon their Yahweh." He doubled his fist and banged it upon the parapet. "Yet one lone Roman century ordered into that hive of impudent, arrogant busy bees could send them all flying, one Roman century, Longinus. And by the great Jove, I'm tempted to dispatch soldiers down there to clean out that insubordinate, traitorous nest!"

Fortunately, though, the Procurator issued no such order, and the day passed without the Romans' becoming involved in the religious ceremonies of the Jews. The next morning, however, Pilate called together all his officers on duty in Jerusalem, including Longinus and Cornelius. Immediately it was evident that the Procurator's hostility toward the Temple leadership had not diminished.

"We are in a war of wits with these obstinate, proud Jews," he declared, "and I cannot defeat them by remaining on the defensive. It's been a war of words and gestures thus far, but I have been forced to the opinion that we can have no victory over them until we have had some blood." His blue eyes swept coldly over the unsmiling faces before him. "So I have determined upon a bold plan in which we shall take the offensive." 102

Pilate revealed that Caiaphas and Annas had rebuffed, though with unctuous smiles and sugared words, his every effort even to discuss the possibility of using Temple funds for the improvement of Jerusalem, particularly the health of its residents, through the construction of facilities to enlarge and improve the city's water supply.

"They insist that this money has been dedicated to their god and belongs to him and that for me to use one denarius of it, even in promoting their welfare, would be a profanation and a sacrilege. Old Annas, may Pluto burn him, even suggested that the people—he emphasized the fact that he was not himself suggesting it—might even believe that *I* had seized the money for my own use." Pilate's anger had turned his face an ugly crimson. His voice rose to a shout. "A profanation indeed! To these insufferable Jews everything they do not wish to do or to have done is a profanation. Yet their priestly caste is sucking the very lifeblood of the people in the name of religion." He paused for a moment, then continued more calmly. "So I have determined to initiate a bold new plan. I shall have these Temple leaders crawling to me, and on their bellies, cringing!"

When it was clear that Pilate had, at least temporarily, finished, Sergius Paulus ventured to speak. "But, Excellency, do you plan to raid their Temple's treasury, to commandeer the gold the Jews have stored there? Such a course, you must realize, might provoke the wrath of the Emperor and the Prefect, since they have made a compact with...."

"No, Commander, I am planning no raid on their treasury," Pilate interrupted. "On the contrary, they will bring their treasure to me and urge me to use it in providing a new water supply for Jerusalem. In so doing they will admit to me and, more importantly, to their fellow religionists that Rome is master and that their puny Yahweh is a lesser god than our Emperor." 103

Quickly and more calmly the Procurator unfolded his plan. When three days ago he had come into Jerusalem at the head of the troops, he reminded them, he had suffered the humiliation, for the first time in his military career, of marching with the proud ensigns of Rome all sheathed. This was done, he pointed out, to appease the Jews, to mollify their Yahweh.

"You recall the stony silence with which we were greeted, even the hostile looks of the people peering from behind their screens or down from their housetops; you remember the hatred in their eyes as we crossed through the Temple court on our way here, the taunting remarks flung at us. Rome has lost prestige in Palestine. We must recover it, and this I am determined to do." The trace of a malevolent smile spread across his round Roman face. "The Emperor must not be made to yield to Yahweh; our eagles and our fasces must no longer be hidden from view as though we were ashamed of them."

Longinus was watching Sergius Paulus. He saw the commander's face blanch, but Sergius said nothing. And Pilate continued outlining his plan.

"On top of this tower"—Pilate pointed upward—"is a perpetual flame that burns while the vestments of the High

Priest are held safe here in Antonia. Rome therefore is providing and tending a flame that, to my mind, is a memorial of Rome's yielding. No ensign with the Roman eagle flies above the fortress or hangs from its ramparts. A further testimony to our surrender to the stubborn Jews and their jealous god." A humorless smile wrote thin lines at the corners of his mouth. "Of course I am telling you what you who are stationed in Jerusalem already know. Perhaps to me it is more galling because it is new." He paused, as if to consider carefully his next words. "Tomorrow, with Centurion Longinus and his century escorting my party," he began again, "I shall leave Jerusalem on my return to Caesarea. Centurion Cornelius with his century from Galilee will remain here until after my departure; how long he will stay will be determined by the situation." His thin smile blossomed into a baleful grin. "During the night, after I have left, the troops stationed here at Antonia will extinguish the flame atop the tower and hang out from the ramparts the ensigns of Rome, including the eagles, the fasces, and the likenesses of the Emperor." 104

"But, Excellency"—Sergius' face was pale, and his expression mirrored alarm—"do you realize how this action will provoke the Jews, how it will inflame them against us, lead perhaps even to bloodshed...?"

"I fully realize that, Commander. That is why I am ordering it. I wish to provoke them. It is only by provoking them that we can demonstrate forcefully to them that Rome is master."

"But, sir, the Emperor and the Prefect...."

"Are you not aware that since my arrival at Caesarea I represent the Emperor and the Prefect Sejanus in Judaea?" The words were almost a snarl. "If you wish to dispute my authority or my judgment...."

"But I do not, Excellency. The Procurator's commands to me naturally will be carried out fully."

"I expected as much, Commander. You will have charge of our forces in Jerusalem in carrying out my orders. If it comes to bloodshed, do not hesitate to shed Jewish blood if the Jews assail you; your only concern will be to prevent the shedding by them of Roman blood. I am confident that they will yield before offering violence to Rome; I think they haven't the courage to challenge us. What they will do"—his cold, calculating smile overspread his florid face—"is send their priests, including old Annas no doubt, whining to me at Caesarea and imploring me to rescind my orders. Then I will have a lever with which to move them. And thereafter, you may be sure, the legionaries and their ensigns will be respected by the Jews as they are respected by all other conquered peoples. Our Emperor, as he rightfully should, will then take his place, even in Jerusalem, above their vengeful and jealous Yahweh."

He dismissed the group with instructions to begin at once their preparations for putting his orders into effect.

16

For five days the roads into Caesarea from Jerusalem and central Judaea were clogged with a motley throng of Jews pushing relentlessly toward the Procurator's Palace. Here and there in the multitude rode a man or woman on a donkey, but countless hundreds trudged on foot, dust-covered and weary in every bone but more outraged in spirit.

Then the dam that was Caesarea's gates was inundated, and the flood of disgruntled Jewry, sweating, travel-soiled, frightened but still undaunted in its anger despite the long and tiresome journey, poured through the city to fill its market squares and surge upward toward Pilate's house. The angry flood had burst upon the port city hardly two days behind the messengers sent by Sergius Paulus to warn the Procurator of the multitude's approach.

The Jews, the messengers informed Pilate, were swarming toward Caesarea to protest with all the vigor they could command his profanation, they called it, of their holy city through the display at the Tower of Antonia of the Roman army's ensigns, including even the likenesses of the Emperor Tiberius. The morning after the Procurator's departure, they revealed, the Jews had awakened to behold with horror the flaunted banners. But their vehement protests to the commander of the fortress had been unavailing. Sergius Paulus had told them with firmness that only a command of Pilate could restore the flame above the tower and once again sheathe the offending ensigns.

So, alternately beating their breasts with loud lamentations and angrily calling down their Yahweh's curses upon the invading Edomites, as they termed the Romans, they had surged into the roads and pushed northwestward to demand of the Procurator himself an end to the profanation of their Jerusalem.

Five days ago these Jews had arrived at Caesarea, but five days of protesting, of threatening, of pleading, and of threatening again had not moved Pontius Pilate. "Rome is master," declared the stubborn and proud Procurator to the Jews' spokesmen; "the emblems of Rome's mastery will not be removed or sheathed. My orders stand." 106

But the sons of Israel, too, were unyielding in their demands. "Your Emperor Augustus, your Emperor Tiberius"—Pilate took notice that they did not say "our" Emperor—"have respected our laws, which forbid the display of such emblems, and have been strict in honoring our religion," the spokesman insisted. "Your Emperor Tiberius cannot but be angered by the refusal of the Procurator to respect in the same manner our ancient traditions."

"Go home!" Pilate ordered. "Get you back to Jerusalem. I, not you, speak for Tiberius. I was sent out by him to govern this province, and by the great Jove, I will govern it!"

But the Jews did not go home. Hungry, discouraged, exhausted, they were not defeated. They swarmed about Pilate's palace, they fell in their tracks on the marble of the esplanades to sleep fitfully when sheer exhaustion overtook them; they crowded the market places, they slept in rich men's doorways. But they would not turn their backs on Caesarea.

On the morning of the sixth day, Pilate called Longinus to the Palace. "Centurion," he said, his face livid with anger, "since Sergius Paulus continues at Jerusalem, I wish you to take command of the troops here and put into execution the orders I am about to give you. Send out couriers to summon these Jews to come together in the Hippodrome; say that I will meet them there. In the meantime, disguise a sufficient number of your soldiers and place them about the amphitheater in advantageous positions so that should disorder arise among the Jews, you will be ready immediately to put it down."

Claudia had been listening to her husband. "But, Pilate, aren't you creating a situation that will produce fighting between our troops and these Jews?"

"And if there is bloodshed?" Pilate's eyes flashed sudden anger. "Haven't I been patient with these obstinate rebels? If they choose to get themselves run through with swords, isn't it their own doing?" Then quickly he recovered his poise. "Claudia," he said quietly, "I have given them every opportunity to return peaceably to Jerusalem. Have I not?" 107

"Yes. But you have not agreed to have the ensigns sheathed. And until you do...."

He turned upon her, his countenance flaming, his mood changed completely. "Do you stand with these stubborn provincials against Rome? Are you with them, or are you with me?"

"Before you interrupted me, Procurator," Claudia's voice was as cold as her smile, "I was going to observe that in displaying the army's emblems, you are really breaking a tradition, so far as I have been able to understand it, and this tradition may very well be a long-standing order of the Emperor and, indeed, of Augustus before him. I care not a fig about these Jews. Nor do I care about their High Priest or their Yahweh. I am concerned only with what will be the attitude of the Emperor and the Prefect Sejanus toward the Procurator as a result of this unprecedented breach of the established order." She turned away, her head high. Pilate seemed taken aback; he looked at her somewhat sheepishly and licked his lips as though he were about to speak. But he said nothing. Instead, he turned abruptly to Longinus. "I take responsibility for the orders I give," he said tersely. "My orders to you are unchanged."

Longinus saluted, then without a word turned on his heel and withdrew.

By early afternoon the great concourse had filled with excited, chattering Jews. Their determined stand, they felt confident, had defeated the Procurator; their reminder that the Emperors had honored the Jews and their Yahweh and that Tiberius might not approve a course taken in defiance of the long-established tradition had frightened Pilate. He was calling them together, wasn't he, to announce that he was withdrawing the hated emblems and to ask them to return home victors?

But they had judged the Procurator wrongly. And they discovered their mistake as soon as he began to address the throng from his box high in the stands of the great oval.

"For five days, and this is now the sixth, you have kept our Caesarea in turmoil. You have been obstinate and insubordinate and have shown little respect to the Procurator, who represents the Emperor and in this province personifies the power and majesty of the Empire. You have threatened him with reprisal, saying that he has flouted the orders of our Emperor. You were not only inhospitable in refusing to welcome the Procurator to Jerusalem, you were actually hostile. In being hostile to us, you have shown yourselves contemptuous of Rome and enemies of our Empire; in being stubbornly hateful to me, you have shown yourselves no friends of the Emperor." 108

Pilate paused, his face suffused with color as his anger grew with his listing of their offenses. Then he stood back on his heels, squared his shoulders, and held up his tightly clenched fist. "Now hear me, men of Judaea!" he shouted. "I have asked you to disperse and return to your homes. Stubbornly you have refused to heed my command. I am asking you again to abandon this unreasonable, senseless, and ill-advised effort and get yourselves outside the gates of Caesarea and on the roads that lead homeward. Hear me, by great Jove! This is my last command to you." He leveled a shaking forefinger toward the multitude. "I have stationed my soldiers in disguise among you, and they are heavily armed. They have been instructed, upon my next command, to spring upon you and run you through with their swords."

But in the vast oval of the colosseum not an Israelite moved to obey him. Stolidly, calmly, they faced the Procurator; silence was heavy upon the great throng.

Pilate's face was twisted with wrath. "Then I must give the order, men of Judaea?" He shouted the question.

Not a man moved.

Then from the ranks nearest Pilate a man stepped forward a pace and held up his hand to speak. By his dress it was evident that he was one of the Temple leaders. "O noble Procurator," he said in a loud voice, "though your soldiers run us through with swords until each of us has perished, we cannot submit to the profanation of God's holy Temple; we cannot countenance without protest the treading into the dust of our God's commandments. Before we agree to Rome's profanation of our holy places and her flouting of our God's laws, O Procurator, we will bow our necks to the Procurator's soldiers. We will die, and gladly, for our God!" 109

“Profanation! Profanation! All I hear is Rome’s profanation of your traditions. By all the gods, in every other land our Emperor is honored, his banners and his emblems, his likenesses paraded on our staffs, all these are hailed with shouts and acclamations! And yet you Jews...”

Suddenly Pilate paused. The priestly leader who had just addressed him had fallen on his face in the dust of the great stadium, and beside him and behind him others now were prostrating themselves. Within moments every Jew in the place was lying face down upon the ground before the Procurator of Judaea. Mouth open, eyes darting from one area of the great concourse to another, aghast, Pilate stood silent. Then quietly he spoke to Longinus, who was standing near him. “Centurion, I cannot order men on their faces ran through with swords. It would be massacre.”

“So it would be, Excellency, on their faces or standing, since they are defenseless.”

Pilate turned back to face the prostrated multitude. “Stand on your feet!” he commanded. “I shall withhold for the moment at least my command to the soldiers.”

Without a word being said, without a change of countenance even, the Jews rose to their feet and faced the Procurator. “Now send me your High Priest and his father-in-law the former High Priest Annas,” Pilate commanded. “No harm will be done them; this I swear by the great Jove.”

Hours later Caiaphas and Annas returned from the conference with the Procurator at the palace. Mounting the rostrum from which Pilate had previously addressed them, Caiaphas held up his hand for silence. “Men of Israel, we have just concluded our meeting with the Procurator Pilate,” he announced. “An agreement has been reached. Now you may return in peace to your homes. The offensive emblems of Rome, the Procurator has assured us, will be removed so that they will no longer profane our holy places. The God of Israel, He is One!”

“The God of Israel, He is One!” The multitude of suddenly exultant Jews echoed his words in a great chorus, and a hosanna of shouts swept wave upon wave across the immense arena. Then, laughing and chattering, the people began pushing toward the Hippodrome’s exits. 110

And in all the throng not a man ventured to inquire of the High Priest what the terms of the agreement with Pilate had been.

17

An hour before the “Actium” was to sail out of the harbor at Caesarea on the return voyage to Rome, Centurion Longinus went aboard and handed the captain a heavily sealed communication addressed to the Prefect Sejanus.

“This is an army message of great importance,” he announced. “It must be delivered in person to the Prefect. He is expecting it, and if it is not delivered immediately after the docking of your ship, he will begin to inquire why he has not received it.” Actually, the centurion knew that Sejanus was not expecting a message from him on the returning “Actium,” but telling the captain so would insure the message’s getting quickly into the hands of the Prefect. The captain might well think that the centurion’s letter was in reply to a message brought him from Sejanus by the Tetrarch Herod Antipas.

The “Actium” two days before had brought the Tetrarch and his new wife Herodias and her daughter Salome to Caesarea, and from the wharf they had been escorted by Longinus and a detachment of his century to the Procurator’s Palace to be guests of Pilate and Claudia while resting a few days after the long voyage out from Rome. From Caesarea they planned a short visit to Jerusalem, and then they would travel northward through the Jordan Valley to the Tetrarch’s gleaming white marble palace at Tiberias. 111

It was when Longinus learned that the “Actium” would be returning directly to Rome that he decided to dispatch a report to the Prefect. The report related in considerable detail the events of the Procurator’s recent visit to Jerusalem, his flaunting, in disregard of Sergius Paulus’ warning, of the cohort’s banners from the Antonia ramparts, the subsequent storming of Caesarea by the irate Jews, and Pilate’s yielding to them, after a conference with Caiaphas and Annas. Longinus advanced no suggestion concerning the probable terms of the agreement between the Procurator and the Temple leaders. The centurion was confident, however, that the astute and suspicious Sejanus would infer from what he had left unwritten that Pilate had profited handsomely. Longinus concluded the message with an avowal that the report was factual and uncolored.

From the “Actium” Longinus returned to the headquarters of the cohort and that evening was a guest, along with Sergius Paulus, of the Procurator and his wife at a small, informal dinner honoring the Tetrarch, his wife, and her daughter. When they had finished the meal, Herodias and her hostess retired to Claudia’s apartment, and Salome went to her chamber. The four men remained reclining at the table, where after a while, as they drank wine and nibbled grapes and figs, the inhibitions of Pilate and Antipas, each vain and domineering and jealous of the other’s authority, began slowly to disappear. Gently at first Antipas chided the Procurator for his profanation of Jerusalem by flaunting the ensigns of Imperial Rome from the Tower of Antonia.

“Profanation! Profanation! All I hear in this contentious province is profanation. I am sick of the word.” Pilate wiggled a forefinger at the Tetrarch. “Do you consider Rome’s display of her honored emblems profanation of Jerusalem and this province, I ask you, Tetrarch?”

Antipas studied the fig he held between finger and thumb. “I don’t consider it profanation, nor do the Emperor

and the Prefect, but I do agree with the Emperor and the Prefect that it is a wise course not to offend unnecessarily the people of Israel who do so hold.” It was a clever answer, and Antipas, knowing it, pressed the point. “It would be politic if the new Procurator learned to uphold the traditions of this land,” he continued, “so long, of course, as they do not seriously conflict with the interests of the Empire and certainly”—he smiled—“so long as the Emperor and the Prefect uphold them.” 112

Pilate was quick to strike back. “I was sent out to this province to rule it,” he declared, his eyes flashing indignation. “I was not sent here to cower and truckle, to lower Rome’s ensigns at the demands of your obstinate, cantankerous Jews,” he hissed. “I came to rule....”

“But you did lower Rome’s ensigns when those obstinate—Jews bared their necks to your swordsmen and refused to obey your command to return home,” Antipas interrupted. Then suddenly, as though seeking a truce, he changed his tone. “But I don’t blame you, Procurator. In fact, I admire you; you’re a very intelligent man. Living in this province must be trying to one who has never lived here before, and of course it’s unrewarding unless there are ... ah ... extra benefits, shall we say ... not provided by Rome. And there is much gold in the Temple’s coffers, I am told. It seems that no matter how much is withdrawn, a great deal still remains for the use of the Temple leaders, hmm?” He smiled appreciatively. “And no doubt the Prefect will approve, too, provided....” Grinning, he left the observation unfinished. “And with no Jewish blood shed by your soldiers, there will be nothing to explain to Tiberius, Excellency.”

Pilate glared, mouth open. But he did not deny the Tetrarch’s thinly veiled charge. “Profanations! Violated traditions!” He hurled across the room the grape he had selected from the silver dish of piled fruit and pointed a quaking finger at the Tetrarch. “And how dare you, Antipas, speak of my violating the traditions and offending the religion of the Jews, when you have just taken to bed your brother’s wife! Is that not a heinous offense for a Jew himself...?”

“Excellency!” Sergius Paulus, palpably fearful of what the exchange might quickly be leading to, jumped to his feet. “The hour is growing late, and the Centurion Longinus and I must be getting back to headquarters. Please excuse us, sir. We’ve enjoyed your hospitality, and we beg you to express our thanks to your wife.” He glanced toward Longinus, who nodded agreement. “And I thought, Excellency, that the Tetrarch perhaps might honor us by going with us—we have a sedan chair at the door—to inspect our cohort headquarters, should you, sir, be willing to excuse him.” He looked questioningly toward the Procurator and then the Tetrarch. 113

“Should the Tetrarch wish....”

“I shall be happy to accompany you,” Antipas interrupted. Carefully he pulled the stem from the fig. “It will be a change of air.” But he was smiling, and his manner was jovial; the tension of the moment had been dispelled.

“When you have finished with him, Sergius”—Pilate had calmed, too, and no rancor was revealed in his tone—“have him brought back, properly attended. He and the Tetrarchess are always welcome at the Procurator’s Palace.”

But Longinus knew, as the three prepared to leave the great dining hall, that relations between the Tetrarch and the Procurator were still strained; he suspected that they would remain so. The temperaments of the two men, coupled with the situations in which they had been placed, would demand it. In his own dealings with them, in his observation and appraisal of them and their activities, he told himself, he must bear this always in mind.

Meanwhile, lounging comfortably on Claudia’s large couch, pillows at their backs, the two women had been exchanging news of their own activities since they had last seen one another in Rome, and, more interesting to Claudia, Herodias had been revealing tidbits of gossip involving the more lively set in the Empire’s capital city. But soon the discussion narrowed to their own changed circumstances. Claudia was frank. “Yes, it’s just as I told you it would be that day you came to return my call. I said marrying Pilate would make no difference. Remember? Well, it hasn’t.” A cloud passed across her countenance. “Of course, we will have to be patient, though, and wait for things to work out.”

“But until they do, must you never...?” Herodias paused.

“No, it isn’t that bad,” Claudia hastened to reply, smiling. “We can see each other and we can be together ... more and more hereafter, I hope. We have been together already, for hours, in fact, both here at Caesarea and in Jerusalem at the Herod’s Palace, while Pilate conveniently, I do believe, busied himself at the Antonia Tower.” She shook her head. “Really, Herodias, I don’t know whether the man is stupid, quite wise, or just indifferent. But whatever he is, his being the way he is will help Longinus and me to arrange things.” 114

Herodias’ large dark eyes were bright now with scheming. “My dear, you have never been in Galilee, have you? It’s a beautiful land, especially now that spring is beginning to break, so much more interesting than this barren Judaea. We have so many flowers, and willows and oleanders and bright-blooming shrubs along the watercourses. I remember Galilee in the spring from my childhood days and on occasional visits since. So”—her eyes were dancing now—“you must go with us to Tiberias. We can contrive to have Longinus escort us. And in the Palace there”—her voice dropped to an intimate whisper—“you will have no one to disturb you.”

“But Antipas’ other wife? What would she say if I should go with you?”

“I am the Tetrarchess of Galilee and Peraea,” she said evenly. “As soon as we get there, Antipas is going to divorce her and send her back to old Aretas.”

Before they reached the bend in the road roughly paralleling the Jordan, whose banks were beginning to color now with the awakening of willows and oleanders to advancing spring, the Tetrarch recognized the voice.

"By the beard of the venerable High Priest!" Antipas exclaimed. "This isn't the place where he was making his stand when I came this way before, but it's the same fellow, that mad prophet of the Wilderness. I'd know his haranguing anywhere." 115

Longinus was riding beside the Tetrarch. Herodias and Claudia, with lively Salome a few paces back, were following in the narrow column, and just behind them rode Neaera, Tullia, and several other servants of the two households. Soldiers were in the vanguard and at the rear.

Antipas turned to Longinus. "Centurion, I wonder if we shouldn't go another way and avoid encountering this fellow. I'd rather not see him or hear more of his ranting."

"But I want to see him." Herodias had ridden abreast of the Tetrarch. "He must be the one I've just been hearing so much about in Jerusalem. Everybody was talking of his ability to sway the multitudes and his fearlessness in denouncing the Temple priests."

"Yes, he's the one. But, my dear Herodias," the Tetrarch began to protest, "he's likely to say something that will offend you, too. The fellow has no respect for the Tetrarch's office or authority and no bridle on his loose tongue."

"By the gods, then, that's all the more reason I want to hear him." She laughed gaily, then quickly grew sober. "And certainly the Tetrarch should be concerned," she added, "if the man flouts the Tetrarch's authority." She signaled to Longinus to resume the march. "Let's ride down and join his audience. After the boredom of our journey, this should at least provide a diversion."

Antipas shook his head grudgingly but offered no further protest. "She'll regret it as soon as she hears him, by the gods," he muttered to the centurion as they started. "But I warned her."

At the bottom of the slope the group dismounted, and on Longinus' summons, soldiers came up to hold the horses. The servants remained behind with them except for Neaera and Tullia who followed their mistresses as the Tetrarch's party quietly slipped around a screening clump of willows to join the throng about the gaunt and weathered speaker. To Antipas, John seemed little changed since that day when they had come upon him at the ford farther up the Jordan. His clothes looked the same; fleetingly the Tetrarch wondered if the haircloth 116 mantle had ever been cleaned since he had last seen it.

Although the Tetrarch's group had slipped unobtrusively into the rim of the crowd, Antipas was quickly recognized, and soon a murmur moved through the multitude and heads began to nod as intent black eyes shifted from the fiery prophet to study the newly arrived ruler of Galilee and Peraea.

"It's old Herod," Longinus heard a beak-nosed, thin Jew whisper to the man beside him. "And that woman, she must be the new wife he's fetched from Rome, the one he took away from his brother, and that must be the brother's daughter beside her." Both men turned to stare, then smile. "I wonder what John will say to that!" one said to the other as they turned back to peer again at the thundering prophet.

John, too, had recognized the Tetrarch, Longinus was sure; yet the prophet made no immediate reference to his presence. Instead, he continued preaching on the necessity of repentance and on the use of baptism as a sign of Yahweh's forgiveness. The man was a powerful speaker; he had native ability, Longinus immediately perceived, to command attention and sway his hearers. The crowd listened, entranced, to his every word; now and then one would step forward and, crying loudly in repentance, ask for baptism.

Sometimes a man would interrupt the prophet to seek an answer to some deeply perplexing problem. But no one yet had spoken openly of the Tetrarch's presence among them.

Then a tall, narrow-faced Jew, unkempt, ill-clothed, evidently a man of the earth, stepped forward and held up his hand. "This repentance of which you speak," he questioned, "is it necessary for the rich man in the same manner as it is for the poor and dispossessed, for the man of authority as well as for the servant? I ask you, does the measuring rod measure the same for all men, or is there one rule for one man and another rule for another?"

"Repentance is necessary for all men, my brother," John replied calmly. "The same measuring rod measures for both the man of authority and the servant who serves him, for both the rich man and the man of earth."

John paused. Then slowly his dark eyes moved from the face of his questioner to that of the Tetrarch. "The same measuring rod measures for the Tetrarch of Galilee, my brother, that measures for you, and it is the same for even the lowliest servant in that iniquitous marble pile above the graveyard in Tiberias!" The prophet's eyes were blazing now, and he raised his gaunt, sun-bronzed arm to point a lean forefinger directly at Herod Antipas. "Repent, O Tetrarch, repent!" His voice was thunderous now, and the finger darted forward like the tongue of a serpent. "Repent while yet there is time! Repent of the evil you have done, and seek in true penitence the forgiveness of our God Whom you have scorned and despised!" 117

Antipas stood silent and stared straight ahead, looking as though suddenly he had been turned to stone. But Herodias, though amazed, had not been rendered speechless by the torrent of the prophet's denunciation. Calmly she turned to her husband. "Do you intend to stand here and allow this madman to vilify you? Are you going to

stand patiently while...?”

“And you! You evil woman!” John’s shout interrupted her. Now the angry hand was pointed directly at her. “You call me a madman,” he said. “Yes, I am a madman. I am a madman for our God. And I call upon you, too, to repent. Repent before our God turns His face from you forever. I call upon both you sinners to fall on your faces and cry out to the God of Israel, imploring Him for forgiveness.” Then the prophet’s stern eyes turned again toward the Tetrarch. “Herod, cast this foul woman from you! Have you not stolen her away from the bed of your brother? You cannot have her, O Tetrarch! Does not God’s holy law forbid a man from taking to bed the wife of his living brother in the flesh? Adulterer! Repent! And you, evil woman, you adulteress”—John’s eyes were fiery now with a wild zeal as he faced Herodias, whose flushed cheeks and lips drawn into thin lines revealed her fury—“neither shall you have him! Get you back to the bed you have deserted, if the husband you have abandoned has the grace to forgive and receive you! O Tetrarch”—John lifted his gaunt arms toward the heavens—“cast her from you before your grievous sinning brings ruin down upon the land. Send her back to your brother, and 118 humbly beseech the forgiveness of our God! Repent, O Tetrarch, repent! Repent!”

Still Herod Antipas stood staring, unmoving, rooted.

“By all the great and little gods, Antipas”—Herodias, infuriated, whirled upon the Tetrarch, grabbed his arm and shook him—“will you stand there like a statue and permit that fanatic to insult and intimidate you and your wife before this crowd?” Scornfully she measured him, and her lips curled with disgust. “Are you indeed the Tetrarch of Galilee, or are you a frightened mouse?” She stood back, taunting him with her shrill laugh.

Her challenging words and her mirthless laughter broke the spell the prophet had cast. “No, I am not afraid of him,” Antipas replied slowly, as though he were arguing with himself. “Nor can I any longer permit this abuse to go unpunished. He has not only vilified your Tetrarch and his wife”—Antipas was now addressing the crowd rather than Herodias—“but he has challenged my honor and authority. His words are a call to insurrection. I can no longer permit the preaching of rebellion.” He turned to confront Longinus. “Centurion, arrest this man. Have him taken at once to the Fortress Machaerus and there placed in its dungeon. Order him held until I pronounce judgment.”

Without even a glance toward the now silent but calm and seemingly untroubled prophet of the Wilderness, Herod turned and started along the gentle rise toward the horses.

19

As they approached the southern shore line of the Sea of Galilee, Longinus sent riders ahead to notify Chuza of the impending arrival of the Tetrarch and his party at Tiberias. So the steward, with household servants to handle the baggage, was waiting at the palace gate when the caravan entered the grounds.

But Chuza, though he greeted them warmly and with profuse smiles, was obviously troubled, and Antipas 119 quickly drew the man aside to question him. “Sire, you will not find the Tetrarchess here to welcome you,” the steward explained, his tone apologetic and his expression patently pained. “She has departed from Tiberias. I suggested that she might wish to delay her leaving, Sire, until your return, but she insisted on going at once.”

She had received a message, she told Chuza, that her father, King Aretas of Arabia Petraea, was desperately ill and that he had summoned her to his bedside. Although the steward had seen no messengers, he had not been disposed to question the Tetrarchess. She had prepared for the journey very quickly. The Centurion Cornelius had provided her with a detachment of soldiers to escort her to her father’s capital in the country southeast of the Dead Sea, beyond the Fortress Machaerus; she had taken with her, in addition, her best raiment and many of her choicest personal possessions.

“Then you think that she is not planning to come back to me? Is that what you’re suggesting, Chuza?”

“Sire, I am suggesting nothing. I am relating only what I saw and heard. I have no opinion as to what plans the Tetrarchess....”

“The Princess Herodias is Tetrarchess now, Chuza,” Antipas interrupted.

“Indeed, Sire”—Chuza bowed to the Tetrarch and then to Herodias—“the former Tetrarchess....”

“But when did she depart, Chuza?” Antipas interrupted again.

“A week ago, Sire. The escorting soldiers have not yet returned.”

“Had she heard that I was returning from Rome with a new Tetrarchess?”

“She said nothing to me about it, Sire, but I am confident that she knew of the Tetrarch’s marriage. Passengers coming ashore at Ptolemais from the vessel on which you and the Tetrarchess sailed out from Rome brought to Tiberias word of the new Tetrarchess. I myself heard it, and surely the report must have come also to her ears here at the palace.”

“Very well, Chuza; think no more of it.” By now they had entered the lofty, marble-columned great atrium. A faint smile crossed his heavy face. “Do you know, I believe she must have suspected all along?” He turned to 120 Herodias. “By all the gods, my dear, she has made our course all the easier.”

Longinus declined the invitation of the Tetrarch and Herodias to take a chamber in the palace during his stay at Tiberias. He had promised Cornelius that he would be his guest when next he came to Galilee. Tempting though the Tetrarch's invitation had been, Longinus reasoned that it might be wise to assume that the watched might also be the watching.

Besides, Claudia had been assigned an apartment which, the centurion had observed, looked out upon a broad terrace facing the Sea of Galilee. A door from Claudia's bedroom conveniently opened onto the terrace. Longinus smiled as he reviewed the details of the arrangement.

The sentry at the palace gate, he also knew, would be a Roman soldier.

20

Cornelius shook his head solemnly. "Herod will regret it. Arresting the prophet was unwise, Longinus."

"But the fellow is an insurrectionist, Cornelius; certainly it can't be denied that he's been inciting rebellion against the Tetrarch's rule. You should have heard what he called Antipas and Herodias." A wry smile twisted the corners of his mouth. "Of course, just between you and me, I think he was right. But that doesn't absolve him from agitating against the Tetrarch, and in this province, of course, the Tetrarch represents Rome."

"But I don't think that the prophet's a revolutionary," Cornelius insisted. "He lambasted the Tetrarch that day we came on him at Bethabara, too, but he wasn't challenging Herod's authority as Tetrarch; he was denouncing his wickedness as a man and calling upon him as a man to repent just as others were repenting. There's a difference, Longinus, even though it's hard for us Romans to understand that. We bundle our religion—if we have any, which few of us do, I suspect—and our imperial government into one packet. But the Jews keep their religion and their government, or rather our enforced government over them, separate. And their religion is predominant. In ordering John imprisoned, therefore, Herod is allowing the government to invade the Jews' religious precincts, just as Pilate did when he had the army's ensigns flown from the ramparts of Antonia. He's likely to find himself in the same sort of situation that Pilate faced. It will do him no good; John at Machaerus will likely have more power over the people than he would have had if Herod had left him unmolested." He glanced quizzically toward his friend. "Don't you think so?"

"I've never thought of it. Nor do I care, by the gods, what becomes of that Wilderness fellow, or...." He paused and glanced about.

"There's no one to hear us."

Nor was there. From the early evening meal, eaten in the stuffiness of the garrison's mess hall at a table with the other officers, Cornelius had brought his guest to the flat roof. Up here they would escape the heat and the heavy odors of food and wine and sweating soldiers and at the same time catch any vagrant breeze that might be stirring from the sea. Nor would there be any ears to overhear.

"I was going to say that I cared little what happened to him or Antipas ... or, by great Jove, even Pontius Pilate."

"Both Herod and Pilate have blundered. And I'm sure Sejanus will be hearing about it; that is, if he hasn't heard of it already."

Longinus nodded, then casually changed the subject. "By the way," he commented, "that reminds me; what ever became of that carpenter you said the desert preacher hailed as the Jews' Messiah? Has he begun yet the task of wrecking the Roman Empire with his hammer and chisels?"

"It's just possible that he has, though not with any hammer and chisel." His smile was enigmatic. "Certainly the Empire, if I understand him, isn't built on any plan that he approves."

"By all the gods, Cornelius!" Longinus, who had been sprawled in his chair with his feet propped on the low rampart, sat up with a start. "What do you mean?"

Cornelius held up his hand. "Now wait," he said calmly. "There's nothing to be alarmed about. You won't need to report to Sejanus about the carpenter. But since I saw you last he has gained a great following, even among some of the more influential people. You remember that beautiful woman Herod took with him to Jerusalem, the one called Mary of Magdala?"

"Who could forget her?"

"I agree. Well, she's a disciple of the carpenter now, and a different woman, they say; she's forsworn the Tetrarch's bedchamber."

"Maybe"—Longinus grinned—"that's because Herodias has moved in."

"Could be; I don't know. But the report is that she's given up all her amatory pursuits in order to follow him. All up and down the seaside, in fact, the people are swarming to hear him and beseech his help."

"But insurrection, Cornelius...."

"Oh, it isn't that, Longinus. The Galilean isn't concerned with the government, as I understand his teachings, though I've seen little of him myself; I get my information from some of the Jews in the synagogue at Capernaum"—he smiled—"who secretly, I suspect, are followers of the man, though many others among the Jews are hostile. I think he wants to change people as individuals, not their governments; he wants to help them. I'm sure he's never given any thought to fomenting rebellion against Rome."

Longinus relaxed and sat back. "Then he's just another of these religious fanatics, isn't he? Well, I'm relieved to hear that, though Palestine seems to have more than its share of these charlatans."

"Charlatan? I wouldn't say that. Let me tell you a story, and then you can deduce what you wish. It happened only a few weeks ago. When you see Chuza, Herod's steward...."

"I saw him today."

"When you see him again, ask him to tell you what happened to his son. Everybody in this part of the country has heard about it; the news swept through Galilee like flames across a parched grassland." 123

"Well, by the gods, Cornelius, what did happen?"

"Chuza's young son had come down with a fever. In this low country along the lakeside, you know, fevers are pretty common, but they're not often dangerous. So Chuza and Joanna—she's his wife—weren't alarmed at first. But when days passed and the boy didn't improve—in fact, his condition grew worse—they became concerned. One physician after another was called in, and they exhausted all the treatments they knew how to give. But the child was failing fast, and Chuza and Joanna were frantic; it looked as though their son wouldn't live much longer. The fever was consuming him. What could they do? Where could they get help?"

"It happened that on the last day, when it appeared that the boy was about to die, a Jewish fisherman who had occasionally been supplying the palace came to Chuza. He and his brother and two other brothers with whom he frequently fished had made a heavy catch, and this Simon had come to inquire if Chuza would buy a mess for the Tetrarch's household."

"But a servant came to the door and told him his master could not discuss business; the steward's son, he explained, was dying."

"'In that case, I must see him,' the fisherman said to the servant. 'I can tell him how his son's life may be saved.'"

"But the servant told him that the physicians had despaired of saving the child and that the parents were momentarily awaiting his death. He ordered Simon to leave."

"The fisherman, a headstrong fellow, insisted, however, on being shown into the chamberlain's presence, and the argument grew so loud that Chuza heard and came out to discover what was taking place. The fisherman Simon then told the Tetrarch's steward of the Galilean carpenter's amazing ability to effect miraculous cures, and he suggested that a servant be sent on horseback to find this young man, whom Simon referred to as 'the Master.' 'And when the servant finds him,' he said 'have him bring the Master here, and he will heal your son.'"

"Of course Chuza protested," Cornelius continued, "that skilled physicians had been unable to cure the child. 'Only try the Master,' Simon then implored him. 'Only have faith in him and ask him to heal your son, and he will heal him.'" 124

"And suddenly the thought came to Chuza that surely he had nothing to lose by seeking out the Galilean mystic. The child was already on the verge of death; certainly this Jesus ben Joseph, whatever he might do, wouldn't further endanger the boy's life. So he asked Simon where his master might be found and whether he would come at once to his son's bedside."

"The Galilean was visiting friends at Cana, a village a few miles west of the little sea. And Simon assured Chuza that he would come."

"So Chuza decided to seek the carpenter's aid. But he sent no servant for him. Instead, he had three horses saddled, one for Simon, one for himself, and one for this Jesus ben Joseph."

"'As we rode westward toward Cana,' Chuza told me, 'I felt a growing hope that the strange Galilean might really be able to restore my son to health, and I was possessed by an overpowering urge to find the man. Soon Simon and I were racing along the dusty road. When we reached Cana and found the house, we discovered this Jesus seated with his friends at the noonday meal.'"

Cornelius got up from his chair, sat down again on the rampart, and looked out toward a small fleet of fishing boats coming in to shore with the day's catch."

"By the gods," Longinus asked, "what happened then? Go on; it's a good story."

"When he looked into the understanding eyes of the young man from Nazareth, Chuza told me, a strange warmth, not physical warmth from the hard riding but a sense of eased tension, of peace, perhaps, something he said he couldn't describe to me and didn't entirely understand himself, took possession of him. He knew then, he was utterly certain, he said, that the young man smiling at him had the power to heal his son, if he could but get him to Tiberias in time!"

Once more Cornelius paused in his recital to study a fishing boat unloading a heavy catch. Then he resumed the narrative."

"Chuza said he didn't remember what he said to the man, except that he blurted out his plea for help and begged the stranger to return with him to the boy's bedside. He and his wife loved their son so much, he pleaded, and the little fellow was dying. If only the carpenter would intervene to save him, he knew the child's life would be spared. 125

"Then," Cornelius went on, "the Nazareth carpenter said a strange thing. He turned his intent, kindly gaze from Chuza to glance at those at the table with him. 'Always you must have signs and wonders,' he said. 'Can't you believe without actually seeing these things done before your eyes?'

"Chuza didn't understand the man's words, but he didn't try to find out what they meant. His son was dying, his need was desperate. Once more he begged the carpenter for his help. 'O, sir, my boy is dying,' he pleaded; 'he won't last out the day unless you go to him. Won't you leave with us now, sir, and restore him?'"

Cornelius paused again. Longinus, his forehead creased in heavy concentration, seemed absorbed in the doings of several fishermen down at the water's edge as they struggled with a heavy net. But he turned quickly to confront his friend. "Pluto blast you, Cornelius! Why do you keep stopping? Did the carpenter return with him or didn't he?"

"No, he didn't. He laid his hand on Chuza's shoulder. 'Return to your son,' he said. 'The fever has left him. He has been restored.'"

"And I suppose when Chuza and the fisherman got back, they found that the boy's fever had actually broken?"

"Yes, he was fully recovered. And when Chuza asked Joanna what time it was when the fever broke, she said it was the seventh hour, which was exactly when the carpenter had told Chuza that the boy had been restored." Cornelius smiled and stood up. "That's the story, Centurion ... Chuza's story, not mine. What do you make of it?"

"A good story, and ably told by you. I'd call it an entertaining account of a remarkable coincidence."

"Only a coincidence?"

"What else could it be? Surely you don't believe that this carpenter fellow, without even going to the sick boy, drove out the fever? You know that fever victims either get well or die and that once the fever reaches a certain point, it goes one way or the other; it's either death or a very rapid recovery, and the odds are about the same." He shrugged his shoulders. "After hearing Chuza's story the carpenter probably calculated it was time for the fever to break, and he simply gambled on the outcome." Then he was suddenly serious, his eyes questioning. "Cornelius, don't tell me you believe the carpenter actually cured the boy?" 126

"I don't know, Longinus. But I'll say this: I don't disbelieve it. And I do know that the boy is alive and well today." Cornelius stood up and stretched. "After all, to Chuza and Joanna that's the important thing. When you see Chuza, you might ask him what he thinks of the Galilean."

"If that carpenter did cure the boy in the manner you described, Cornelius, then he's bound to be a god. And would a carpenter be a god, and a Galilean carpenter, at that? To me the whole idea is preposterous. But I'm just a Roman soldier; I haven't been exposed, like you, to these eastern workers of magic."

"This Jesus is no magician. In fact, he seems reluctant to perform these—what did he call them—'signs and wonders.' But the sick and the crippled continually besiege him to heal them, and his sympathies for the unfortunate appear to be boundless." Cornelius sat down again on the parapet. "Tell me, do you remember that day we were sailing down the Tiber, standing at the 'Palmyra's' rail talking about the various gods, and you said that you could never comprehend a spirit god, something that was nothing, you said, a being without a body?"

"Yes, and I still feel that way."

"But what about a god that does have a body, a god-man? If a god should have a physical body and be in every physical respect like a man, would that make sense to you? Could you comprehend such a god?"

"By Jove, Cornelius, you've been out here with these Jews for much too long. You've been listening to too much prattle about their Yahweh. A god without a body, a body that houses a god. Bah! I put no credence in any of these notions. As for that carpenter, I'd say he's another Wilderness preacher, not as fanatical perhaps, not as desert-parched and smelling of dried sweat as John, but certainly no god—whatever a god is, if there is such a thing, which I most seriously doubt. A carpenter from Nazareth, that hillside cluster of huts! Cornelius, I've been to Nazareth, as I'm sure you have. I ask you, would a god choose Nazareth to come from?" He stood up. "Nevertheless, the story you told was entertaining. Maybe to some it would be convincing. To me, though..." He shook his head slowly. Then suddenly a wide grin lighted his grim countenance. "How is it that you and I inevitably get around sooner or later to a discussion of the gods? And where do we invariably end? Nowhere. Talk, that's all. And talk is all it can ever be, isn't it? It's all too nebulous, intangible..." 127

"But, Longinus, if this all-powerful, all-wise, all-good god that old Pheidias envisioned, this supreme one god, in order to communicate with his earthly creatures"—Cornelius held up his hand to stop Longinus, who had been about to interrupt—"should decide to take the form of a man, an ordinary man..."

"By all the small and great gods," Longinus did interrupt, "do you think then that he would choose to be a carpenter from Nazareth?"

Cornelius stared at the fishing boats, now pulled up on the beach; the lengthening shadows had already begun to obscure them. "I wonder," he said.

Herod Antipas was in a bad mood; he said little and appeared preoccupied during the meal. When they had finished he announced that he planned to spend the remainder of the evening conferring with his ministers. "I've been out of the country for a long time," he explained casually. "I suspect there will be many trying problems awaiting consideration."

When the Tetrarch withdrew from the lofty dining chamber, Herodias had servants place couches at the eastern edge of the terrace beside the bordering balustrade of faintly rose-hued marble, and with Neaera and Tullia hovering discreetly near them, the new Tetrarchess and her guest lay back comfortably to relax after the heavy meal. Out here it was cooler than it had been in the great chamber, for the white marble palace of Herod Antipas had been built on an upflung spit of land that pushed out like a flattened giant thumb into the Sea of Galilee, and whenever there was a breeze from off the water it swept unobstructed across the spacious terrace. 128

This terrace had been built seaward from an immense glass-covered peristylum, paved with tiny marble blocks in colors that had been laid to form an intricate but pleasing mosaic pattern and alive with fountains, flowers, and luxuriant tropical plants. Predominantly Roman in architecture, decoration, and furnishings, the palace reminded Claudia of the Procurator's Palace at Caesarea. "Except that it's more pretentious," she told Herodias.

"Yes, it is," Herodias agreed. "Antipas was determined for once to outdo his father. He had always lived in the shadow of old Herod, and I think he resented it. But even so, he has never had the ambition or the courage that his father had."

"But surely, Herodias, you don't see any virtue in your grandfather. Didn't he have your grandmother and your father killed?"

"Yes, and my father's brother Alexander. No, he was a monster, particularly in his last years when I think he must have been demented. But he was an able man, and he had courage. He never would have permitted that desert fellow to stand there and insult him and his wife, for example, even if the man had had all the Jews in Galilee at his side. Nor would he have yielded, as your Pilate did, to those Jews at Caesarea. He would have had them run through with swords and would have roared with laughter at their agonized dying. But perhaps I offend you."

"No, you don't offend me, my dear. Nor do I defend Pilate. But you must remember, he has Sejanus to deal with and also my beloved stepfather. Neither of those pillars of the Empire would have sanctioned the massacre of thousands of Jews. Pilate does have a difficult role to play." 129

Herodias smiled and pointed a ringed forefinger. "And are you going to help him play it, my dear Claudia, or will you...?" She paused and allowed her question to hang in mid-air.

"Or will I conspire with Longinus to lead Pilate into making further wrong moves, thereby getting him recalled and perhaps banished and permitting me to divorce him and marry Longinus?" Laughing, Claudia sat up and swung her feet to the floor. "You are so subtle, my dear, so very subtle." Now she shook an accusing finger at her hostess. "But tell me, what will you do when Aretas' daughter returns to Tiberias and demands her place as Tetrarchess?"

"She won't return; Antipas is sending her a bill of divorcement. Surely you must know that I would see to that. In fact, I think she left with her mind made up that she was finished as Tetrarchess. My only thought—and that isn't concern—is what old Aretas will do about it."

Behind them now the lamps had been lighted in the palace. A brilliant full moon slowly climbed the sky above the little sea; both women lay back luxuriously to watch the moon mount higher, and before long their talk had slowed into silence. Suddenly Herodias realized that she had become almost senseless. She sat up with a start.

"By the gods, Claudia, we're almost asleep!"

"We're tired from the journey," Claudia said, rubbing her eyes.

"Yes. Maybe we should go to bed. Can I have Neaera bring you something? Some wine and wafers, fruit, or a glass of hot milk?"

"No, not a thing. I'm still stuffed from the wonderful dinner. I only want to get to bed and to sleep. I am really quite tired."

"You must be indeed." Her smile, Claudia saw plainly in the brightness of the full moon, was positively devilish. It was impossible to mistake its meaning.

"Oh, that," she laughed, then added, "but surely you heard him tell the Tetrarch he would spend the night with Cornelius?"

"Yes, I heard him tell the Tetrarch." She stood up. "Let's go to bed." They crossed the terrace and entered the palace. "I'll see you to your chamber," she said. 130

An inner room that opened into Claudia's had been prepared for Tullia. Herodias glanced quickly around the apartment, then turned to go. At the door opening onto the corridor she paused. "I hope you will be comfortable and sleep well." Her eyes brightened. "You won't be disturbed. And you'll discover"—she swept her hand in an arc to embrace Claudia's chamber—"that all your doors have bolts opening from the inside, including," she added

with a knowing smile, “the one to the terrace. Good night, Claudia. And, by all the gods”—her dark, wanton eyes had burst into dancing flames—“I envy you!”

22

Claudia sat up in bed, instantly and fully awake. She knew that she had been dreaming, a confused, wandering, disconnected, senseless sort of dream, though now with her awakening it had vanished completely, dissolved into nothing. But the gentle tapping that had been mixed with the dreaming, had not been a part of it; the tapping at the door to the terrace was real and repeated and insistent.

She kicked her feet free of the sheet and swung them to the floor. From the waist down, as she arose, she stood in the narrow band of silver-cold moonlight spearing through the tall window behind her to cut diagonally across the foot of the bed; quickly she stepped into the less revealing shadows at the doorway.

“Longinus?” she whispered, her face close to the panel.

“Yes.”

“One minute until I can draw the bolt.”

When he was inside and she was closing and bolting the door, he slipped his toga off and, stepping past the shaft of moonlight, dropped it on a chair against the wall near the head of the bed. As he turned around, she came toward him, her arms outstretched; crossing the bright beam, her white body stood plainly revealed through the sheerness of the black gown. 131

“Oh, Longinus”—she flung herself into his arms—“I thought you really had decided to stay with Cornelius.”

He lifted her to her toes and held her, almost crushingly, against him, and then he caught her chin and raising her face so that he could look into her eyes, bent down and kissed her red and warmly eager lips.

“Didn’t you know,” he asked when he released her after a long while, “that those words were for Antipas and not you? Didn’t you know that nothing could possibly keep me from you tonight?”

Gently, almost carrying her, he led her the two or three steps to the bed. They sat down beside each other, and he bent forward to unbuckle his sandals. When he sat up again, she twisted her feet around and lifted them to the bed, doubled up her knees, and lay with her head and right shoulder pressed hard against his side. “Are you tired from the journey and anxious to get to sleep?” she asked, turning her head to look into his face.

“Tired maybe, and warm from walking from the Antonia”—he pulled his tunic open at the throat and to his waist—“but sleepy, no.” He laughed, but not loudly, for the palace was as quiet as a sepulcher. “Do you think any man in my present situation could be sleepy?”

“Yes, by all the gods, I know one.” She sat up and swung her feet to the floor. “Pontius Pilate.”

“No, Claudia, he couldn’t be that cold-blooded.” He pulled her to him, and drew her warm body into the closing circle of his arms. She lifted her feet again to the bed and slid down into the brightness of the moonlight.

“But, I tell you he is, Longinus. All the man ever thinks of is guarding and extending the powers and authority of the Procuratorship and piling up Jewish shekels. To him my only attraction is being the Emperor’s stepdaughter.”

“Then he’s an even bigger fool than I thought.” Gently he pushed her chin down to pull her lips slightly apart and, bending over her, crushed his mouth upon them. 132

“Oh, Longinus,” she cried out, when finally, breathing heavily, he raised his head, “do take me away from him! Do, Longinus, oh, do, do! I cannot endure him! By all the gods, I simply cannot!”

“But where would we go?” He looked deeply into her troubled eyes, luminous even in the shadows. “How could we escape the Emperor and the Prefect, my dear girl? How could we?”

“We couldn’t, of course. If we attempted it, they would soon find us, and Tiberius would do to you what my grandfather did to my poor father. I know that, Longinus. But it’s so long from one time with you to another, from one night so quickly passed to the gods only know when again.” She slipped her hand beneath his tunic and caressingly ran her fingers across the damp, warm expanse of his chest. “It’s so hard waiting for these few stolen hours,” she murmured. “Must we be forever waiting, Longinus?”

“No, Claudia, no. Pluto burn him! One of these days he’ll go too far with the Emperor and Sejanus. But we’ve got to give him time to be caught in his own trap. Then when he’s ruined himself, the Emperor will permit you to divorce him. But in the meantime, we must steal all the hours we can”—his words were blurred as he buried his face in her lustrous, fragrant hair—“and not be too concerned with Pilate or our future.” They remained silent side by side for a while, then Longinus raised his head. Claudia lay stretched out full length upon the bed, and from the waist down now her scarcely concealed body came within the rapidly widening band of moonlight. “We mustn’t try to anticipate things,” he said quietly. “We must seize the opportunities as they come. Carpe diem, that’s all.” He bent lower to look into her eyes. “More to the point, let’s enjoy the night while we have it.”

He stood up quickly and in the shadows hastily stripped off his clothes.

133

23

As he drifted up slowly out of the depths of slumber he fancied he was hearing the early cockcrow from Castra Praetoria; surely he was sharing Claudia's bed in her apartment in the Imperial Palace, for he could smell her perfume, he could feel the satiny texture of her hair spread fan-like across his chest.

The trumpet was insistent. He would have to open his eyes. He twisted up on his elbow and squinted toward the window; light sifting into the chamber revealed the crumpled sheer nightgown dropped across his clothes on the chair near the bed. Looking down, he studied Claudia's sleeping face—rouge-smeared, half-open mouth, cheeks, forehead, and even her neck splotted with the smudged prints of his lips from her own lipstick.

He glanced around the room again; no, this time he was not in Rome, and the trumpet call came only from the post headquarters in Tiberias. This time there was no threat of immediate separation. Immensely relieved, he pulled up the sheet that had fallen away and snuggled back down beside her.

"Must you be going so soon?" she asked sleepily, for his movement had aroused her. "Must you always be leaving me?"

"That's the cockcrow at Castra Praetoria, and I have early duty," he said. "Maybe this morning I'll be summoned before the Prefect."

"You aren't deceiving me. The Prefect is in Rome, and we are in Tiberias," she replied. "And you have no morning duty at the post's quarters." Smiling, she added, "I'm not that sleepy, Centurion." She slid forward and sat up, then just as quickly slipped back beneath the protecting sheet. "I forgot," she said, grinning. "But I'm so glad that you don't have to leave now."

"But I'll have to be going soon," he declared. "I'd like to get away before the palace is too much astir."

134

"But why, Longinus? Must you sneak away as though you were a thieving intruder? Don't you know that Herodias was expecting you? She even admitted that she was envious of me; I'm sure she was anticipating a far less interesting evening with Antipas." She paused, and her eyes widened. "Surely you aren't afraid of his knowing ... about us?"

"You know I'm not afraid of the Tetrarch's knowing"—his tone was gently scolding—"or, by the gods, of Pontius Pilate's."

"Then could it be Cornelius?" Now she was teasing. "But doesn't he know? Surely...."

"Of course," he interrupted. "He knew last night I was coming here. He gave me the password for the sentry at the palace gate."

"But did he know you were going to be spending the night ... with me?"

"I didn't tell him that. But I'm sure that anybody with the intelligence of a centurion would arrive at such a conclusion." He was grinning. "Wouldn't you think so?"

"Yes. But maybe he doesn't approve, now that he's become so interested in the Jews' religion. And judging by that desert fanatic's tirade against Herodias and Antipas, even the most innocent adultery is frowned upon by these Jewish religionists."

"Whatever he may think about it, Cornelius knows very well that what you and I do is none of his business, and I'm sure he won't try to make it his affair."

"Then I'm the one." Her smeared lips were pushed out in a feigned pout. "You're bored with me. I know, you're just trying to get rid...."

"Silly girl." He pulled her close, for she had coquettishly twisted away. "Did I say I was leaving right now?"

135

24

Two soldiers from his own century at Caesarea who had ridden into Tiberias during the night were awaiting Longinus when he returned to the garrison headquarters. They had been sent by Sergius Paulus with a message from the Prefect Sejanus. A note from the Prefect had been attached to the carefully sealed message, emphasizing the importance of the communication and ordering Sergius Paulus, should Longinus not be in Caesarea on its arrival, to have it dispatched to him wherever he might be and as speedily as possible.

The message from Sejanus had arrived on an Alexandrian grain ship that had sailed into the harbor at Caesarea several days after Herod Antipas and his new wife, with their party and their guest, the Procurator's wife, had departed for Jerusalem on their way to Tiberias. The cohort commander had dispatched the two horsemen at once

in the hope that they might overtake the centurion before Herod's party had started on the journey up the Jordan Valley toward the Galilean capital. But the caravan had been two days on the way before the horseman rode into Jerusalem; from there they had started almost immediately for Tiberias.

Quickly and with considerable apprehension Longinus broke the seals. Why was the message so urgent? What could have happened? He knew that Sejanus was not replying to the report he himself had dispatched to the Prefect by the hand of the "Actium's" captain; that vessel had probably not even reached Rome yet.

Longinus hurriedly scanned the message; then, relieved, he read it again more slowly. The Prefect was summoning him to return to Rome to report in detail on the situation in Judaea and Galilee. But first he was to go immediately to Senator Piso's glassworks in Phoenicia. There he would receive a package which he would then convey to Rome. 136

The package would be highly valuable, the Prefect warned; it would contain a large sum of money, revenue from sales of glassware, and he was to exercise every precaution in seeing to it that he got it to Rome intact. Impress as many soldiers as he thought necessary to serve as guards while the package was being transported from the glass plant to the ship that would bring it to Rome, the Prefect ordered; take no risk of being waylaid by robbers or some band of zealots. He suggested that to minimize this danger, the centurion should go aboard ship at Tyre, the seaport nearest the plant.

Longinus explained to the two soldiers who had brought him the message that he was being ordered to Rome by the Prefect Sejanus and instructed them to bear to Sergius Paulus a message he would write. In this note he informed the cohort commander of the assignment Sejanus had given him to come to Rome, although he made no mention of the money he would be delivering. He added that the Prefect had given him no details of the new assignment; he would write later from Rome. When he finished writing the communication, Longinus dismissed the two to return with it to Caesarea.

Cornelius had been aware of the arrival of the two men sent by Sergius Paulus; Longinus told him what the Prefect's instructions had been.

"Cornelius, I want you to pick a small detachment from your century to go with me to Phoenicia for the package and then on over to Tyre," he said. "If by any chance I should let that money be stolen...." He shrugged and drew his fingers across his throat. "I suspect a large portion of it, if not all, is destined to find its way into the Prefect's private coffers."

Cornelius agreed to accompany him. His men would leave early on the morrow and meet the two centurions at the home of Cornelius at Capernaum where they would spend the evening. From there the party would start northwestward for the senator's glassworks in Phoenicia.

"And now," said Cornelius when they had made the arrangements, "you'll be wanting to return to the palace; after today it may be a long time before you see Claudia again." 137

Only last night he and Claudia had talked of how they might remain in Tiberias for perhaps two weeks; he had even considered taking her with him on a hurried visit to the glassworks, which he had not inspected for the last several months. And they would manage to spend every evening together, to be with each other every night through.

"Oh, Longinus, let me go with you to Rome! Take me, please," she pleaded an hour later as they sat on the terrace outside her bedchamber. "Do you dare, Longinus? Or, should I say, do we dare?"

"No," he said, "though by all the gods, I wish we did." He shook his head slowly. "No, Claudia, we mustn't attempt it. You might be able to hide from the Prefect and the Emperor. But not for long. Pilate would report your disappearance—he would have to for his own protection—and immediately Sejanus would suspect me. He might even think you and I were plotting to upset the rule of Tiberius, which would mean, of course, the overthrow of the Prefect. You would be discovered within a matter of days. And then in all probability it would be the imperial headsman for me, and for you ... well, for you it would probably be a fate much like your mother's, Pandateria or some other far-off place. And for the friends who tried to hide you, death, too. You see, Sejanus and the Emperor married you off to Pilate to get you far away from Rome. They intend for you to remain away. Until"—he shrugged—"there's a violent change in Rome, you must not return."

They sat quietly and looked out at the fishing boats plying the sea.

"I won't remain long in Rome, I think," he said after a while. "If the gods are good, Claudia, it will be only a few months until...."

"If the gods are good!" she interrupted, harshly. "There are no good gods, Longinus. There are no gods!" She scowled and looked away. "If there are, how can they be so perverse?"

"I don't dispute it. Call it what you like, gods, fate, chance, luck...." 138

"Ill luck, perversity of fate. Bona Dea, Longinus, if there are gods, they are evil, and the most evil of all is old Sejanus, may Pluto transfix him with his white-hot fork! Why must he forever be doing us ill?"

"Perhaps, who knows, he may be serving us well in calling me to Rome. It may lead to the Emperor's banishing Pilate or, if not that, his removal from the Procuratorship."

"May the gods grant it!" she said fervently.

"But now, my dear"—he smiled—"there are no gods."

They sat for a long time on the sunlit terrace and talked, though they knew their future was a difficult one to predict. They walked down to the beach and strolled along the sands; once they paused to sit for a while on the rotting hull of a half-buried fishing boat. Before the sun dropped westward behind the palace they climbed the steps and crossed the esplanade; in the peristylum he said good-by to the Tetrarch and Herodias. Claudia walked with him back to the terrace, where he quickly bade her farewell.

"I'll see you before many months in Caesarea," he said and gently pinched her cheek. He bent down for a last kiss. "Pray the gods for the winds to bring me quickly ... and with good news. Pray the silly little no-gods."

"I would, if I thought it would bring you back any sooner," she said. "I'd even say a prayer—and offer a lamb—to the Jew's grim Yahweh. But I have more faith in the charity of the winds themselves."

An hour later he and Cornelius set out for Capernaum. The squad from the Tiberias century that would escort them to the glassworks and then to the harbor at Tyre had been selected and equipped for the journey; the soldiers would join the centurions the next morning at the home of Cornelius.

As they were nearing the house, Cornelius turned to question his friend. "Longinus, do you remember Lucian?"

"Lucian? Your son?"

"Well, you could probably call him our son, although he's actually my slave. He was given me by his father, just before he died, when Lucian was only three or four years old. He's the grandson of old Pheidias, the tutor I was telling you about some time ago." 139

"Yes, I do remember the boy. But he is more like a son than a slave, isn't he?"

"He is. We're devoted to the boy. We couldn't love him more, I'm sure, nor could he love us more, if he were really our own flesh and blood."

"But why are you asking me about him?"

"Well, some time ago I promised Lucian that the next time I went on a journey I'd take him along. I wonder if you would object to his going with us up into Phoenicia?"

"Of course not. Why don't you take him?"

"Then I shall. We'll get an early start in the morning. We ought to be ready to begin the journey when the detachment arrives from Tiberias."

But the next morning Lucian was ill. Perhaps, Cornelius thought, it came from the great excitement of the anticipated journey. With his palm the centurion felt the boy's forehead, cheeks, under his chin. They were feverish.

PHOENICIA



143

25

The old man, smoke-blackened and naked except for a frayed and soiled loincloth, tottered forward and collapsed at their feet.

"He almost fell into the fire chamber," explained one of the two young slaves who had dragged him from the furnace shed.

A beetle-browed, scowling overseer with a long leather whip came running from an adjacent section of the sheds. "Get back to your work!" he shouted, as he slashed viciously at the slaves. The two fled inside; the burly fellow strode across to the old man on the ground.

"Water! O Zeus, mercy. Water! Water!" the old slave gasped.

The overseer raised his whip. "Stand up, you, or by the gods, I'll cut you in strips!" he hissed. "Get back to the furnace!" He stood poised to strike the inert man.

"Hold!" Cornelius commanded. "Strike him once, and by the great Jove, you'll have me to deal with!" Suddenly

furious, his eyes blazing, the centurion stepped forward to confront the overseer.

"Who, by the gods, are you?" the fellow demanded insolently. "By whose authority do you interfere with the operation of this plant?"

"By the great gods, my own, if the centurion"—he glanced coldly toward Longinus—"is little enough interested to stop you."

"Don't touch him!" Longinus pointed. "And get back to your duties."

"And who"—the fellow was glowering, his heavy jaw thrust out—"are you, by the gods, to be giving me orders?"

Aroused by the angry words outside the fire chamber, a man rushed from the near-by furnace-shed office. "Porcius, you insolent, blundering fool, put down that whip!" he bellowed. "Don't you know the centurion"—he gestured toward Longinus—"is the son of Senator Piso, who owns this plant? And the other one is his friend. Now you get back to your work!" 144

"But first let him get this poor old slave some water."

"Yes, Centurion." He turned fiercely to the overseer. "You heard the centurion. Go! And bring a cloth, too, to bathe his face."

"O Zeus, mercy. Water." The old man's plea was hardly a whisper. "Mercy, O...."

Longinus pointed. "Water will do him no good now, Cornelius."

The wizened, gaunt slave's eyes, wide-open, were setting in an agonized, frightened stare; his head was stretched back, and Cornelius, looking into his blackened and bony face, saw that it was pitted and scarred from innumerable small burns; the eyebrows and eyelashes were completely gone, singed away in the intolerable heat of the glass furnaces.

The overseer returned with the water and a smudged cloth.

"No need now," the plant superintendent said. "He's dead."

The overseer nodded. "Shall we....?" He paused. "The usual way?"

"Not for the moment. Put him over there under the shed. Later, when...."

"When we have left, eh?" Cornelius was pointedly sarcastic. "What is the usual way?"

The superintendent hesitated.

"I'll tell him, Lucius," Longinus spoke out unconcernedly. "Usually, Cornelius, they are thrown into the furnaces they have been tending, provided, of course, that the heat is so intense that such disposition of the cadaver will not endanger the mixture in the glassmaking. Oftentimes they end up over there, in the deserted area behind that sand dune, with the vultures picking their ill-padded bones. But every now and then, when they do drag one over there, particularly if the breeze is from the land, they shovel a bit of sand over him." He shrugged and thrust out his hands solemnly. "Of course, doing it that way provides a more pleasant atmosphere for working."

Cornelius appeared not to have heard his friend's poor attempt at humor. He stared at the dead slave on the ground and slowly shook his head. "He was calling upon Zeus, a Greek. He might have been another Pheidias." He shook his head ruefully. "Slaves both, but what a difference in their lots." 145

"And what is the difference?" Longinus demanded. "They're both dead. Your old tutor was put away honorably in a tomb, no doubt. But when this fellow's carcass has become a handful of ashes or is completely dissolved into the sand and water and sea winds, won't they both be gone to nothingness, ended without a trace?"

"They're both dead, yes. But gone to nothingness, I can't say. It might be that their spirits, their souls...."

"Oh, come now, Cornelius." Longinus turned to the plant superintendent, "My friend has been too long in Palestine," he commented wryly. "He has come to believe what those Jews believe, that the death of a man is not his end. In other words"—he pointed to the stiffened slave now being borne to the shed—"that that fellow's soul, whatever a soul is—if there is such a thing, which I find it impossible to believe—is floating around somewhere in a world filled with other disembodied beings."

"If you will excuse me, sir," the manager said, evading comment, "I have some work...."

"Go ahead, Lucius. We will be leaving early tomorrow for Tyre. Everything, you say, is ready?"

"Everything, the reports, the revenue, everything, sir."

Earlier Longinus had shown Cornelius through the various departments of the glassmaking plant, and Cornelius had marveled at the skill of the glassblowers, slaves whose lot was incomparably more fortunate, he saw, than that of those who fired the roaring furnaces. When he had remarked about this to Longinus, his host had observed casually that the blowers were valuable property, while the laborers in the furnace chambers were easily replaced when after a few weeks or months they literally burned themselves out. The two had just completed their tour when the old Greek was dragged out to die before them.

From the plant they strolled toward the beach some two hundred paces below it. "I can't get that slave out of my mind," Cornelius said, as they sat in the bow of a small boat that had been pulled up on the sands. "By all the gods, I thought those on the docks of the Emporium were having a hard time, but these slaves that fire your glass furnaces"—he grimaced—"Jupiter pity them. Certainly nobody else does." 146

"But if we are to have beautiful glass in the mansions of Rome, or at the Tetrarch's Palace, or the Procurator's at Caesarea, or in countless other great places of the wealthy and the privileged, if revenue from the glass factories is to continue flowing into the coffers of the Empire and the Prefect, then, Cornelius, the furnaces must be stoked and the molten glass must be blown. So"—he shrugged—"slaves will die and be replaced. But remember, Cornelius, they are slaves, and slaves are easy to come by; fresh ones are always being sent out here by Sejanus. And we only put those of least value into the furnace chambers."

"So, Longinus, the value of a slave is to be measured in direct proportion to the value of the merchandise—in your case, glassware—he is able to produce? And when tomorrow you leave for Rome with the profits made from your glassware, you will be carrying the lives of many slaves in your package, won't you? And when at the markets of Rome and Antioch and Alexandria you sell those beautiful goblets with their slender, rose-tinted stems, you will know that you are selling glass colored with the lifeblood of men such as that old Greek, that slave who perhaps by now has been consumed in the very furnace that exacted his life? Isn't that true?"

"Cornelius, you're a good soldier, but you're in the wrong profession." Longinus leaned forward and cracked his bronzed knuckles. "You should be writing poetry or lecturing classes in philosophy, or even"—he paused, and a grin spread across his face—"be acting as a priest in the Temple at Jerusalem." Suddenly the smile was gone. "Of course a slave is valuable in proportion to what he can produce or the service he can provide. Aren't we all valuable in that same proportion? We live awhile, work, love, hate, die. What do we leave? Only what we have produced. Everything else is gone, including us. So, in the end, we and the dead slave are the same ... nothing. But you don't agree, do you?"

"I don't want to agree, Longinus. What you say makes sense. But something within me says just as emphatically that you are wrong. Yet I can't prove it." Cornelius dug his sandaled heels into the sand at the bottom of the long abandoned boat. "I keep thinking of the old Greek up there. I don't know what life gave him, of course, before some invading Roman soldiers destroyed his home—if he had a home—certainly his way of life, and dragged him to Rome, where he simply had the bad luck to fall into the hands of the Prefect. But there's no mystery about what life has offered him since his enslavement. And this man may have been another Pheidias, Centurion, a man more intelligent, more cultured, a better man, my friend, than nine out of ten of the equestrians in Rome. Obviously, then, life has been unfair to him. And you say he is finished, done for, nothing. You say there will never be any chance of his getting a better throw of the dice." 147

"Exactly. And throw of the dice is right, too. He shook them in the cup and rolled them, and they rolled wrong; we rolled ours, and they stopped with the right numbers up. That's all there is to it. Fate, chance, luck, call it what you will. It's a few years or many, a good life or one of pain ... and then nothing. Isn't it just that simple, Cornelius? How else could it possibly be? Isn't any other idea simply superstition?" Longinus leaned over and picked up a small shell. "Look at this," he said. "What happened to the mollusk who lived here? Did he live out his span of life happily, or was he eaten in his prime? And is his unshelled spirit now swimming about in some sea heaven?" He tossed the shell into the surf. "That old slave up there, I maintain, is just as dead and gone—or will be when his corpse is disposed of—as the mollusk who once inhabited that shell. And both of them are gone for good."

"Then you put men and mollusks in the same category?"

"Yes, as far as having immortal spirits is concerned. But you don't, Centurion; you hold with your Pharisee friends—it's the Pharisees who believe in immortality, isn't it—that man is a different sort of animal in that he survives in a spirit world...."

"I'd like to; I want to. It's a damnably unfair world if he doesn't."

"And it's just as unfair if he does. Look." Longinus leaned forward again. "You say that this all-powerful, all-wise, all-good god, this Yahweh, will see to it that in the next world, the spirit world, that old slave up there will get justice. But I insist that such a god does not exist; if he did, as I argued that day we were sailing down the Tiber, you remember, he wouldn't permit such unfairness and injustice in this present life. Isn't that a logical contention, Cornelius? How can a good god, I ask you again, decree, or permit, so much evil?" 148

"I don't know," Cornelius replied. "I'm no nearer an answer to your question now than I was that other day. But I am confident that if this god exists—and I believe he does, Longinus; in fact I'm even stronger now in that belief than I was then—he does not decree evil, he simply permits evil men sometimes to rule in the affairs of this earthly, physical life. It may be that he doesn't want to restrict man's freedom. Do you see? That wouldn't mean he approves of the evil acts of men."

Longinus slowly shook his head. "No, Cornelius, I don't see. Your argument seems completely fatuous to me. I cannot comprehend an all-powerful, good god who would permit men to do one another evil. I am convinced that the fact that the world is filled with men who are unjust and cruel and evil indisputably proves that no such god exists."

"And I would answer that it is strong evidence but not indisputable proof." For a long moment Cornelius stared out in the direction of a merchant ship sailing southward toward towering Mount Carmel. "You see, Longinus," he said, turning to face his companion, "we have so little information on which to base an opinion. If there is such a god—if there is, remember—how can we even comprehend his nature, what he is like, unless?... " He paused and

looked back to the sea.

“Unless?”

“Unless someone reveals him to us, interprets him to men, shows his works and thoughts....”

“The Jewish Messiah, eh? The carpenter who is about to overthrow Rome?”

“I don’t think he’s ever indicated that he was seeking to overthrow Rome. I think that idea has come down from the old Jewish prophets, who foresaw a great political and military savior of their land. Several times I’ve been in the crowds listening to him talking, and so far as I could tell, he was only trying to explain to the people the nature of this god whom he refers to as his father. He was attempting to interpret this Yahweh to them sometimes even to the extent of utilizing some of this father god’s power. That’s apparently what he did when he restored Chuza’s son.” 149

“You mean he was clever enough to figure out when nature would do the restoring. But we won’t go into that again.” Longinus twisted around in the boat and stood up. “No, my friend, I insist that your reasoning is not sound, that you have been overcome by this eastern mysticism which seems to fill the very air out here.” He clapped his hand on Cornelius’ shoulder; his friend had risen with him. “Centurion, come with me to Rome; I suspect that you need to be indoctrinated again in the ways of modern thought.”

“I wish I could go with you.” Cornelius stepped from the boat and kicked the sand from his sandals. “But sometimes I wonder just what sort of thinking could properly be termed modern.”

They walked back to the inn to await the loading of the ship on which Longinus would sail for the capital. No further mention was made of the Roman gods, the Greek gods, Yahweh, or the Galilean carpenter. And early in the forenoon the next day the vessel spread its sails for Rome. Two hours later Cornelius and his men started on their return to Tiberias.

150

26

One of the household servants was waiting for Cornelius when he returned to the garrison’s quarters at Tiberias.

“Centurion, Lucian is desperately ill,” he reported. “In the last few days he has developed a palsy. Your wife bade me tell you that she fears him near death. You must come back with me, sir; she’s greatly frightened and in much distress about the boy.”

“But the physicians? Haven’t they been able to help him?”

The man shook his head. “She has had them all with him, sir, all she could find in this region, and they have done what they could; but the paralysis has spread, and his fever does not abate. All their efforts have been useless. She prays that you hurry, sir.”

As fast as their horses could take them the two raced toward Capernaum. When Cornelius entered the house, his wife rushed to him and fell into his arms. “Oh, I thought you would never get here,” she cried. “Lucian is near death, I know; I don’t see how he can live much longer. And the physicians have despaired of saving him.”

“But there must be something we can do,” he said, as he turned toward the sick boy’s chamber. “Are there no other physicians we could call?”

“None,” she said. “And the paralysis seems to be growing worse. He is deathly ill, Cornelius. Oh, by all the gods, if there were something....”

“By all the gods.’ The carpenter! Didn’t he restore Chuza’s son? And though Lucian is a slave, isn’t he just as much a son to us? Wouldn’t the carpenter just as willingly restore a slave boy, even of a Roman soldier?” He had said the words aloud, but they had been addressed more to himself than to his wife.

He turned smiling, to face her. “Do you remember how that young carpenter of Nazareth healed the son of Herod’s chamberlain? Don’t you think...?” 151

“But he’s a Jew, Cornelius, and we are Romans.”

“No matter.” He turned to the servant who had gone to Tiberias in search of him. “Get me a fresh horse, and quickly!” he ordered. “I’m going out to find that carpenter!”

A few minutes later he stopped to inquire of a shopkeeper if the man had seen the young Nazarene rabbi. “Has he been around today?” Cornelius asked. “Can you tell me how to find him?”

“He passed here this morning,” the shopkeeper answered, “with Simon and the Zebedees and some of those others who are usually with him. They went out the gate in the western wall, and judging by the poor trade I’ve had all day, the whole city’s gone out after them. I hear the carpenter’s been speaking to them from the side of that little mountain over there.” With his head he motioned toward the west. “In all likelihood you’ll find him there, soldier.” Suddenly his face fell; his hands shook as he grasped his scraggly beard. “Now wait a minute,” he sputtered, “this fellow, this Nazarene, he hasn’t run afoul of you Romans, has he?”

"No. No, indeed. It's on a personal mission that I seek him." Cornelius smiled reassuringly. "I'm his friend."

The shopkeeper looked relieved. "Then if you station yourself at the western gate, you'll surely see him as he returns to the city. Or you might ride out toward the mountain, soldier."

Cornelius rode on through the gate. He was halfway to the little eminence in the plain west of the city when he began to meet the throng returning. Soon he spotted the rabbi walking in the company of the Capernaum fishermen. Boldly he rode up to them and dismounted.

The men with Jesus formed a circle about him.

"I am unarmed, and I intend no one harm," Cornelius said, holding out his hands. "I am seeking the rabbi of Nazareth."

Jesus stepped forward and held up his staff in salute. His brown eyes were warmly bright. Cornelius, closer to him than he had ever been before, saw sparkling in the beads of perspiration rolling down his bronzed smooth forehead the long rays of the setting sun. He saw them, too, in the beads clinging to the thick mat of reddish-brown hair on the carpenter's chest, for in the sultry stillness of the dying day, Jesus had thrown open his robe half way to his rope-belted waist. 152

"What would you have of me, my brother?" he asked the centurion.

"Sir, I pray you to restore my little servant boy whom I greatly love; I fear he is near death of a palsy. If, sir, you would but say the word...." He paused, suddenly hesitant.

The rabbi reached out and with strong brown fingers grasped the centurion's arm. "I will go with you and restore the boy," he said gently. "Show me to your house."

"But, sir, I am a Roman soldier"—a feeling of embarrassment, deep humility, strange to the centurion, possessed him as he looked into the face of the young rabbi—"and unworthy that you should enter my house. But if you would only command that my little servant boy be healed, while we stand here, sir, then I know that he would be restored to health." He smiled, weakly, he thought. "You see, sir, I understand authority, for I am a centurion and when I give a command, it is obeyed."

For an instant the rabbi said nothing, but his warm eyes lighted with a rapture plain to see. He turned to his friends. "Nowhere in Israel have I seen such faith. I tell you that many will come from the east and the west and with our fathers Abraham and Isaac and Jacob sit down in the Kingdom of Heaven. But many of the chosen likewise will be cast out, and there will be great wailing and mourning, for their faith shall not be as the faith of this Roman."

Then he turned again to confront the centurion, and Cornelius saw that his face was radiant. "You may go on your way, my brother," he said. "As you have believed that it might be done, so has it been accomplished. Return in peace to the little boy."

"Oh, sir...." But the centurion's eyes were blinded with tears, and he bowed his head, and no words would come. Then he felt a warm hand on his shoulder and strong fingers once more gently squeezing his arm, then the fingers released it. When after a moment he looked up, Cornelius saw that the Nazarene and his friends had resumed walking toward the city gate. In that same instant Jesus turned and looked over his shoulder, his face still alight with a glowing happiness, and raised his hand high in a parting salute. Then he quickly turned eastward again, and the little group disappeared around the bend. 153

Cornelius stood unmoving, his left hand still clutching the bridle rein, and then he mounted and rode toward the western gate. A few paces ahead he went around the bend and shortly passed the rabbi and his friends, who had overtaken several men who evidently had been out with them at the mountainside; Jesus smiled and once more lifted his hand in friendly greeting.

The centurion, reaching the gate, rode through it and toward the center of the city, where he turned left and followed a cavernous road to the gate in the southern wall. He was in no hurry as his horse picked its way along the cobblestones and out upon the coast road southward. His fright, his sudden hysteria had gone; it had vanished completely as he had looked into the eyes of the young rabbi. Cornelius knew that Lucian would be well; not the shadow of a doubt darkened his thoughts.

When he reached home and turned into his courtyard, a servant came running to take his horse. "Lucian, sir, is well again!" the man declared, almost breathless with the excitement of being the first to give his master the thrilling news.

"Yes, I know it." Cornelius smiled.

"But, sir, it was only an hour ago that...."

"A man over at Capernaum told me then," he said and strode toward the house as the servant, mouth open, stared after him.

As he stepped inside from the courtyard, his wife, who had heard him ride in from the roadway, rushed to him and flung her arms about his waist. "Oh, Cornelius, Lucian has been restored! Not only has his fever gone, but so has the paralysis. He can use his arms and hands, and he can walk as though nothing had ever been wrong with his legs!"

She stood back from him, her eyes wet with the sudden surging of her emotion. "Isn't it wonderful, Cornelius! And it happened so quickly, too; he was low, Cornelius, desperately sick, much sicker than when you left, I'm sure, and the fever was consuming him. I had turned aside from his bed a moment to wet a cloth to spread on his forehead; then, as I wrung it out and turned back to him, suddenly he sat up. I caught him under his arms and discovered that he was no longer feverish; in a moment he was talking and using his hands, and then quickly he stood up and walked toward the table where I had set the pitcher of cool water. 'I'm so thirsty,' he said, grinning at me, 'and hungry, too.'" 154

"Yes, I knew about it. It happened about an hour ago. Where is Lucian now?"

"He went out to the stables. He wanted to see his horse; he hadn't...." Abruptly she broke off and stared at her husband, incredulous. "Cornelius, how did you know when it happened? Did one of the servants tell...?"

"Yes, when I rode in a moment ago. But I knew when it happened."

"But how, Cornelius?" Her amazement was evident.

"Have you forgotten that I went in search of the carpenter of Nazareth? Well, an hour ago I came upon him beyond the western gate of Capernaum. I implored him to heal Lucian, and he did. He told me so. And I knew he had; I had not the slightest doubt. Nor am I in the least surprised to find him well." His serious expression relaxed into a warm smile. "Did you feed the young imp?"

"Yes. And he was famished. Literally, Cornelius, the boy ate like a horse."

"Well, he hadn't had anything in days; he was bound to be empty."

"But, Cornelius, this carpenter from Nazareth...." She paused, her forehead furrowed in perplexity.

"Yes," he said, not waiting for her to finish her question, "and, by all the gods, I'd like to see Longinus try to explain this one away!"

ROME



27

157

When the vessel eased in to dock just below the Sublucian Bridge, almost at the spot from which the "Palmyra" had started its voyage, Longinus went ashore. Quickly he engaged a loitering freed slave to help with his luggage. He had brought little from Phoenicia, only his clothing and a few small presents for his mother, principally some choice pieces of glass, and the package he was delivering to Sejanus.

"I'll carry this," he said to the fellow; "it's glass and fragile." He picked up the bundle, heavily wrapped. "And I'll take this spare toga, too. You can carry the remainder. I don't want any sedan chair; I'd rather walk. I want to get my land legs back."

The toga had been wrapped about the money packet, which Longinus had kept securely under his arm as he descended from the ship. But it was an innocent looking bundle and only its weight would have excited a bearer's suspicion. Longinus had determined not to let it get out of his possession until he had locked it in his father's safe to await its delivery to the Prefect.

They walked from the pier along the way that went eastward from the bridge into the dense, traffic-jammed heart of the city. At the foot of Palatine Hill they turned left and walked northward past the western front of the Imperial Palace. Glancing over his shoulder as they reached the northwest corner of the sprawling great structure, Longinus had a glimpse of the wing that had been Claudia's apartment; once again he picked out the bedroom window through which that morning he had heard the rising bugle at Castra Praetoria.

"I wonder...."

"Sir, did you say something?" His helper, trudging behind, paused.

"No." Longinus turned to face him. "I was just thinking, talking to myself."

158

All the way from the dock area Longinus had been retracing the route he had come with his century from Castra Praetoria the day they sailed for Palestine. But a hundred paces farther on, instead of continuing past the Forum of Augustus on their left, he turned abruptly westward. "I want to walk through the Forum Romanum," he

explained. "It's been a long time since I've been there. I've lost touch with Rome. What's been happening lately?"

"Very little, sir, as far as I've seen." The fellow shook his head resignedly. "No triumphs, as I recall, no big ones anyway, and precious few games."

"Why haven't there been more?"

"Oh, I don't know, sir. They say the Emperor gets no enjoyment out of such things, and he's not here in Rome most of the time anyway, and I hear it told that the Prefect doesn't want to spend the money...."

"They do say that?"

"Now, sir, I have heard such talk. Understand, I don't know anything about it; I don't know anything about them, the Emperor and the Prefect. Not a thing. I don't even know whether I'd recognize either one of them if he came right up to us now." The fellow's fear that he had spoken too boldly was obvious. "All I ever get done, sir, is work; I have to struggle hard to make a living. Seems that it's just like it's always been in Rome, the way I see it, which is that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." He grinned good-naturedly. "I'm meaning no offense to you, Centurion; likely you're one of the rich ones."

"I understand, and I suspect it's a sound observation, that the rich do get richer and the poor get poorer, I mean. But it's not true of Rome alone; it's that way everywhere, isn't it, throughout the world?"

"I couldn't say as to that, sir. Rome's pretty much my world."

Rome was his world, too, Longinus told himself a moment later as the two were propelled suddenly from the shaded cavern of the cobblestoned narrow street into the widened stir and commotion of a veritable forest of marbled columns and statuary.

The centurion's heart lifted as he strode once more into the Forum Romanum, that busy, marble-crowded flat between the Tiber's westward bend and the mansion-crowned hills. He took a deep breath, and his chest swelled. 159

... This is the veritable beating, pulsing heart of Rome, and Rome is the world. Here is reality. Here are solidity, strength, planning made real, dreams hewn in enduring stone. Here are wealth, accomplishment, power, might. Not twenty paces across there is the Millenarium Aureum, the resplendent bronze column set up to mark the center of the Roman world, the point from which miles are counted along the highways and their joining sea lanes stretching to the ends of the known earth to bind Rome into one colossal, unconquerable, enduring Empire!...

They paused to catch their breath. Longinus set down the glass, but he continued to clutch the toga-wrapped packet under his arm. In another moment they would push once more into the jostling, shoving multitude milling through the Forum's crossways. Suddenly the centurion remembered Cornelius and their discussion that afternoon as the two men had sat in the wrecked rowboat near the glassworks. He smiled grimly.

... But this is Rome. This is reality. This is accomplishment, creation. I can reach out and run my hand over the stone and feel these marbled creations of men; a thousand years from now, were I to live so long, I could rub my hands across their imperishable cold faces. These are tangible things, and Rome is tangible, her power, her strength, her wealth, her dominance over the world. Cornelius may prate of his old tutor's preachments about the imperishability of the intangibles and the reality of things unseen. But these statues, these temples, this Millenarium Aureum, are tangible. Rome is carved statuary and fluted marble magnificence; Rome is spacious mansions and marching great armies flaunting their ensigns. Rome is poverty, too, and injustice and ugliness at times and in places, but Rome is no pale intangibles, no vaporous conjurations of an eastern philosopher. Rome is not even her gods. This is Rome, this marbled splendor of the Forum; Rome is here and now and touchable and real, and Rome, by all the gods or no gods, will endure.

... Rome is something else. Rome is strength and power and substance, but Rome is also grace and beauty. Examine these graceful columns, these elegant pediments. Rome is feminine, a beautiful woman. Rome, by the great Jove, is Claudia. Indeed! What is more Rome than Claudia; what is more Claudia than Rome? Rome is beauty and pleasure, tangible, real, to be experienced, enjoyed. 160

... And Rome will endure. That carpenter of Galilee, wandering up and down the seacoast with his little band of poor working people, talking of intangibles to illiterate fisherfolk and the dwellers in Jerusalem's festering Ophel, that fellow to overcome Rome! Even under the silvery softness of a full moon beside the sea in Galilee, it was a preposterous notion. But here in the middle of the Forum, with confirmation of Rome's might everywhere around....

"By all the gods, Cornelius. Can't you see?"

The man carrying Longinus' belongings whirled suddenly around. "I beg your pardon, sir," he asked, "did you command anything of me?"

Longinus laughed. "No," he answered. "I was just thinking aloud again. I must be growing old." He reached down and picked up the glassware package. "But let's be moving on. I'm anxious to get to my father's house." He pointed the directions. "Out that way and on through the Forum of Augustus to Via Longa. The house is on Quirinal Hill."

Longinus placed the package on the desk in front of the Prefect. "Sir, I'm delivering this to you just as I received it at the glassworks," he said. "I have not seen the contents; I don't know what's inside. The package when it was handed to me was sealed as you see it now; the seals have not been broken."

"Thank you, Centurion, for bringing it; it has been quite a responsibility, I know." The Prefect's darting eyes, Longinus saw, had examined the package already. The centurion, appraising Sejanus in the short moment he had been in the ornate chamber, had observed no change in the Prefect's appearance. Judging by the man's looks and demeanor, it might well have been only yesterday that they had last met. The small, cold eyes were just as carefully calculating as they had been the day the Prefect had given Longinus his orders and sent him and Cornelius eastward aboard the "Palmyra." Now the eyes were disarmingly friendly. "My purpose in having it so well sealed was not because I didn't trust you, Longinus, but because I wished the manager at the glassworks to know that no one but himself could be blamed in the event that the contents were subsequently found short. I knew that he would therefore make sure that the packet left Phoenicia intact." The blinking, small eyes narrowed. "So actually, you see, it was a protection for you." With a flourish of the hand he motioned to the chair in front of the massive desk. "Sit down, Centurion."

161

"Thank you, sir." Longinus took the seat and faced the Prefect.

Sejanus leaned forward and crossed his hands on the desk. "In all likelihood, Centurion, you've been wondering why I summoned you to Rome."

"I have wondered, sir."

"Yes, I'm sure you have. And I'm sure you've also guessed that I dispatched my message to you before receiving your report."

"I had presumed so, sir."

"And right you were. Had I received the report but a few days earlier I would not have summoned you here. But once I'd received your communication, I had no way of countermanding my order to you so that you would get it before sailing for Rome." He sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest; his entire attitude radiated good humor. "But I'm glad it happened as it did, Longinus. I'd rather like to hear in person from you concerning the situation in Palestine. It was a good report, Centurion, and comprehensive, so far as such written reports go. But I had the feeling in reading it that you might have had further information to give had you been able to talk with me directly. Perhaps discretion had cramped your writing hand." Now his smile was disarming. "But here, with no ears to hear us but our own, we can talk with complete freedom. I, too, can say things that I would not dare write."

162

The Prefect unfolded his arms and, leaning forward, drummed his fingers on the desk. He studied the centurion briefly through narrowed eyes, then sat back again.

"How did you leave the Procurator, Longinus?"

"He was quite well, sir, when I left him at Caesarea. But your message overtook me at Tiberias, and I had then been away from Caesarea for some time. I went on to the glassworks and sailed from Tyre, as you suggested."

"Then you have seen Herod Antipas quite recently?"

"Yes, sir. I saw the Tetrarch and Herodias and told them good-by just before leaving Tiberias. I had escorted them to Galilee from their landing at Caesarea."

"And how did the daughter of King Aretas accept Herod's new wife?"

"She didn't, sir. She has left him and returned to her father. She..."

"By winged Mercury!" Sejanus lunged forward and slammed his fist against the desk. "Gone, you say? Fled to Aretas? By great Jupiter! But this you did not report, Longinus!"

"Sir, Herod didn't know she was gone until we arrived at his capital. I was preparing to dispatch a report to you when I received your summons, and then I decided I would bring the report in person, instead." He ventured a wan smile, and the Prefect himself relaxed.

"I understand; you did right, Centurion." Then his countenance darkened, and his narrow forehead wrinkled. "This is a matter of considerable moment; I shall come back to it presently." He shook his head. "Yes, it could have dire repercussions. But for the moment, let us speak of more pleasant things." His small weasel-like face lighted with a thin but suggestive smile. "Longinus, when did you last see Claudia? How is the Procurator's wife?"

"I saw her in Tiberias the day before I left there for Phoenicia, sir. Herodias and Herod Antipas had invited her to accompany them to Tiberias for a visit."

163

"And Pilate didn't object to her going up into Galilee with them ... and you?" He licked his lips and drew them in thin lines across his teeth.

"If he did, sir, he did not indicate anything of the sort to me."

"I'm sure the Procurator would do nothing that he thought might displease the Emperor's stepdaughter. But what he thinks, however, is a different matter, isn't it?"

"I'm sure it is, sir." Longinus expected momentarily that the Prefect would begin plying him with intimately personal questions concerning his relations with the Procurator's wife, and he wondered desperately how he should answer. But, happily, Sejanus turned away from the Procurator's affairs to return to a discussion of the Tetrarch's.

"You were saying a moment ago, Longinus"—the familiar scowl had returned to the Prefect's face—"that Herod's wife has gone back to old Aretas. Have you had any reports concerning his feelings toward Herod for the way his daughter has been treated?"

"He was greatly angered, according to reports coming back to Galilee, sir."

Sejanus shook his head slowly. "No doubt." He reflected a moment. "Has there been any talk of possible reprisal?"

"There has been some talk that Aretas might attempt to punish Herod. But that would mean war, sir, and war with us Romans. So I feel that Aretas would hardly be so foolhardy as to attempt to send an army against Herod."

"I hardly think so, either, Centurion. But a father will sometimes do foolish things when his daughter's honor is at stake. If Aretas should challenge Herod, that will mean war, and war is expensive, Longinus. The cost in terms of both men and money is exorbitant ... and useless. War would also mean loss of work and production and loss of revenue in addition to the expenditure of revenue already collected." His frown deepened. "By the great gods, I should never have permitted Herod to have Herodias. He has not only offended his own people; he has now set King Aretas against him ... and us!"

Angrily the Prefect drummed his fingers on the desk again. Then quickly his anger seemed to disappear. He arose, and the centurion stood with him. "But we need not anticipate events," Sejanus said. "When you go back to Palestine, however, I want you to make a careful investigation of the situation. It might be well for you to contrive some reason for visiting our fortress at Machaerus; it's over beyond the Dead Sea on the borders of Arabia; perhaps by going there you may learn whether Aretas is actually planning to attack Herod." 164

"I'm familiar with the place, sir. I was there several years ago."

"Yes. By the way, in your report of Herod's arrest of that desert preacher, you indicated that he may have displeased a large number of the Jews."

"I'm confident he did, sir. Many of them hold that John in the highest regard. I think Herod made a mistake, sir, and I felt it my duty to inform you so."

"But wasn't Herod justified in believing him to be an insurrectionist?"

"At first, sir, I confess I thought so. But Cornelius, who understands the Jews, insisted that he was just a harmless religious fanatic, and nothing more. Frankly I soon came to the same conclusion. The fellow is deluded, of course, but so are most of the Jews in respect to their foolish one-god religion; other than that, I'm convinced that he's entirely harmless. And he has many followers who were deeply offended when Herod, at the insistence of Herodias, had him arrested."

"By the gods, that headstrong woman! She will be Herod's ruination!" He was thoughtfully silent. "Perhaps, Centurion, Rome might profit if I had the man liberated. At any rate, look into the matter, and let me hear as quickly as you can"—his scowl deepened—"if it will wait that long ... and if Aretas isn't precipitate in sending an army against Herod."

"But, sir..."

"I haven't told you, Longinus," the Prefect interrupted. "You aren't returning at once to Palestine. Now that you're here, I have another mission, quite urgent, that I'm sending you on into Gaul. When you have accomplished this—and it should require only a few months—you will go out to the east again." 165

Sejanus pushed out his lips into a round pucker, and once more his eyes began to catch fire and his narrow face lighted sensually. Then he twisted his lips again into the thin semblance of a smile. "I hope, Centurion, that you can wait that long ... before getting back to Claudia!" Then quickly the smile was gone. "Remember, Longinus, she must be kept away from Rome, and it will continue to be your task to keep her happily occupied." The lips twisted again. "That task, I should think, will not be an unpleasant one."

MACHAERUS



29

Someone knocked on the door to Claudia's apartment, and Tullia was sent to answer it. She ran quickly back into the tepidarium.

"Tertius says there's a soldier to see you, Mistress, a centurion. He's waiting in the atrium."

"Longinus! Oh, by the Bountiful Mother!" But quickly Claudia's elation subsided. "He must still be in Gaul, though, according to the information Sergius Paulus had from Rome. Still"—her face lighted—"he might have returned early, perhaps, and caught a fast vessel to Caesarea. Bona Dea, Tullia, help me finish dressing! The perfume, that vial"—she pointed—"the Tyrian. And do hurry, Tullia!"

A few minutes later she scurried breathlessly into the atrium. But the soldier was not Longinus. The Centurion Cornelius arose and advanced to meet her. He saw her disappointment and smiled understanding. "I'm sorry, Claudia, but Longinus hasn't returned to Palestine, nor have we heard at Tiberias when he expects to arrive. I've come to bring you a message from the Tetrarch Herod Antipas and the Tetrarchess."

"I'll confess I was hoping Longinus had surprised me, Cornelius," she said, "although I'd heard that he was still in Gaul. Did you know about his assignment out there?"

Cornelius nodded. "Yes. But we understood it was not to be a lengthy mission."

Claudia motioned to a seat; she sat down and Cornelius sat facing her. She summoned Tertius to bring wine and wafers. "And now, Centurion," she said, "what is the message you fetch me from Tiberias?"

"They are inviting you and the Procurator to go with them down to Machaerus to spend a holiday season there. And if the Procurator's duties will not permit his leaving his post, the Tetrarchess hopes that you will join them anyway, together with your servants and any guests you may wish to bring." 170

"To Machaerus? That's the fortress castle on the other side of the Dead Sea, isn't it, on the southern border of Peraea?"

"Yes, it's on a high plateau overlooking the Dead Sea, some way south of Mount Nebo."

"A wild and desolate country, isn't it? I've never been there."

"I understand so; I've never been there myself. A good place, they say in Tiberias, for the sort of holiday the Tetrarch particularly enjoys ... wild, uninhibited, like himself."

Claudia laughed appreciatively. "It promises to be interesting at any rate. But"—her face clouded perceptibly—"I know that Pilate won't go. In the first place, he loathes Antipas—and I do, too, as a matter of fact—and in the second place, he wouldn't venture that far from provincial headquarters. But he might let me go. And it would be a change from this dreary existence." She brightened. "When are they planning to make this holiday excursion?"

"As a matter of fact, they've probably already started. They sent me on ahead in the hope that you might agree to join them; if you should, I'm to escort you and your party to the Jordan, where they plan to meet us. They were to start this morning from Tiberias. If we could leave by tomorrow morning, we would be able to reach the Jordan at about the same time they do. From there we would continue down the Jordan Valley to the Dead Sea and around its eastern shore at the foot of Mount Nebo to Machaerus."

"How long do they plan to be there?"

"A week or longer, probably longer"—Cornelius smiled glumly—"if the Tetrarch has to recover from one of his usual drunken orgies. But if you should wish to leave earlier, I'd be glad to escort you back to Caesarea. And we'll see that you don't run afoul of Bar Abbas or any of those other zealot cutthroats."

"I really would like to go, and I see no reason why I shouldn't, even if Pilate won't. If I only knew that Longinus would be there." ... She broke off, laughing. "Cornelius, why do you suppose old Sejanus recalled him to Rome? Do you think it was because of"—she shrugged—"well, us? And do you suppose he'll continue to provide assignments that will keep him away from Palestine?" 171

Cornelius shook his head. "I hardly think so, Claudia. The Prefect, in my opinion, summoned him to Rome to inquire about the situation out here. I think he wanted to learn about the temper of the people, how the Jews were taking to Antipas and his new wife, and to the new Procurator; that was one reason, I'm sure. But he was mainly interested in learning whether the revenue was flowing into his treasury without being diverted in part into the coffers of...." He paused.

"Pilate and Antipas?"

"That's my opinion, Claudia. I don't believe the Prefect is really concerned with anything beyond keeping the province peacefully paying its taxes. So I'm confident Longinus will be sent back to Palestine, he's the man Sejanus needs for the job he gave him ... and still needs; he'll be back, though I'd hesitate to predict when." He shrugged his shoulders. "For a soldier, I've been speaking very freely, and to the wife of the Procurator, at that."

"And for the wife of the Procurator, so have I. But I'm not naïve enough to think, Cornelius, that you don't know

just how little I am Pilate's wife. You must feel free to talk with me in complete frankness, just as I feel free to talk that way with you. And tomorrow, by the gods, Pilate willing or Pilate grumbling—and he won't grumble at me, by the Great Mother—I'll start with you for Machaerus."

30

The two sat in a protected spot of warming sunshine on the terrace at Machaerus. A week ago as the caravan bringing the Tetrarch's party had moved down the low trough of the Jordan, the faintly greening willows and oleanders bordering the twisting stream had hinted of spring. But here on this desolate, upflung headland, 172 barren and granite-capped, the March winds were crisply chill.

"Are you cold?" Herodias asked. "Would you like to go inside?"

"No, it's wonderful out here, as long as we're sheltered from the wind. It's so bracing, so invigorating after all our dissipating...."

"But, my dear, I haven't been aware of your dissipating at Machaerus. With Longinus not here...."

"Pluto roast old Sejanus! But too much wine, nevertheless, and entirely too much rich food." Claudia looked out from beneath long eyelashes. "After all, isn't more indulging done in banquet halls than in bedrooms?"

"As far as I'm concerned, yes, certainly."

"But the Tetrarch is here with you, Herodias, and he appears to be in a gay holiday mood."

"Here with me? Hah!" She tossed her head disdainfully. "With his women, you mean, those dark, fat, greasy, perfume-reeking Arabian women old Aretas gave him. And his little girls."

"Little girls?"

"Yes. Hadn't you noticed? They seem at the moment to be an important part of the Machaerus staff. As Antipas gets more senile—and I'm sure he's getting that way—he tries more and more to ape the Emperor. At least, that's what I believe he thinks he's doing. It's disgusting, of course, but I welcome being relieved of his crude attentions."

"But in Rome, Herodias, weren't you eager to marry Antipas?"

"Yes, but you know why. I wanted to marry the Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea so that I could make him a king and myself a queen. I sought the office, my dear, not the man." She pulled her lips into a determined grim line. "And I still expect to see him on a king's throne, with me seated beside him. But as a man Antipas has as much attraction for me as ... as I suppose Pilate has for you."

Claudia laughed understanding, but made no observation. Instead, she pointed westward. "Look how high we are here. The Dead Sea seems almost below us, and it must be several miles away."

"The surface of the Dead Sea is a quarter of a mile below the surface of the Great Sea. And we're a half 173 mile above the Great Sea; that would make us, where we sit now, about four thousand feet above the Dead Sea, wouldn't it? Jerusalem, of course, is almost this high." Herodias twisted around slightly to point northwestward. "See, across there, almost straight west of the top of the Dead Sea, that's Jerusalem. It's too far away, of course, for us to distinguish any of the buildings, but the city's on that rise, just there. Sometimes of a late afternoon, when the angle is just right, they say, one can see the sunlight flashing from the golden roof of the Temple."

Claudia looked off to her left and settled back in her chair. "Herodias, why did they ever build this palace in such a desolate, rockbound region so far from everything?"

"I asked Antipas the same question. He said it was built more as a fort than a palace. This is near the southern boundary of the tetrarchy. Down there"—she pointed southward above a narrow valley fast greening with luxuriant vegetation—"beyond that stream with its banks lined with willows is the kingdom of Aretas. The Herods originally came from that region at the southern end of the Dead Sea, which was called Idumaea. So this fortress up here was built as a defense post."

"Then Aretas isn't far away, is he? By the way, what became of his daughter, the woman you displaced?"

"I don't know, and what's more, I don't care!" She realized that she had spoken petulantly. "I didn't mean to be short, Claudia. I have no reason to hate her, after all. And I have no idea that she or her father will attempt reprisal against Antipas. Any attack upon him would be an attack upon Rome, and surely they wouldn't risk that."

"I think you need have no apprehensions. But, of course, I know absolutely nothing about this King Aretas or his daughter. Generally, though, I understand, these eastern peoples are impulsive and vindictive."

"But they're also known to be very shrewd. Surely he would know he couldn't defeat Rome."

"If he calmly considered the situation, yes." She shrugged. "I hope so. If Rome should be involved in war 174

with the Arabian king, Sejanus and the Emperor would both be infuriated, and Sejanus, I'm sure, would place the blame for it upon Antipas ... and you." She had been looking downward beyond the descending outcroppings of granite and limestone and sand to the great sluggish salt sea far below them. But now she confronted Herodias, her countenance plainly concerned. "Herodias, if Aretas should seek vengeance against the Tetrarch and you, what would the Israelites do? Would they fight him? Have they become reconciled to your being Tetrarchess? Do many of them still hold with that wild fellow we encountered that day on the river bank?" She paused, and suddenly her eyes were roundly questioning. "Wasn't it to Machaerus that Antipas sent him? By the gods, is he here now?"

"Yes, and still a troublemaker. They say his followers have been coming here all the time since he's been imprisoned. Haven't you noticed all the Jews coming and going while we've been here? Look." She indicated a point far down the slope where the trail to Machaerus led from the road paralleling the lakeside. "That group down there, I'd wager they're coming here to listen to the fellow's haranguing. And they'll try to see Antipas and petition him to free the madman." For a moment she watched the men coming slowly up the slope. "If Antipas had done as I said and had the man beheaded, he could have prevented all this; while that fellow's alive there'll be more and more agitation against us." She hunched up a shoulder. "But what can one do with a person," she said indifferently, "who is not only fearful and woefully superstitious but is horribly obstinate as well?" She stood up. "Excuse me, Claudia; you stay out here and sun yourself as long as you like. But I have some things to do before we sit down to Antipas' birthday banquet, one of which, no doubt"—her brittle laugh echoed across the terrace—"will be to get him sobered sufficiently to attend it himself."

175

31

The Tetrarch, mouth open, his thick lips grease-smearred and wine-purpled, snored sonorously; his round, closely cropped head, cradled in his hand, swayed in precarious balance on the column of his forearm which was pressed into the heavy cushion.

Herodias, reclining at his left, had changed position to rest her head on her right arm and thereby avoid somewhat breathing the heavily alcoholic exhalations of her spouse; she lay facing her daughter.

Claudia, Herod's guest of honor, was at his right, and next to her, as the ranking Roman soldier at Machaerus, Herod had placed the Centurion Cornelius. Other guests, in various stages of intoxication, sat or reclined on their elbows or had fallen inert on their couches to the right and left of the Tetrarch.

The banquet had begun in the daylight of late afternoon, and by the time the sun had dropped behind the western headlands the Tetrarch and his guests had begun to be surfeited with the richly tempting food, the wine, and the wildly sensual dancing of Herod's darkly handsome Arabian women, who, nude but for gossamer thin, gaily colored loincloths, writhed and twisted in the open square before the tables to the oriental, whining insistence of the strings and the maddeningly rhythmical beat of the drums.

But now the dancers, their copper-hued perspiring bodies shining as though they had been rubbed with olive oil, had retired to a chamber adjoining the banquet room. From there they could come prancing out barefoot, with lewd twistings and contortings, at the first summons of the musicians. Until Antipas should arouse from his stupor, though, and call for them, they would be free to relax.

Cornelius, who had been eying the Tetrarch, nodded in his direction. "If we could get his head down flat," he said to Claudia, "he'd be asleep until morning, and we could leave. Wouldn't you like to get away?"

176

"Yes. I'm gorged. And I'd like to have a breath of fresh air on the terrace. Perhaps Herodias would excuse us. I had no idea that Antipas...."

But at that instant the Tetrarch's head slipped from its cradling hand, and he fell face downward upon the cushion. The sudden drop awakened him, and he twisted his legs around heavily and sat up. The leader of the musicians, seeing him, signaled his men to begin playing and motioned to the dancers to return.

"No! No!" shouted the Tetrarch. "We have had enough of their dancing! But now, my friends"—Antipas faced right and left to look along the couches, as his guests began to sit up—"I shall provide you with more novel entertainment." He paused and reached for his wine goblet. "I ask your pardon for having gone to sleep, although I'm sure a number of you did likewise. During our stay at Machaerus I have been overindulging in food and wine and, for a man of my age, certainly, other more strenuous pleasures." He ran his thick tongue over his greasy lips and smiled lewdly. "But now"—he signaled two of the guards standing at the doorway opening upon the terrace—"go into the dungeon and fetch to our birthday feast the Wilderness prophet."

Herodias whirled about to confront him, her countenance betraying both anger and amazement. "Why should the Tetrarch bring that depraved madman here to insult his guests, his wife, and himself? Has the Tetrarch permitted too much wine and too many women...?"

"Patience, my dear! And be calm. I am not having him brought before us to insult us. On the contrary, he will ask our pardon for his intemperate words, and we shall release him."

"Release him! By all the gods, can the Tetrarch be speaking seriously? Does he for one moment contemplate giving this notorious insurrectionist his freedom to resume his agitating against us, against Rome...?"

"But, my dear Tetrarchess, Rome, as represented by the Centurion Cornelius," he interrupted, as he glanced toward the centurion and then turned his head the other way to address his wife, "thinks that releasing this man will be not only an evidence of the Tetrarch's magnanimity but also a politic act greatly pleasing to a countless number of our Jewish brothers. It was he who suggested...." 177

"But are not you Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea? Was it not your wife and you, not the centurion, whom this revolutionary castigated so bitterly? And has he not sought to inflame the people even against Rome?"

Claudia had turned to confront Cornelius; she said nothing, but her eyes were sharply questioning. He bent forward and spoke quietly, so that none of the others would hear.

"I did suggest that it would be a good idea—especially in so far as Sejanus is concerned—for him to free the man, since it would please the Jews and the man is plainly no insurrectionist against Rome. But I didn't know he meant to have the fellow brought before us. The man should have been freed quietly, with no fanfare."

"Frankly, I think he would have done better," Claudia whispered to Cornelius, "to have had the fellow beheaded, but quietly." She leaned nearer the centurion. "Antipas craves attention; he tries to be dramatic. He's always...."

But suddenly she stopped, for the guards, flanking the manacled prisoner, were entering the great hall. They escorted John into the open square before the Tetrarch's table.

"Unbind him," the Tetrarch commanded, "and step back from him."

In an instant the guards had removed the shackles about the prophet's wrists and retreated to their former places at the doorway.

Though not all the Tetrarch's guests had completely sobered, every eye was on the Wilderness preacher. In the months he had been imprisoned in the Machaerus dungeon, John had lost the leathery deep burn of the desert, but otherwise he was little changed. He was tall and erect and perhaps even more gaunt than he had appeared to be the day Antipas had ordered his arrest; his coarse brown robe, belted with a woven rope at the waist, hung loosely about him. But his eyes still blazed with the zealot's fire as, relaxed and silent, he stood calmly facing the Tetrarch. 178

"You are the Prophet John of the Wilderness and the Jordan Valley?" Antipas asked, his tone and manner almost friendly.

"Have I been so long in your dungeon, O Tetrarch, that you can't be sure you know me?"

The question and the tone in which it was framed were sarcastic, even patronizing, but the Tetrarch appeared to take no offense.

"It was an idle query, and you have been a long time in prison. Perhaps your intemperate words to the Tetrarch and the Tetrarchess have been sufficiently punished." Antipas smiled blandly and rubbed his fat hands together. "Our banqueting this day is an occasion of joy and merriment; it is our birthday and to mark it further the Tetrarch is happy to demonstrate before these our honored guests, including even the wife of the great Procurator Pontius Pilate"—he bowed toward Claudia, who had been listening avidly—"and our honored Centurion Cornelius, his softness of heart toward his subjects. Today a group of the prophet's followers"—now he bowed toward John—"has petitioned the Tetrarch to liberate him. These men assured us that you"—he spoke directly to the gaunt preacher—"have never had any thought of insurrection against the government of Rome or the Tetrarch but that you were concerned only with the promulgation of our true religion. I agreed I would grant their petition. Now as soon as you satisfy me that you will cause us no further trouble and express your regret for the intemperate and malicious words with which you castigated the Tetrarch and his beloved Tetrarchess, as soon as you assure us that you have repented of your evil words...."

"Repented!" John's eyes blazed. "I have nothing for which to repent to you, O Tetrarch! My repentance is to the God of Israel against whom I have sinned and continue to sin. But I have done you no evil. I call upon you to repent, O you of evil and lustful heart, you robber of your brother's bed!" The prophet lifted himself upon his sandaled toes and pointed with lean forearm straight upward toward the ceiling dome. "Repent! Repent! Repent, for your days are numbered! The Messiah of God, Him of Whom I spoke in the Wilderness and along the Jordan lowlands, had come! Even now He walks up and down Galilee preaching of the coming of the Kingdom and bringing blessed salvation to those whose ears are bent to hear Him. The time of repentance, O Tetrarch, is now!" He lowered his gaunt arm, and the robe fell about it, and he swept it in an arc in the faces of the diners on the square of couches. "Repent! Repent! Cast away your sins and be cleansed, and be baptized!" 179

Suddenly the preacher paused, and his blazing eyes settled upon the Tetrarchess. He thrust out his arm and held it before the startled woman's face. "And you, repent, you evil woman, you deserter of your lawful bed, return to your husband, forswear your adulterous cohabiting...."

"Hold your tongue!" Herodias, eyes flashing her uncontrollable rage, her cheeks flaming, had sprung to her feet. She leaned across the food-covered, disordered table. "By all the gods, O Tetrarch"—she turned to grasp her husband's shoulder as he sat upright on the couch—"I will hear no more of this evil madman's prattle. Send him away—have him shot with arrows, or order him beheaded, or throw him again into the dungeon—by the great Jove, I don't care what you do with him, but I will not remain here with him and be further insulted!" She shook his shoulder furiously. "Do you understand, Antipas? Do you understand, by the Great Mother Ceres?"

The Tetrarch stumbled to his feet, swayed, but clutched the table edge to steady himself. "Take your seat, my dear," he said evenly. "I understand very well what you say. And you speak the truth." He turned from her to face

the desert preacher. "I had meant to hand you your freedom, Wilderness prophet; I had meant to give you into the care of your friends who remained here tonight to take you back into Judaea. But your vicious tirade against us forces me to change my plans for you." He beckoned to the two guards. "Manacle him, and return him to the dungeon," he commanded.

Quickly they fettered his wrists and, grasping him by the arms, led him toward the door through which moments ago they had brought him into the chamber. John walked silently, head erect and unafraid. But as they were about to go out through the doorway, he jerked his arms free, and whirled about to face the Tetrarch and his guests. Raising the manacled hands, he pointed toward the Tetrarch. "Repent, adulterer!" His blazing eyes sought the still incensed Herodias. "And you, whore of Rome, get you back to your Babylon!" 180

The guards jerked their prisoner through the doorway, and the door closed heavily behind them. The banqueters, silenced by the bitter exchange between Herodias and the prophet, listened to the retreating footsteps of the three along the corridor.

"The fellow's a fool," Claudia observed in a low aside to Cornelius, "but he does have courage."

"Yes, he must believe that he's serving his Yahweh and Yahweh's Messiah," the centurion agreed; "that faith must be the source of his courage."

"Amazing. I cannot understand how these Jews can be so swayed by such silly superstition. I do wonder what Antipas will do with him; Herodias, if she could, would have his head off in a minute. And so would I, if he had talked to me as he did to her." She tossed her head and smiled indifferently. "But why should I be concerned about this Jewish fanatic? I don't care one green Campanian fig what happens to him."

As she reached for her wine goblet, which a servant had refilled, Antipas set his down and stood up. The servant hastened to fill the Tetrarch's. Antipas licked his thick lips. "By the beard of the High Priest," he said, "I really intended to liberate the prophet. His imprisonment is on his own head." He clutched the table's edge to steady himself again. Then he grasped his wine goblet and drained it in one gulp. The servant raced around the table to refill the empty glass. Antipas picked it up and twirled it slowly on its slender stem, "Drink, my friends! Let us dispel this sudden gloom. Isn't this the Tetrarch's birthday? Drink! Drink!" He downed the wine as his guests, lifting their goblets, drank to their host. Antipas clapped his hands. "And now, music and the dancing women!"

The leader signaled to his men, and the musicians began their lively playing, as the Arabian dancers came scampering again into the hollow square before the tables. Antipas sat down, rested his head on the palm of his left hand, and with his right reached for the glass. 181

"Soon now he'll be very drunk, and we can escape," Cornelius whispered to Claudia. "He's still afraid of the Wilderness preacher, and he will try to drown his fears in wine."

"But he just ordered the fellow back to the dungeon."

"He also fears Herodias. He'll free John, though, as soon as he can do so without his wife's knowing about it."

The tempo of the music was increasing, and the women, refreshed by the long intermission they had been having and the food and wine they had been served, were fast approaching a frenzy of abandon in their wild convolutions and sensual writhings. For a few moments the jaded Tetrarch, watching the brazenly lewd gyrations of the dancing women, appeared to be gaining renewed stimulation. But quickly his interest faded; he sat up on his couch and straightened himself. "Hold!" he commanded, waving his hand aloft. "Enough of this. We are surfeited on dark women."

The music stopped. "Let them go," said Antipas, nodding toward the leader of the musicians. The man bowed to the Tetrarch and, turning, waved his dismissal to the dancers, who went tripping out. Once again the great triclinium was as still and the guests as suddenly silent as they had been at the dramatic entrance of the gaunt prophet.

Now the Tetrarch, beaming, looked to his left beyond his Tetrarchess. "It is our wish that our beloved daughter Salome honor our birthday by dancing for the Tetrarch and his guests," he declared in honeyed tones. "Will you not dance for us, my dear child?"

Cornelius leaned forward to watch Herodias' daughter. Salome seemed amazed at her stepfather's request. "But, Sire," she ventured to protest, as she turned on her couch to face the unctuously smiling Tetrarch, "doesn't my dear father know that I am not a dancer? Surely he prefers the dancing of women trained in the art." She shook her head firmly. "Sire, I would not wish to display before this company just how poorly...."

"Oh come now, my child, your dancing will delight the Tetrarch and his guests. Do not let maidenly modesty deny us the pleasure of seeing you perform." The Tetrarch's eyes were beginning to flame. "We would delight in your dancing, my dear. After all that dark flesh, a flashing before us of firm, white, youthful...." 182

"But Salome, the Tetrarch well knows, is not accustomed to dancing before companies such as this." Herodias, her eyes challenging, caught her husband's arm in protest. "And has not the Tetrarch seen enough already of both white and dark female flesh? Is he not surfeited with women? Why should he wish to see a child...?"

"I wish to see her dance, my dear Tetrarchess. I have never seen her dance. And is this not my birthday? Shouldn't one be indulged on his birthday?" He leaned past his wife to plead again with Salome. "Won't you, my dear Salome, dance just this once, to please and flatter your doting father?"

Claudia leaned close to Cornelius. "I don't believe 'doting' is the word," she whispered; "I'd say 'drooling' is more like it."

Antipas was still pleading with the girl. "If you will but dance this once for us, Salome, my child," he said, his voice soft and sugared, his round face disarmingly friendly, "I will grant any request you make of me."

"If I could dance well, Sire, I would be happy to dance for the Tetrarch, but I am not skilled in that art, nor do I have the mature charms of the Arabian women nor the...."

"But you have the tender charms, my dear Salome, the virginal charms of the bud about to open to full flowering. And I am satiated with these wide-open flowers ready to shatter." He stood up and braced himself against the table, then turned toward her with renewed pleading. "Dance for us, my dear. Dance for us, and I will reward you what you will, I swear by the High Priest's beard, even to the half of our tetrarchy!"

"But, Sire, even were I able to please the Tetrarch with my poor efforts, I am not suitably dressed...." The girl paused, for her mother had leaned over to whisper in her ear. She listened, solemn-faced, and then, suddenly smiling, she turned back to address the Tetrarch. "Sire, if the Tetrarch would not unmercifully censure my stumbling attempts, and"—she hesitated, and her smile was demure—"does the Tetrarch really intend 183 seriously to grant any request I might make of him?"

"I've never been more serious in my life, my dear child. I fully intend to keep my promise. Anything you want, a marble palace, a pleasure barge to rival Cleopatra's, gold, precious gems, silks from the Orient, anything; it is yours but for you to name it ... after you have danced for the Tetrarch and his guests."

"Very well, Sire." The girl stood up. "I shall do my best to please the Tetrarch and his guests on his birthday. But, first, I must change my costume." Herodias arose unsteadily to stand beside her. "Mother will help me dress."

Claudia leaned to her right to whisper to Cornelius. The Tetrarch, absorbed in watching his wife and stepdaughter, would hardly have heard her had she spoken aloud. "It's Herodias who's told her to dance for him. She's got some sort of scheme in mind, and I'm sure it hinges on that request. I wonder what it will be...."

Cornelius nodded. "Something, I would say, that bodes the Tetrarch no good. I'll be interested myself to see what Salome will ask."

A few minutes later Herodias reappeared in the doorway. She signaled to the leader of the musicians, and he went over to her; she talked with him a moment, and then, as he rejoined his group, she made her way around the couches to resume her place beside the Tetrarch. Immediately the leader raised his hand, and the musicians began to play.

"By the great Jove!" Cornelius, who had turned momentarily to reply to something Claudia had said, glanced back toward the doorway through which the Tetrarchess had returned. At his murmured exclamation Claudia looked in the same direction.

"By Bona Dea! what a transformation!" she exclaimed.

Salome was standing just inside the doorway. When she had left the chamber a few minutes ago she had been wearing a shimmering white silken stola, held at the waist by a wide girdle of interlaced narrow strips of green and gold, and golden sandals. Her raven-black hair had been combed back from a part in the center and bound in a loose knot at the back of her neck where it was held neatly in place by a net. Her hair, like her mother's and Claudia's, had been arranged in the style currently popular among Roman women of the equestrian class. 184

But now the girl, immobile and statuesque, stood stripped of every garment she had worn in leaving the chamber. At first glance the centurion thought Salome had returned completely in the nude, save for the few thin veils she had draped about her shoulders. But looking more closely, he saw that her loins were bound, though scantily, with a carefully folded flesh-colored veil. To the casual observer and certainly to the aging Tetrarch, the girl appeared to be standing before them divested of all her clothing. The brightly colored veils even heightened the illusion. She was barefoot, and her hair, freed from the restricting net and unbound, fell past firm, outthrust breasts almost to her slim waist in a tumbling dark cascade of curls. Salome looked as though, finding herself unclad, she had pushed her black tresses suddenly through a small wispish rainbow that had settled about her white shoulders and slipped downward to her dimpled knees.

"Her charms seem quite mature," Cornelius whispered to Claudia, grinning.

"And I suspect they're no longer virginal," she replied. "But, by the gods, she must be sixteen, and"—she leaned nearer and spoke into his ear—"whoever could imagine a Herodian virgin any older!"

Claudia's caution had not been necessary, for the Tetrarch's dark eyes, smoldering as though at any moment they might burst into flame, were measuring and exploring and savoring the girl. Claudia, following Cornelius' eyes, glanced toward the entranced ruler and then, turning back to the centurion, whispered again, "Soon he'll be drooling. He's mad, stark, raving mad."

The music had been soft and slow, but now Salome, with a quick upward flexing of her fingers and a nod to signal the musicians, stepped forward a pace and with shoulders twisting and hips undulating came slithering into the opening between the tables.

From high on a pilaster a shaded lamp cast a circle of bright light in the center of the hollow square. As she 185

tripped on the balls of her bare feet, Salome held the sheer veils lightly to her white body, arms crossed over her breasts, taking care to avoid the full brightness of the illuminated circle. Once she ventured, whirling and twisting, to come as close to the Tetrarch as the position directly in front of Cornelius, but then teasingly she doubled back the other way. When a moment later she reversed her direction and came prancing between the bright circle and the Tetrarch's couch, Antipas lunged forward to grasp her, but laughingly she slipped from his reach and sped away.

"Magnificent! Wonderful!" he shouted, unabashed, as he sank again to his couch and reached for his goblet. "My child, you restore the sap of youth to my aging limbs!"

At the edge of the circle and straight across it from the Tetrarch, Salome stopped, and as the drums ceased their throbbing and the strings subsided to a whisper, she turned deliberately to face the Tetrarch and his guests.

"Bountiful Ceres!" Claudia kept her voice low. "Is she going to discard those veils?"

But Salome, with her arms still pressed across her chest, continued to clutch the colored gauze protectively before her. The music began to increase in volume, and hardly discernible at first above the harmony of the strings and the flutes, the drums added their insistent throbbing. Now the girl in the square before the diners slowly withdrew her right arm, which had been crossed underneath the left one, and lifted it high; at the same time she pushed forward her left leg, so that the gossamer veils fell to either side to expose it from toes to hip, and leaned back; the leg, torso, and lifted arm to ringed forefinger made one continuous straight line of vibrant, glowing, suddenly stilled flesh, veiled but scantily by the diaphanous colored silks.

Cornelius ventured a glance toward the Tetrarch. Antipas, upright on his couch, was leaning forward, mouth half open, dark eyes staring unblinking at his stepdaughter and grandniece. The centurion gently nudged Claudia. "Any moment now," he whispered, "he'll be lunging over the table again." But his eyes darted quickly to the girl.

Her head was back, in line with the rest of her body, and her sultry eyes looked upward to her extended forefinger. Now it began to move, almost imperceptibly, so that few of the Tetrarch's guests were aware of the beginning of its motion. But Cornelius, intrigued, saw the finger's movement widening and speeding; like a serpent it was coiling and uncoiling, twisting sideways, darting, writhing, all in perfect rhythm with the music. As he watched, the motion of the finger appeared to flow like liquid downward to involve the hand and then the forearm. Now along the graceful length of her slender bare arm the smooth, unknotted muscles, rippling and twisting, seemed to have transformed it into an oriental adder swaying and bobbing to the compelling strains of the charmer's flute. 186

"The child's amazing, I must agree with the Tetrarch," Cornelius said. "Do you suppose Herodias trained her?" He leaned forward to glance past Antipas to the intent Tetrarchess who seemed absorbed completely in her daughter's performance. "What a symphony of motion and movement!"

"And when that movement begins to gyrate in the region of the hips, Centurion, you'll realize Salome's no longer a child!"

Nor was the flowing, rhythmical motion long in attaining that region. In synchronized rolling and lifting and falling, the right shoulder joined the twisting, gently writhing arm, and then the rounded stomach undulated, freed now of the teasing veils. As the tempo of the music speeded and the volume swelled and the throb of the drums grew deeper, the hips began their undulating motion. Grinding, thrusting, withdrawing, thrusting, they moved faster and faster in an abandon of voluptuous movement. Then the music slowed again and the frenzied gyrations with it, and quickly the movement ran downward from the stilled hips and disappeared in a restrained tapping of bare toes on the mosaic of the triclinium's marble floor.

The Tetrarch's guests, inspired by his shouted acclamations, applauded wildly. And before they had settled to silence again, Salome dextrously transferred to her right hand the thin veils that throughout her dancing, even in the abandon of its most voluptuous last moments, she had held clutched snugly against her breasts, and lifted high her left arm as she extended her right foot. Then she began anew the routine she had just finished; she followed it, motion for motion, until in the midst of the most lascivious portion of the dance she suddenly turned her back to the Tetrarch and his company, and lowering her arm, without missing one wanton movement of her writhing, weaving hips, she thrust her arms, shoulder high, straight out to the sides. In each hand, completely away from her perspiration-dampened, shimmering white body, she clutched several of the bright-hued wisps of silk. 187

From where the diners sat across the bright circle from her, the girl appeared to be entirely nude, despite the thin bit of flesh-toned silk that bound her loins. Her curling long black hair hanging unrestrained down her back and across her shoulders added to the illusion.

"But, my dear daughter, don't you know that one never turns his back upon the Tetrarch?" Antipas shouted, as he leaned out across the table, his black eyes bulging as though they might leap from the sockets.

The girl's only response was to draw in her hands slightly and then thrust them outward again in the pantomime of unveiling herself anew as, in an ecstasy of voluptuous simulations, she rotated her slim hips to the mounting frenzy of the music.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" Antipas clapped his fat hands together. "Marvelous, my dear child! But must you continue to give your back to the Tetrarch? Will you continue thus to tease us?"

Still Salome made no reply to her stepfather. But slowly, as Antipas clutched the table edge to pull to his feet, the girl, without breaking the rhythm of her seductive undulations, began slowly to turn herself about, her arms still

outthrust from her sides. The Tetrarch, seeing it, let go his prop and sank heavily to the couch; once more his screamed approval signaled the guests to new applause, as every eye in eager anticipation followed the gracefully suggestive motions of their royal host's stepdaughter.

But hardly had the girl done a quarter turn toward the diners when suddenly she drew the gossamer scarves protectively to herself, and, whirling the remainder of the turn to face them, paused in her dancing. Then with head tossed back and laughing, she scampered across the spotlighted circle almost to the Tetrarch's table. A pace from it she stopped, turned her head, and with a nod signaled the musicians. As they resumed the dancing rhythm, she began again her voluptuous gyrations. 188

Claudia was close enough now to Salome to see that the girl's half-closed eyes, peering through slits beneath the darkly shadowed lids, were glancing from the Tetrarch to her mother beside him. Salome, she was suddenly convinced, was performing for Antipas not out of her own volition but through Herodias' devising. And what, Claudia wondered again, could the crafty Tetrarchess be planning to accomplish through this brazen flaunting of her daughter's physical charms.

But the Procurator's wife had only a moment for conjecture; Salome suddenly ceased her rhythmical writhings and stepped forward to lean above the Tetrarch's still burdened table. Teasingly, and before the musicians were aware of her changed routine, she fumbled with the veils still held pressed against her, and as Antipas, in a new frenzy of excitement, sought to rise from his couch, she thrust her hands apart and then, with a high squeal of laughter, crossed them again in front of her. In the brief moment that her youthful but fully matured bosom had been completely exposed to them, the Tetrarch had lunged out to clutch her, but he had shattered his wine goblet instead and the girl, screaming with laughter, had darted backward into the illuminated circle to evade him.

As a servant came running up to mop the spilled wine and remove the broken glass, Antipas settled back on his couch. "Aha! The clever little vixen was too quick for me," he said, turning to face his wife. "But I'll..." He said no more. Herodias, Claudia saw, was unsmiling, grim. But evidently she hadn't meant for Antipas to see her in such a mood, for quickly she affected a cloaking smile. "By the gods," she said to her husband, "the child is clever, isn't she?"

Salome was now in the center of the bright light. The music had died away as the leader awaited his new instructions. The girl stood quietly facing the Tetrarch and his guests, the colored veils clutched in her crossed hands as though she were trying to cover herself in a chilling breeze. Then she turned her head and lifted one veil-holding hand to signal resumption of the dance music; the musicians swung quickly into a fast rhythm that sent Salome dipping and prancing around the lighted circle. As she came within inches of the Tetrarch's table, Antipas once more lunged toward her, but she had anticipated his attempt to catch her and had darted out of reach. Laughing, she danced to the center of the lighted spot; soon she was whirling around on the balls of her bare feet, and as the tempo of the drums and the strings and the brasses increased and the volume swelled, she circled as she pirouetted. Opposite the Centurion Cornelius she released one of the veils and it sailed across the table to be caught by the diner at his right. 189

"Another!" shouted Antipas as she whirled past his couch but safely beyond his reach. "Another! Let another one fly!"

She was wheeling before the diners at her mother's left when she loosed a second veil; a man grabbed for it and thrust it beneath his pillow. When she had spun around to the other side of the circle she held out her arm and a yellow one sailed above the table. A man and a woman grabbed for the floating gossamer; he caught it but laughingly surrendered it to her.

"More! More!" screamed the Tetrarch, and around the square of the tables others joined in chorus. And when the girl let two of the shimmering scarves sail away together, they screamed again. "More! More! Let them fly!"

Salome, her head back, laughing, began now to tease the Tetrarch and his guests. Whirling around the rim of the patch of light, she would sweep one hand with its veils outward with a flourish and then, without releasing them, fold the arm back across the other one, which all the while she had kept pressed close to her pirouetting white body.

"She's an actress, the little coquette!" Cornelius observed. "She knows how to build up suspense. She understands how to please Antipas, too; she's got a good sense of the dramatic."

"Yes, and in another moment or so, unless I'm entirely wrong about her, her dramatics will have Antipas—and maybe you, too—groveling." But quickly her expression changed to one of perplexity. "Still I wonder, Cornelius, what Herodias is scheming. Surely she's getting no pleasure out of seeing her daughter make a spectacle of herself in public. There must be something behind it; yet I can't imagine what. What on earth could she want so badly that she would go to such great...?" 190

But her question remained unfinished, for the girl had pranced, still pirouetting, into the center of the bright spot. She paused in her turning and with both hands clutching the remaining veils modestly across her chest, signaled with a motion of her head to the leader of the musicians. Immediately the volume of the music began to increase and the tempo to speed, and Salome whirled faster and faster in time with the music's crescendo. As she spun on the balls of her bare feet, the veils that had been hanging to her knees streamed out in a kaleidoscope of whirling color. The flutes more insistently joined their whining pleas to the deeper invitations of the harps and the dulcimers and the rhythmical throaty demands of the drums; the girl's black hair, standing out from her head as she whirled, made a dark spinning disk above the circular rainbow of the scarves.

Now Salome lifted one arm above her head, while she held the other protectively before her, so that the dark whirling of her hair had above it as well as beneath it a spinning rainbow of color.

"I think I know what she'll do next," Claudia said, leaning to her right to speak to Cornelius above the steadily mounting volume and frenzy of the music.

Antipas, too, must have anticipated it. "The other arm!" he shouted, as he leaned forward, his eyes blazing with lechery. "Raise the other arm, my dear child!"

But Salome did not obey the Tetrarch. Instead, as she came pirouetting nearer him, she lowered the arm she had just raised, and the two whirling circles of color merged into one fast, revolving gossamer flame. Faster the girl spun, and faster, faster the musicians played, and higher swelled their instruments' invitation to abandoned revelry.

Antipas, who had sat back when the girl failed to heed his demand, reached for his goblet, gulped his wine, and was replacing the slender-stemmed glass when suddenly Salome, whirling hardly two paces from his table, lifted both arms high into the air. The transparent veils twisted upward with them to form above the girl's swirling black hair a spinning canopy of weaving and shifting bright colors. 191

Once more the Tetrarch overturned his goblet, and the wine spilled across the table. But when a servant came racing to his aid, Antipas waved him away. The Tetrarch's amazed eyes had focused upon the dancing girl; he would permit nothing to obstruct, even for an instant, his view of her.

The spinning Salome in the circle of light from the wall lamp was nude from the small gossamer triangle of her loins' covering to the crown of her head, and in the rapidity of her turning she appeared to be entirely divested of clothing.

Antipas caught at the edge of the table and pushed himself, swaying, to his feet. "Nearer, child, nearer!" he shrieked. "Come closer! Come closer to us! Come..." But his frenzied words were choked in a swirling cloud of silken transparencies, for his stepdaughter had let go all her veils and one had dipped full into the flushed, round face of the Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea.

As Antipas struggled to free himself of the clinging, vision-obscuring fluff of silk, the guests around the tables grabbed merrily for the descending veils. But by the time the Tetrarch had jerked the scarf away from his face, Salome had already disappeared; she had darted across the spotlighted mosaic floor into the enfolding privacy of the triclinium's antechamber. Behind her, her audience thundered its applause.

Moments later, before the birthday celebrants had settled completely from the excitement of her dramatic exit, Salome, dressed as she had been when she left to prepare for her dance, returned to the great chamber and took her place beside her mother. Claudia, watching discreetly, saw the Tetrarchess lightly squeeze the girl's hand and bend over to whisper into her ear.

Antipas sat up and beaming turned to face his stepdaughter. "My child, you have pleased the Tetrarch immensely," he said, as he rubbed his plump hands together. "I had no idea that you could dance with such grace and charm. Your dancing has far excelled the finest efforts of the women of Arabia; it has added immeasurably to the pleasure of the Tetrarch and his guests." He reached for his goblet, swallowed the wine, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "And now, my dear daughter, you have but to name your reward for thus having entertained so pleasantly the Tetrarch and our friends. Speak out, Salome. What shall it be? A palace of your own beside the sea? A great pleasure yacht with servants in shining livery and galley slaves to row it? Perchance a long visit to Rome to renew your friendships in the capital, with a handsome allowance to cover every gift your fancy may envision? Speak up, now. Let your wish be known, and it shall be granted." 192

"Even, Sire, to the half of your tetrarchy?"

Antipas blinked, hesitated a moment, and then his round face brightened. "Yes, if you ask it, even to the half of the tetrarchy, though I should think a marble palace or a yacht...."

"Have no fear, Sire," Salome interrupted. "I wish not the half of your tetrarchy or any part of it. Nor do I need or desire a marble palace or a pleasure boat, or a trip at this time to Rome."

"Ah, but I know what will please you," Antipas spoke up. "A new wardrobe, full of beautiful garments fashioned of the finest silks brought from the Orient or woven on the looms in Phoenicia...."

"No, not gowns or shoes or houses or yachts or journeys to Rome or gold and silver...."

"But come, my dear child, you must be repaid for the pleasure you have given us. I beg of you, name your any desire...."

"And the Tetrarch will grant it?" Salome stood up, facing the ruler of Galilee and Peraea, just beyond her mother. "You swear it, Sire?"

"By the beard of the High Priest, I swear it, Salome. I shall grant whatever you ask of me, even to the half of the tetrarchy."

"Then, Sire," she said, smiling demurely, "my request is simple and will rob the Tetrarch's treasury of not one denarius. It is my wish"—she paused and looked the happily smiling Antipas full in his round face—"that the Tetrarch present to me on a silver platter the head of the Wilderness preacher called John the Baptizer." 193

Claudia and Cornelius had been leaning out over their plates, avidly following the conversation of the girl and her stepfather.

"By all the gods!" Claudia whispered, without taking her eyes from the still calmly smiling Salome. "Now I understand. Herodias, by the Bountiful Mother...."

But she said no more, for Antipas was pulling to his feet. "Surely, child, I have not heard you correctly. Surely you would not wish to have the head of a man...."

"But you did hear correctly, Sire. And you have sworn to grant me my wish. I ask only for the head of the Prophet John."

The Tetrarch, braced against the table's edge, looked to his right and then left along the tables. The eyes of his guests were fastened on their plates; not one face was raised to help him. Antipas stood, drained of all levity; the impact of the girl's inhuman request, so simply and heartlessly presented, had sobered him. He turned again to Salome and tried to affect a smile.

"Were you a man, a soldier, perhaps, seeking revenge upon an enemy ... but for a beautiful young woman of such charm and culture, who has danced for us so delightfully"—he shook his head sadly—"such an utterly strange request for a beautiful woman." He seemed to be thinking aloud, talking more to himself than to the girl. "To want the head of a prophet of Israel, a man held in such esteem by so many of our Jewish subjects, a prophet who may indeed have been sent of Israel's God...." He broke off, shaking his head as if in deep perplexity.

Claudia, watching Salome now, saw Herodias reach out and gently grasp her daughter's arm. The girl, still standing, smiled cynically and tossed her head. "Nevertheless, Sire, that is my request. If, however, the Tetrarch wishes to dishonor his oath before this company and refuse me...."

The Tetrarch banged his fist on the table top. "The Tetrarch never dishonors an oath!" he shouted. "He withdraws no promises he makes." He turned to face the two guardsmen at the door, the soldiers who had brought the Wilderness prophet into the banquet room and had escorted him back to the dungeon. "Guardsmen, you have heard the request of the Princess Salome. Go you now into the dungeon and carry out her request." 194 He paused. They stood stiffly at attention, awaiting his final command. "Do you understand?"

The men glanced at one another, then faced the Tetrarch. "We understand, Sire," one said.

"Then go."

Quickly the two strode out of the chamber; their footsteps echoed as they marched down the hall. Antipas slumped on his couch, then lowered his head between his hands. Salome took her seat. She smiled as she and her mother whispered. The guests kept their places and were silent; the servants, moving about to replenish the wine goblets, walked noiselessly.

"The Tetrarch is making a monstrous mistake," Cornelius said.

"Because he's giving in to Herodias?" Claudia inquired.

"Because he's ordering the prophet's death."

"Then you"—a faint smile crossed her face—"are afraid of the Jews' one god?"

"I could be," he answered unhesitatingly. "But that's not my reason. I'm sure it's...." He stopped. A servant had approached the Tetrarch's couch.

"The Centurion Longinus?" The Tetrarch raised his bulky frame to a sitting position. "Indeed, bring him to us."

At the sound of the Tetrarch's words, Claudia looked up; her eyes followed the retreating servant. Antipas turned to her. "The Centurion Longinus has just arrived at Machaerus," he said; "I've sent for him. Shall we make a place for him between you and Centurion Cornelius perhaps, my dear?" He grinned. "He must be famished from the long journey to this forsaken outpost."

A moment later the servant escorted the centurion to the Tetrarch's couch. Antipas greeted him cordially, presented him to the diners, and ordered the servants to set him a place at the table. When after a minute he was settled beside her, Claudia found his hand on the couch and squeezed it hard. "It's so wonderful to have you here," she said. "I can hardly wait to hear the news from Rome."

"I can hardly wait to be with you ... alone," he said. "It's been so long, and I had no idea I'd find you here." 195 He turned to Cornelius at his right. "I've got much to tell you, Centurion," he announced, "and, no doubt, much to hear from you too."

"But what on earth are you doing at Machaerus, Longinus? Where have you been before this?"

"Tiberias," he answered, "I came there after landing at Caesarea. I had orders from Sejanus to convey to the Tetrarch. When I reached Tiberias and found that he and his guests had departed for Machaerus, I set out to follow. It was urgent that I see the Tetrarch as quickly as possible; I didn't dare await his return to his palace."

Antipas had overheard. "We are happy that you came, Centurion, but what mission could you have that would be so urgent?" He smiled, and his manner was most agreeable. "A new style of glassware, perhaps, that you wish to sell to the Tetrarch?"

"No, Sire, nothing to sell you ... now, at any rate. It's a more important mission. I'm coming to you from the Prefect Sejanus who is sending you instructions in the name of the Emperor, for whom he is acting in this case

and after conferring with Tiberius at Capri. I assure you it is important and urgent, and I desire an audience with you at the first moment you may be available, Sire, in order to transmit to you the instructions from Rome.”

“Indeed, Centurion”—the Tetrarch’s flippant manner had disappeared; his countenance, at the centurion’s mention of Sejanus and the Emperor, was suddenly grave—“if it is that urgent, we can leave the dining chamber at once. But that would cause a lot of talk, I suppose. Must you confer with me in secret, Centurion? These are all dear friends, my wife, the Procurator’s wife, Centurion Cornelius. Is it necessary that the information you bring me from Rome be kept from them?”

“Indeed, no, Sire. In fact, they would know soon anyway, as quickly as you acted. And the Prefect desires that you act immediately.” He paused. Antipas nodded. “In fact, Sire, it is fortunate that you are here at Machaerus; your orders can be put into effect within minutes after they have been issued. The Prefect’s instructions to you have to do with that strange fellow we encountered along the Jordan as we were going to Tiberias, the one you had arrested and brought here to be imprisoned, you remember, the Wilderness prophet called John the Baptizer.” 196

“John the Baptizer!” The Tetrarch’s face had paled. Herodias, who had been listening, leaned forward; her countenance was a mask. “But what of John,” the Tetrarch began, “what...?” He paused, licked his dry lips, and swallowed.

“Sire, it’s nothing to be unduly concerned about,” Longinus replied. “It’s only a policy matter. You know that Sejanus and Tiberius are always stressing the importance of keeping the Jews happy, at least to the extent that they won’t attempt to revolt. And since John is so popular among them, the Prefect believes that your release of the prophet will be pleasing to the Jews and will, to that extent, strengthen Rome’s rule ... and the Tetrarch’s. There’s no point in needlessly offending them, you see. That’s why he sent me to you with the suggestion, Sire, that you release John at once. He has prepared notices, to be signed by you, for posting in Tiberias, Jerusalem, Caesarea....”

The Tetrarch said nothing but buried his face in his hands. Herodias, erect and unmoving, stared straight ahead.

“But, Sire....”

Longinus said no more, for Claudia had suddenly grasped his arm. He turned and stared toward the doorway through which, a moment before the centurion’s arrival, the two palace guardsmen had disappeared. Now the two were returning. They advanced straight toward the Tetrarch. One man was carrying, chest high and at arms’ length, a large silver tray of the type used by servants at Machaerus for serving food. On the tray was a rounded, gory mass.

“But that can’t be for me, surely,” Longinus whispered to her. “It looks like raw meat, bloody.... Great Jove!” The man bearing the tray had come close enough for them to see his ghastly offering. “By all the great and little gods!” He twisted to face the girl, his expression suddenly aghast. His voice, when at last he spoke, was hoarse and unbelieving. “The Wilderness prophet?”

She nodded. “Yes, the Tetrarch had him beheaded ... just a moment ago, perhaps even after you arrived here.” She turned her head to look away from the guardsman’s horrifying burden.

But Longinus saw. The prophet’s head, with blood dripping from the stump of the severed neck, lay on one ear in the tangled, gore-smeared mat of his long, black hair. His beard, too, was blood-streaked, and his face and forehead were smeared; blood had run down into the corners of his eyes. Wide-open and set in staring rigidity, the eyes seemed to be trying to communicate with him. 197

“Sire,” the guardsmen said, as he reached the table and held out the profaned tray, “the Tetrarch’s orders have been carried out. The head of the desert preacher....”

“No! No!” screamed Antipas, as he held up his right hand before his eyes and pointed with the other toward his wife and her daughter. “Not here! It’s ... it’s theirs! Put it there!”

The guardsman set the tray down in front of Salome, who glanced at it idly and then lowered her head. Herodias stared unabashed at the pitiful profanation before them, and then after a moment she, too, looked away.

Now the Tetrarch lowered his shielding hand and calmly turned to his left to face Herodias and his stepdaughter. His demeanor, Longinus saw, was suddenly changed. When he spoke his voice was calm, modulated. “The Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea does not dishonor a promise made,” he said. “My daughter, you have the reward you sought. Now what will you do with it?”

The girl turned to stare an instant at her questioner. Then she glanced again toward the head on the tray. Shock, nausea, sudden fear, horror curdled her countenance, and she threw up a protecting hand to shut out the fearful sight. “Give it to Mother!” she cried out, her voice shrill, and tense. Jumping to her feet, she fled from the great chamber.

“Take it away!” Herodias screamed to a servant at her elbow. “Dispose of it ... quickly!” Without a word to her husband, she reached for her wine goblet and drank; then she drew up her feet, smoothed the skirt of her glistening stola, and settled herself comfortably on her elbow.

Equally calm, Antipas leaned over to speak to Longinus. “I regret, Centurion, that you didn’t reach Machaerus a few minutes earlier. But....” He gestured with resignation, then sat back on his couch. He was reaching for his wine glass when a palace servant approached, bowing. The Tetrarch nodded to him. “Yes?” 198

"Sire, a delegation has just arrived; the men declare they were sent by King Aretas. They maintain their mission is most urgent and they petition—indeed, Sire, they demand—that the Tetrarch give them audience this evening."

"From King Aretas?" A heavy scowl darkened the Tetrarch's full, round face. "Most urgent, they say?" He was thoughtfully silent a moment. Then he turned, glaring, to the obeisant servant. "Then bring them to us."

"But, Sire"—the bowing man was rubbing his hands together nervously, palpably fearful—"they suggested that perhaps the Tetrarch would wish to receive them privately in his council chamber...."

"No! Who are they to tell the Tetrarch where he must receive them! Bring them to us, at once!"

"Yes, Sire. Yes, immediately." The timorous fellow was backing away, bowing, as he rubbed his knuckles in his palm.

"Did you hear what the servant said?" Claudia whispered to Longinus, as the Tetrarch twisted his heavy hulk the other way to watch the retreating fellow. "I wonder...."

"Yes, so do I. And I'm sure Herodias does, too." He turned to speak to Cornelius on his right. "You heard the servant?" Cornelius nodded. "Sounds like more trouble for the Tetrarch, doesn't it?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Cornelius agreed. "This seems to be a bad night for the old fellow, a tough night, indeed."

The representatives of the Arabian king were formally polite, rigidly reserved.

"It is no pleasant mission on which we have been sent here, O Tetrarch Herod," the spokesman of the visiting Arabians announced, once they had been presented to Antipas, "and we regret that we must speak as we have been ordered to speak, Sire, and particularly that ears other than the Tetrarch's will hear the message we have been commanded to bring you from His Majesty, King Aretas. But the Tetrarch has so ordered it, and we must obey." He paused, and from the fold of his robe pulled forth a rolled document.

"Go on, speak," Antipas told him. "The Tetrarch wishes on his birthday"—he affected a grim smile—"that nothing be withheld from his beloved wife and his guests. The Tetrarch is prepared to hear the King's message." 199

The man nodded, and unrolled the document. "Sire, I have here the King's message to the Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea. But would not the Tetrarch prefer to have it read to him privately and then later, if the Tetrarch might still wish it, have it read to this assembled group?"

"Read it, now. Go on with it. Let us all hear the King's message."

"Very well, Sire." He bowed and then, shifting his position so that the light from the wall lamps fell more directly on the parchment, held it out from him and began to read. But when the stiffly formal greeting was concluded, he raised his eyes questioningly.

"Continue," said the Tetrarch.

The man nodded, and once more his eyes returned to the out-held document. "'King Aretas declares that the Tetrarch Herod Antipas in sending his faithful wife, the King's beloved daughter, a bill of divorcement, after having deprived her of the honors and privileges of the Tetrarchess of Galilee and Peraea, which honors and privileges without right he conferred upon her successor, has grievously injured and insulted the King's daughter, his royal house, and the person of the King himself.'"

Claudia gently squeezed Longinus' hand beside hers on the couch, but she dared venture no whisper. Slyly, though, they both glanced toward Herodias who sat eying the Arabian, a malevolent, frozen smile on her plainly flushed face.

The reader looked up again, but only for an instant, and then resumed his reading of the Arabian ruler's grievances. "'Now, therefore"—he cleared his throat—"King Aretas demands that the Tetrarch Herod Antipas seek to make what amends he can by providing certain reparations to King Aretas, the terms of which shall be agreed upon in conference of the Tetrarch and his ministers with the King's ministers who bear this message. But King Aretas further demands that before such negotiations are entered into, the Tetrarch Herod Antipas must put away or reduce to second wife the woman he now calls Tetrarchess and restore to her rightful place as Tetrarchess and first wife the King's beloved daughter. He further demands...." 200

"'He demands!' Everything is 'He demands!'" Herodias had sprung to her feet, her eyes blazing, her shaking finger extended across the table toward the suddenly interrupted Arabian. Now she turned fiercely upon the Tetrarch. "Didn't you hear him, O Tetrarch? 'He demands!' That old goat of Arabia demands of you, Herod, Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea. He writes you an evil, insulting message abusing you and your wife, and you sit here calmly listening while that man reads it before these your guests and me your Tetrarchess...."

"But, my beloved Herodias"—Antipas clutched the table's edge as he straggled to get to his feet—"these men are only the messengers of King Aretas. What you hear are not this man's words, they are the King's."

"Of course I know that, Antipas; I am not entirely a fool. I know they are the King's words, but don't they say that Aretas has empowered these men to represent him in your negotiations over me? Over me, do you hear? Negotiations designed to force me from the palace in Tiberias, to return *her*...."

Gently Antipas caught his wife's arm and tried to calm her, to get her to take her seat. "Of course not, my dear, of course you'll not be sent away, you'll never be supplanted...."

She jerked her arm free, turned upon him, eyes blazing now in utter fury. "Then send them back to her doting old father! Send them packing, Antipas!" She shook her finger under his nose. "Or else, by all the great and little gods, I myself will go away!"

Antipas faced the still shocked Arabian. "Perhaps you had best excuse yourself," he said evenly. "Tomorrow, in the calm of our council chamber, we shall be able...."

"No!" shouted Herodias. "Let them leave tonight, immediately. I can abide their insulting presence here no longer!"

The Tetrarch, ignoring his wife's outburst, beckoned to a servant hovering nearby. "Escort these men into a suitable chamber, and see that they are adequately provided for with our best food and wine," he commanded, "and after they have dined, show them to their bedchambers. They must be in need of replenishment and rest after their arduous journey to Machaerus." He bowed to the delegation's leader. "We shall defer further consideration of the matter until the morning. We are all greatly fatigued and agitated." 201

The servant stepped forward and bowed to the visitors. They in turn, without any further word from their spokesman, bowed to the Tetrarch and turned with the escorting servant to withdraw from the triclinium.

Herodias, seated now and apparently calm, twisted around to watch them depart. But when at the doorway Aretas' spokesman glanced over his shoulder toward the Tetrarch, she suddenly grabbed the goblet beside her plate. "Go!" she screamed. "Go! Go!" With all her strength she hurled the goblet toward the man; it shattered on the wall near the door. As a servant came running to pick up the broken bits of glass, she sank to the couch, pulled up her sandaled feet, and, sobbing wildly, buried her face in the pillow.

JUDAEA



205

32

The Tetrarch's caravan had reached the flatland where the narrow Plain of Esdraelon pushing eastward between Mount Gilboa and Little Hermon touched the Jordan valley. There Longinus and Claudia had taken leave of the returning group.

Cornelius had wanted to send a detail of guardsmen to escort them the remainder of the way to Caesarea. "You never know when one of these zealot gangs may come swooping down on you," he had protested to Longinus. "And if the Emperor's stepdaughter should be captured, with Senator Piso's son, and held for ransom ... well, by Jove, Longinus, you can imagine the uproar there'd be in Rome."

But Longinus had refused the offer. He had assured Cornelius that their little party, he, Claudia, and the two servants she had brought with her, would join the first caravan headed toward Caesarea; until one came along they would remain at the nearby inn.

Though the Tetrarch's parting words had been polite, he had seemed deeply meditative, still mired in the haze of introspection into which the startling twist of his birthday celebration had plunged him. Nor had the results of his meeting the next day with the representatives of King Aretas enlivened him, for though he had yielded nothing to his former father-in-law's demands, he knew that the Arabians had departed in a bitter mood that for him boded no good. That this unfortunate series of events was known to two Roman centurions and the Procurator's wife, and particularly to Longinus, who had come to Machaerus on a mission from the Prefect Sejanus whose accomplishment had been so disastrously thwarted by the Tetrarch himself, made the situation all the more distressing.

Herodias, on the other hand, apparently had recovered completely from the loss of presence suffered at the Tetrarch's banquet. She spoke with her usual polished ease. "Soon you must visit us again at Tiberias, my dear," she said to Claudia, as the Tetrarch's caravan prepared to resume its journey, "and bring Longinus to protect you from our plundering zealots." She smiled pertly. "Longinus, help her arrange it. Let's try to get together in Jerusalem, perhaps during the Feast of Tabernacles." 206

They had ridden at once to the inn, which sat at the edge of the road that led from the Jordan ford straight westward past Mount Gilboa to the Samaria highroad from Galilee.

"We will require two rooms," Longinus told the proprietor, a beak-nosed Jew with an unkempt, wine-stained

beard. "The manservant will wish to sleep near the horses; if there is a place in the stables...."

"Yes, soldier"—the innkeeper had observed immediately that his guest was wearing a Roman military uniform—"he can bed down comfortably there. And for you and your wife"—he paused, questioning, and Longinus nodded—"one of the larger chambers, yes, and for the maid a smaller one, adjoining yours, perhaps?"

"It will not be necessary that it adjoin ours; wherever you can conveniently place her will be satisfactory."

So a small room down the narrow hallway from theirs had been assigned to Tullia, and now the maid had retired to it, and the manservant to a mat at the stable. Claudia and Longinus had supper and, fatigued from the journey down from Machaerus to the Jericho plain, they retired to their chamber.

Longinus, seated on a low stool, was unbuckling his sandals. "I do hope a caravan for Caesarea comes along soon," he said. "I'm anxious to get there; I'm almost tempted to venture the journey on our own. But with so many of those zealots in the hills...."

"Then you have tired of me this quickly, you can't wait to return me to the Procurator?" she asked innocently.

"I'm getting tired of returning you *to* the Procurator," he said.

"And after every time with you I'm more loath to go back to him myself." The mask of innocence was gone; she was entirely serious now. "Longinus, isn't there something we can do, some solution? We simply can't go on like this indefinitely." She had finished undressing; walking over to the bed, she pulled down the cover, slid beneath it, and pulled it up to her chin. "By all the gods, Longinus, there must be a better fate for us. Surely the granddaughter of an Emperor, the stepdaughter of another Emperor...." 207

"But that's exactly why there is a problem," he interrupted. "If you were just a Roman equestrian, you wouldn't have been forced to marry Pilate in the first place." He kicked off one of his sandals and twisted about to face her. "Claudia, you could slip away from him and we could go away somewhere, but that would hardly be a solution, though for me certainly it would be a permanent one." He smiled rapidly. "Also you could ask Tiberius—and that means, of course, Sejanus, too—to permit you to divorce him; I hardly think, however, that they would allow you to do it, and then the situation would be worse than it is now; they would watch us all the more and doubtless send us to separate far distance provinces, the gods only know where." He considered a moment. "There's the possibility, though—probability, I hope—that Pilate will soon do something that will so infuriate Sejanus that he will depose him as Procurator and perhaps banish him to another remote province. Then they might allow you to divorce him and marry me, provided we went off to Gaul or"—he shrugged—"Britannia or Hispania or some other faraway place. But I'm not sure of that." He removed the other sandal and placed it beside the first one. "That is probably our best chance, Claudia, maybe our only one as long as Tiberius and Sejanus stay in power. But even then I can't proceed too fast against Pilate, because then Sejanus would surely suspect that you and I...."

"But doesn't he think already that you want to marry me?"

"At first he did, I suspect. But now I think he's convinced that our interest in each other is ... well, a purely physical one. And Antipas, I'm sure, has the same notion."

"Certainly Antipas isn't likely to cause us trouble. He's in enough trouble himself to keep occupied with his own affairs."

"Yes. Between Sejanus and Aretas he's likely to be very busy for the next few months. And that gets me back—after you started me on another tack—to why I'm so eager to be in Caesarea. I've got to get off a report to Sejanus. I want him to hear from me what happened at Machaerus before someone else gets the chance to tell him. He may think my dallying allowed Antipas to behead the Wilderness fellow, and also he may wonder why I didn't prevent the trouble between Antipas and Aretas from coming to such an acute crisis. So I want to get my report off as quickly as possible, do you understand?" 208

"Yes, I do understand. You're quite right, it's very important. I wouldn't be surprised if Antipas got into a war with Aretas because of Herodias. And that would bring the Roman legionaries into the fighting, of course, and surely Pilate would be drawn in, and you."

"Very probably, yes. Certainly it would involve Pilate sooner or later. And, of course, the Legate Vitellius would be implicated. Sejanus will certainly call on him to defend Galilee should Aretas attack Antipas."

"Then the Tetrarch's marrying Herodias may ruin him ... and Pilate, too," Claudia said thoughtfully. She lay, head back, watching him finish his preparations for bed.

"You sound as though you hope it will."

She stretched herself seductively under the light covering. "Well?" Her quick smile revealed a suddenly changed mood. "But for tonight at least let's think no more of Antipas or Pilate. Tomorrow perhaps there'll be a caravan along, and we'll be starting for Caesarea." Gingerly she turned down the covering beside her and held out white, bare arms to him. "Hurry, Longinus," she said softly. "The night is wasting."

Well ahead of his caravan returning to the palace at Tiberias raced the startling and, to many, the highly provocative report of the Tetrarch's beheading of John the Baptist in fulfillment of a rash promise made to his wife's dancing daughter.

The delegation that had gone down to Machaerus to intercede for the prophet's release had brought back the tragic news; quickly the story had spread to Jerusalem and to Ophel, the teeming Lower City into which countless poor were squalidly compressed, and beyond there on past the villages of Judaea and Samaria, all the way down into Galilee. Along the shores of the little sea and in many a huddle of modest homes, and here and there in the pretentious houses of the rich, Israelites were shaking their heads sadly and muttering imprecations upon the Idumaeen ruler of Galilee and Peraea.

With the account of the Wilderness prophet's execution went the story, too, of how King Aretas of Arabia had sent his couriers to Machaerus to threaten Herod Antipas with war because of the Tetrarch's having divorced the King's daughter and made her supplanter Herodias his Tetrarchess. Soon rumors began to spread that war with Aretas was imminent and that the Arabian ruler was likely any day to bring his army surging across the borders of Israel to punish his former son-in-law.

Even before the arrival at Caesarea of Claudia and Longinus, the stories from Machaerus had reached the Procurator Pontius Pilate. Their lateness, she explained to Pilate, had been unavoidable; they had waited to join a caravan journeying westward rather than risk the hazards of traveling with only two servants through a region frequented by robbers and zealot revolutionaries.

Pilate appeared to accept without reservation her explanation; he indicated in no way that he might be jealous of the centurion. His attitude exasperated Claudia all the more. 210

"He can't be that stupid," she fumed one day to Tullia, with whom she had long come to talk frankly and in utter confidence. "He surely knows about Longinus and me. Yet if he's in the least bit jealous of the centurion, he's careful not to let me know. It's insulting, Tullia, his indifference to me. It's humiliating. Why do you suppose he acts that way?"

"But you are the stepdaughter of the Emperor, Mistress. What could he do, even though he is the Procurator?"

"He could be a man!" Claudia snapped. "He could kill Longinus, or try to, and give me a lashing!"

The maid shook her head. "No, Mistress, not even a Procurator would dare lay a hand on you, or anyone for whom you held high regard."

"But I'm his wife, Tullia."

"Yes, but you are also the Emperor's stepdaughter, Mistress."

Immediately upon their return to Caesarea from Machaerus, Longinus had prepared a comprehensive report to Sejanus in which he related the unfortunate events that had come to such a dramatic climax at the Tetrarch's birthday banquet. The message was dispatched to Rome on an Alexandrian grain ship that had paused for a day in the harbor at Caesarea.

In the several weeks that followed he saw little of Claudia. During that period he went on a mission for Sergius Paulus to Jerusalem and upon his return took command while Sergius was away at Antioch in response to a summons from the Legate Vitellius, who commanded the Roman forces in that entire eastern region. Sergius, Longinus was sure, had been ordered to Antioch because of the Arabian king's threat to attack Herod Antipas. The Legate, he reasoned, was planning to have his forces ready for action in the event that Aretas should challenge Rome by sending his army against the Tetrarch. The centurion presumed that Vitellius had summoned all military leaders stationed in Galilee—and possibly even the Tetrarch himself—to meet him at Antioch. Longinus learned that his guesswork had been correct; the meeting had been held, and the Legate, Sergius 211 said, had been blunt in his conversations with the Tetrarch.

Shortly after the Caesarea garrison commander resumed his post, a message from Senator Piso for his son arrived. It instructed Longinus to set out as quickly as he could for the glassworks. Production had decreased, and the quality of the ware being manufactured was deteriorating. Morale among the slaves, his father reported, seemed at its lowest point. Longinus was to do whatever might be necessary to speed up the plant's production and improve the quality of the glassware. The Prefect, his father added, was in complete concurrence with these instructions. A fresh supply of slaves, said the senator, was being sent out to Phoenicia by the Prefect; the slaves were being shipped aboard a government trireme that was leaving Rome within a week after the vessel bearing this letter would sail for Joppa. Longinus, the letter suggested, might even go aboard this letter-bearing vessel when it put in at Caesarea.

Little had happened in Rome since his departure for Palestine, his father reported. The Emperor was still at Capri, and Sejanus was directing the government of the Empire. His mother sent her love; she was quite well, though of late she had been disturbed at the indisposition of her little Maltese dog. But the animal, thanks be to Jove and the patient ministrations of Longinus' mother, was now recovered.

"Try to achieve as quickly as possible a new production record at the glassworks," his father concluded. The Prefect was keeping an eye on the figures, and it would be good business to earn the Prefect's early approval. "Don't spare the slaves; they are the cheapest item in the operational cost; replacements can be made quickly available."

His eyes scanned the letter, hardly seeing the words. Ever the patrician Romans, his parents ... his mother

concerned with the indisposition of that pampered, silken-haired pet, his father thinking only of pleasing Sejanus and building up for the Prefect and himself more millions of sesterces. Don't spare the slaves; the life of a slave is the cheapest item in the production of beautiful glassware for the tables of patrician Rome and Alexandria and Antioch and Athens. Work them until they fall dead, and heave them into the flaming furnaces. 212

Longinus thought of the old slave. What would Cornelius think of his father's letter, his father's philosophy? But Cornelius' father, too, is of the equestrian class; perhaps he shares the views of Senator Piso. Cornelius, of course, would disapprove. He would say that men are not the cheapest items in the making of glassware or anything else. He would hold with the Galilean carpenter that every man, Roman senator or Gallic slave or black savage from Ethiopia, is a son of that jealous Yahweh of the Jews and possessor of an immortal spirit.

And I, suddenly thought Longinus, do I hold with my father or with Cornelius and the Galilean?

The day after Herod's birthday banquet Cornelius had related to him in dramatic detail what he contended was the Galilean's miraculous healing of Lucian, but Longinus had shrugged off his friend's fervor with the observation that once more, as in the case of Chuza's son, the clever carpenter from Nazareth had successfully judged the hour at which the fever would break.

Of course his urbane, affluent father, rather than his Jewish-influenced friend the centurion and the Galilean mystic, was right. Even without using a stylus and tablet one can prove that a slave is the cheapest of the several things involved in the making of fine glassware; his father's statement to that effect was quickly demonstrable. And yet....

Longinus shrugged and put away the letter. The ship, he discovered some moments later, would be at the Caesarea port only long enough to load supplies and freight; it would sail for Tyre within four or five hours.

He packed quickly and sent his bags to the dock to be put aboard. Then he rushed to the Procurator's Palace to tell Pilate and his wife good-by. Happily, the Procurator had gone out. But Longinus could have only a few minutes with Claudia.

"I won't be up in Phoenicia long," he reassured her. "It shouldn't take many days before I get the operation of the plant reorganized. And even before I finish the task, if I find it takes longer than I now think it will, I may be able to board a vessel and come down here for a visit. Claudia, why couldn't you arrange a journey"—his tone was eager—"over to Tiberias for another stay in the Tetrarch's Palace? That is, if in the meantime"—his grin lightened the tenseness of the moment—"Aretas hasn't driven him and Herodias away? But if they're still around, well, then I could just by chance select that same time to visit Cornelius." 213

When he could stay with her no longer she summoned the palace sedan-chair bearers and rode with him down to the dock. After he had embarked and the ship was moving across the harbor to gain the open sea beyond the long breakwater, she stepped again into the sedan chair and was borne to the palace.

34

But the biting, sharp winds of spring, sweeping down from the mountains of Judah across the lower Shefelah and the region of the coast, had subsided into the still and enervating heat of summer, and the Centurion Longinus had not yet returned to his post.

Nor had Claudia received any message from him. Sergius Paulus, too, had heard nothing, as she found when on several occasions she had discreetly inquired about the centurion. The Procurator's wife began to wonder if Longinus had been recalled to Rome and sent away by Sejanus on a mission to some remote province of the Empire, perhaps even as far, the gods forbid, as Britannia.

Then one day in late summer Cornelius appeared at the Procurator's Palace. Pilate, it happened, had ridden down the coast to Joppa; Claudia and the centurion could talk freely. Hardly were they seated on the terrace overlooking the Great Sea when she confronted him, eyes solemnly inquiring, her forehead wrinkled.

"Cornelius, what can have happened to Longinus? I haven't had a word from him or concerning him since he left here for the glassworks so many weeks ago. I can't understand...."

"You've no cause to be worried," he interrupted, laughing. "He is still at the glassworks, or at any rate he was when I was there recently. He's been working hard. The plant had deteriorated considerably; he said it required more work than he had anticipated to restore its operation to normal. He's been hoping all along to get back to Caesarea to see you, but he just hasn't had the opportunity. And he thought it best not to send any written messages; unfortunately, there's been no one coming this way with whom he dared entrust a spoken one ... except for me, of course. He gave me a message for you, but I've been delayed getting here. He thinks you heard from him weeks ago." 214

"And what was the message he sent?"

"Just what I've told you." He grinned. "That he was well, working hard, and hoped he would soon be in position to return to Caesarea."

"That was all?"

"Should there have been more?" His eyes were teasing. "Yes, he said to tell you that as far as he was concerned, nothing has changed. He's still looking to the future. Is that the message you sought?"

"Yes, and expected. And should you see him before I do, you may tell him that my message to him is the same. But, Cornelius"—her expression suddenly was earnest, almost pained—"things move so slowly; the future seems so far ahead, and the waiting is so long."

"Maybe not, Claudia. Maybe just around the turn of the road you'll...."

"But I can see no turn."

"The situation out here just now is so explosive that any moment could bring great changes," he insisted, "and overnight the problem you and Longinus have could be solved. Pilate and Herod both could lose their favored positions and, conceivably, their heads. And speaking of Herod reminds me that I was to give you another message, too."

"From whom, Herodias?"

"Yes."

"She wants me to return with you to Tiberias?"

"No, not that. But she does want you to meet her in Jerusalem in October at the Feast of Tabernacles. Pilate undoubtedly will go again this year, and Herod too; after beheading the Wilderness prophet and possibly involving Galilee in a war with Aretas, Antipas will surely want to go up to the Temple to worship the Jewish Yahweh; it's the only way left—aside from dropping Herodias—for him to strengthen himself with his subjects." He paused and leaned forward, smiling. "I'll have to take my century up to Jerusalem, Claudia, as I do on all such occasions when multitudes of Jews assemble there, and I'll try to bring Longinus over to Tiberias to make the journey to Jerusalem with me. If you'll promise to join us there, I'm sure I can promise you I'll have the centurion with me when I come." 215

35

Almost overnight Jerusalem had been transformed.

Through the long drought of the summer months the ancient city had grown more drab with the deepening of fine dust upon its houses, its public buildings, and even upon the resplendent Temple itself.

But now, with the coming of autumn and the annual great Feast of Tabernacles, Jerusalem had bloomed into a veritable forest of greenery. As far as Claudia could see from her perch high on a balcony of the Tower of Antonia—down into the adjoining Temple area, along the terraced rise of Mount Zion, southward to sweltering Ophel and beyond the always smoking gehenna of Hinnom's vale to the bluffs above it on the Bethlehem road, and eastward past the Brook Kidron and the Garden of Gethsemane up the slope of the Mount of Olives—stretched an almost unbroken canopy of green boughs now beginning to wilt. Balconies, roof tops, the grounds about the Temple walls, every unfilled small plot of the cluttered soil of Jewry's holy city, were covered with these improvised, temporary dwellings. 216

The Feast of Tabernacles, Tullia had explained to her mistress, was the Hebrew festival marking the end of the harvesting season and the early beginning of the rains. It was an occasion of national thanksgiving to Yahweh, one that commemorated the Israelites' years of wandering in the desert wilderness where, after their escape from Egyptian bondage, under the leadership of their great law-giver Moses, they had dwelt in booths—they called them tabernacles—made of branches hastily woven together.

"And to this day," Tullia had concluded, "in accordance with the instructions in our sacred writings, every Jew during the Feast of Tabernacles must leave his house and for eight days live in a hut made of the branches of pine or myrtle or olive or palm." The festival occasion, she further pointed out, was one of rejoicing for Yahweh's deliverance of His children from slavery and His establishment of them in their promised land. To honor Yahweh, the celebrants would offer sacrifices each day and follow a prescribed order of worship and praise and thanksgiving. These ceremonies, Tullia declared, were carried out in great dignity and with reverence. Nothing she had ever seen in Rome, the maid was certain, would excel them in pageantry.

"Mistress," she pleaded, "why don't you move from the Palace of the Herods for a day or two to the Procurator's apartment in the Tower of Antonia? From there you could look down on the ceremonial rites being performed at the Temple, and no one would need know that you were watching. And though it would have no interest to you as a service of worship, it should prove entertaining in the same way that the theater in Rome is diverting."

"It might be amusing at that," Claudia had agreed. "And there's nothing else to do in Jerusalem anyway. But how is it, Tullia," she asked, and her expression clearly revealed her puzzlement, "that you know so much about these festival customs? Even if your forebears were Jewish, you were brought up in Rome, and surely you couldn't have learned all this at the synagogue on Janiculum Hill."

"But, Mistress, through the years I have read our sacred scriptures, and I have heard much talk of our laws and customs. And you must know that an Israelite, though he may never set foot in Israel, if he is a true child of the faith, is loyal to our one God." 217

"I know little about Israelites or their Yahweh, and I care less about either"—she smiled—"except for you, and I have never considered you a Jew except perhaps by blood. But as for loyalty, by all the gods, little one, I know you are loyal to me, just as your mother was to mine. All this Yahweh and Temple business, though, confuses rather than interests me. To me it seems the sheerest nonsense. How could any being worthy of being called a god appreciate the sight of poor cattles' throats being slit; how could he enjoy the smell of warm blood and broiling fat? Certainly it nauseates me."

"I have wondered that myself, Mistress," Tullia answered. "But I believe He is pleased because we are seeking to please Him, even though our form of worship may not be too pleasing. Do you understand me, Mistress?"

"Yes, but I believe still that your worship is nothing more than superstition, just as our worship of the innumerable Roman and Greek gods is superstition. But"—she reached over and gently pinched the slave girl's cheek—"I'll do as you suggest; I'll venture to watch the ceremonial at the Temple, and you can tell me what they are doing."

So they had gone up to Antonia and from the balcony had watched the busy movement of the priests and the assembled throngs, many of them pilgrims returned from every province in the Empire, as these earnest Israelites performed the traditional rites of the ancient festival of worship. On her first morning, Claudia had arisen early and had stepped out onto the balcony. The sun was just lifting above the Mount of Olives, but already the Temple was astir, and pilgrims in their many colored robes were swarming into the Court of the Gentiles, the nearer Court of the Women, and the other more sacred precincts permitted to them. In their hands they carried leafed branches.

Claudia stared in rapt fascination at the spectacle below. As she leaned out over the balcony, she scarcely heard Tullia's footsteps approaching behind her.

"Good morning, Mistress."

218

"Good morning," Claudia replied, turning to greet the girl. She pointed downward. "You were right about this offering much in the way of entertainment. It's nearly as good as our Roman games."

Tullia laughed. "Who knows, perhaps you, too, Mistress, may become a convert to our ways."

"Hardly." Claudia shook her head with a wry smile. Then she turned and looked thoughtfully down again at the bustling crowds in the Temple courts. "There's one thing in particular, you know, that I can't understand about the Jewish religion, little one." The half-smile had been replaced by a perplexed frown. "Unless I'm mistaken, the Jews contend that their Yahweh is all-powerful, that he's the only god there is, and that he rules over all peoples; yet they call him the God of Israel and seem to believe that he has no interest in anyone else. Down there, for example"—she pointed toward the Temple—"there are signs warning foreigners not to enter, under pain of death, certain of the sacred places. How do the Jews explain that? It seems to me that they make their Yahweh a sort of tribal god, one having less authority even than our Jupiter. If Yahweh is the god of all the world, how can the Jews claim him as exclusively theirs? And on the other hand, if he is the god and father of all peoples, doesn't that make all peoples brothers?" She shrugged. "I see little sense to ... all this." She broke off with a quick sweep of her hand toward the procession of priests and pilgrims moving down the slope toward the waters of Siloam.

"They do say that such is the teaching of Jesus, that our Yahweh is the father of all peoples, even the pagans who have never heard of Him, that...."

"Jesus?"

"The Galilean. The carpenter, Mistress, of whom the Prophet John declared himself to be the forerunner, you know. He's been teaching down there at the Temple; he came up from Galilee, though he wasn't here at the beginning of the feast, it was said. The priests are bitter toward him, especially Annas and Caiaphas and the Temple leaders; they say he is corrupting our religion."

"Hah! Annas and Caiaphas talk of corruption! I should think they wouldn't have the nerve. But have you seen this Galilean, little one?"

219

"No, Mistress, but I should like to. They say he speaks with great charm and clarity."

"By the gods, I would like to hear him myself. He's the one, isn't he, who Cornelius contends healed his little servant boy? Maybe we could prevail on him to do some other feats of magic."

"But his followers, so I hear, deny that he works magic. They say he does such things of his own power and authority, as the Messiah of God."

"So Cornelius believes, according to Longinus; he thinks the Galilean is a man-god and that he really healed the little boy, but Longinus wasn't that naïve. I wish Longinus were here to see the carpenter and hear his discoursing; I'd like to know *his* opinion of the man."

But Longinus was not in Jerusalem. Cornelius had failed in his promise to bring the centurion to the Feast of Tabernacles. Hardly a week before they were to leave Tiberias, Cornelius had received a message from Longinus saying that the Prefect Sejanus had sent him instructions to board ship at Tyre for Antioch, where he would have business with the Legate Vitellius. What the nature of the business was, Cornelius told Claudia, had not been revealed. Nor had Longinus indicated how long he would be away. Had she known he would not be in the Judaeian capital, Claudia told her maid, she herself would have remained in the provincial capital on the coast. That would have given her two weeks of freedom from Pontius Pilate, at any rate, for Pilate, with a maniple of soldiers and a

retinue of servants, had come up with her to the festival and would probably remain in Jerusalem until the final ceremonies were completed and all the withered booths had been removed.

In late afternoon the Procurator's wife ate an early dinner, and as the sun dropped behind the western walls, she stood again with Tullia at the balcony's parapet and looked down upon the animated movement within the Temple's courts.

"See, Mistress!" Tullia pointed. "They all carry unlighted torches. It will be beautiful, the illumination of the Temple. This is the great event of the festival; it is called the 'Joy of the Feast.' When the sun goes down, a watchman on the western wall of the Temple will give the signal and the candelabra will be lighted. See how high they are, perhaps thirty cubits. The light from them will illuminate the whole Temple area. It will be like nothing you have seen, Mistress!"

220

"Yes, Bona Dea, I agree it will be different. And in Jerusalem, Tullia, you're different. I do believe I've never before seen you so excited."

The service began with a great company of priests and Levites alternating in the antiphonal chant of the Psalms and other sacred Hebrew scriptures. Then, as the shadows lengthened and the quick murk of descending night began to envelop the vast edifice and the thousands massed within it, one of the priests, bearing a long lighted taper, moved through the Court of the Priests and down the steps to the Court of the Women.

"Look, Mistress! See the priest carrying the lighted taper," Tullia said, her enthusiasm mounting. "With it he will light the great candelabra."

The advancing priest paused. "Arise, shine!" his voice suddenly rang out, "for thy Light is come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee!" Deliberately, with all eyes upon him, he lighted first the central candle in the great stand, and then as quickly as he could with the uplifted long taper he touched the flickering flame to each of the three on either side of the central one; when he had finished his task before the first great candelabrum, he crossed with measured tread to the other and lighted it. As he touched the last candle and the flame caught, a great welling up of excited, triumphant song was lifted to the two on the balcony above, one the pagan daughter of Roman emperors and the other, her slave maid, daughter of ancient and buffeted Israel.

"What does the song mean, Tullia?" Claudia asked. "It seems to have a tone of triumph, of victory. Yet how can the people of Israel boast of their victories, if that is what they are doing?"

"It *is* a song of triumph, Mistress," she replied. "It speaks, like the Feast of Tabernacles itself does, of the days when our fathers were led by the God of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. The song recalls, like the flaming candelabra, the long and wearisome journey upward into the promised land when the pillar of cloud led by day and the pillar of fire by night. It is more of the lore of our people. But look! The procession of light is beginning! See the torches!"

221

First came the Levites. In procession they passed the flaming candelabra, and as each man came opposite the blazing, darting fire, he mounted the steps, lifted high his torch, and touched it to the flame. Soon the torches of the Levites, followed by those of the pilgrims, had transformed the entire mountain of the Temple into a blaze of fire.

For a long moment, silent, Claudia stood at the balcony's parapet and studied the procession of torchbearers; their voices, raised in song, filled the night. "It's amazing," she said finally. "I've always thought that the Jewish religion had no joy in it; I thought it was the worship of a stern, vengeful, morose god who was quick to punish any violator of his strict and senseless laws, who demanded bloody sacrifices and fasting and permitted no indulgence in pleasures. But these Jews seem to be having a grand time, almost as though they were devotees of Isis or Moloch."

"Yes, but without the orgies of Isis and Moloch," Tullia explained. "Many persons who are not of our faith do have that opinion of the God of Israel. But we believe that although He is stern and demands that we uphold His laws, He is also a loving God who wants His people to be happy. Some will be dancing here as long as their torches burn, Mistress."

"Well, you may stay out and watch them as long as you like, Tullia, but I'm going to bed."

"One more thing, Mistress," the slave girl asked. "If I may, I should like at sunrise tomorrow to slip down into the Temple courts for the early service."

"Of course, little one," Claudia smiled. "But be careful. And perhaps it would be best if you made no mention of being in the Procurator's household."

222

36

Faintly at first and from afar off the silvery notes of a trumpet floated into her bedchamber. As she seemed to rise slowly upward out of a deep cavern of slumber, she sensed a stirring beside her.

"The morning watch at Castra Praetoria," he said, as in the dim light of breaking day he raised himself on an elbow to look into her face, "and I have early duty."

"But, Longinus," she began a murmured protest, "must you forever be leaving...?"

"Today is very important," he went on, unheeding. "I must meet the Prefect there to begin our journey down to Capri for an audience with the Emperor. Sejanus is going to recommend that Tiberius recall Pontius Pilate and banish him to Gaul and then name me as Procurator. But you are not to go with him into banishment. Instead, you will marry me and...."

"By all the gods! Longinus! Oh, by the Bountiful Mother! So long have we waited...."

She sat up from her pillow. The light was seeping through the narrow window beyond the foot of the bed; the chamber was bursting now with the sound of trumpets. Sleepily, though she was fast coming awake, she felt for the centurion and sought to hold on to the dream, but she knew he was not there. And in a moment's hush between the trumpetings she heard from the room adjoining hers, through the doorway connecting the chambers, the sonorous, heavy snoring of Pontius Pilate.

"Tullia!" she called, keeping her voice down. But the door to the maid's smaller chamber on the side opposite the Procurator's was open; she had hardly expected Tullia to be there. The trumpets below were calling Israel to the sunrise worship, and somewhere in the milling throng of Jerusalem dwellers and pilgrims was her devoted maid.

She pushed down the covering, swung her feet around to the floor, and stood up. Drawing her robe about her, she stepped into her sandals and tiptoed out onto the balcony. Down below in the Temple courts a few torches sputtered sporadically in the strengthening light, and several still burning in the two giant candelabra offered more twisting blue-black smoke than illumination. 223

But there was a glory in the east; behind the rounded crest of the Mount of Olives a giant hand spread fingers of orange and gold and salmon and pink, and as the aureole fanned out higher and wider and its vivid colors swam together in one blazing brightness, the sun ventured to peek above the hilltop. In that instant the golden dome of the Temple flamed, and the topmost stones around the city's western wall caught fire.

A blast of trumpets, silvery, melodious, triumphant, saluted the sun's rising. And then another, and another. Looking down into the Court of the Priests, from which the sound had come, Claudia saw two lavishly caparisoned priests, carrying trumpets and walking abreast, marching toward the lower Court of the Women. They were going down the steps between the two courts when suddenly they paused and, lifting their instruments to their lips, once again blew three blasts. Then they moved austere down the remaining steps and into the court, where they paused and blew three blasts again.

"Can they be sun worshipers, by all the gods?" Claudia murmured as she watched the priests offering what appeared to be homage to the newly risen monarch of the heavens.

The two priests, pacing steadily eastward through the great Court of the Women, stopped near its center and once more blew sharp blasts and then, lowering their trumpets, marched straight toward the Beautiful Gate, the eastern entrance to the court. But before the huge portal they stopped and faced about, so that now their backs were toward the sun.

"Our fathers, who worshiped likewise in this place, turned their backs upon the sanctuary of the Lord and their faces to the sun," they said in chorus, and the words came up distinctly to Claudia, who was able to understand their meaning though she could not comprehend their significance. "But our eyes are turned toward the Lord!" 224

"Then at least they do not worship the sun," she said to herself, "although I look upon the sun as being more godlike than their puny spirit one god."

She stood another moment watching the pageantry below; then her eyes swept beyond the Temple walls to survey the tabernacled city and the area outside its protective walls. Today, she remembered, would see the ending of the Jewish autumn festival, the Israelites' traditional Feast of Tabernacles. And it was well that it should. Already the little green bough shelters were beginning to wilt in the October sun. The pageantry, too, must be losing its luster, even to the people of Israel.

... And Longinus could not come to Jerusalem....

Turning from the parapet, she crossed the balcony and entered her chamber. Taking off her robe, she slipped back into the inviting warmth of the bed.

37

The opening of the bedchamber door awakened Claudia; she sat up in bed.

"I'm sorry, Mistress," Tullia said apologetically as she closed the door behind her. "I thought perhaps you had gone out."

"It's all right. I've slept enough. Those early trumpets awoke me, and I went out on the balcony and watched the services beginning. That was probably just a short while after you left. Then I came back to bed. But why have you returned so soon? Surely that water-pouring ceremony isn't finished yet." She paused and studied the slave maid. "By the gods, Tullia, something's happened. I can see stars in your eyes. And you're all out of breath; you've been

running. Quickly, tell me, what is it?"

225

"Oh, Mistress," Tullia burst out happily, "he's down there! He's down there right now, in the Court of the Gentiles. I ran back to tell you."

"Longinus!" Claudia scrambled to her feet.

The stars dimmed. "I'm sorry, Mistress, I hadn't meant to disappoint you. But yesterday you said you'd like to see him...."

"The Galilean?"

"Yes, Mistress, and he's down there right now. Do you remember that woman who came with the Tetrarch Herod to Rome, the beautiful one called Mary of Magdala?"

"Yes, of course. Why do you ask?"

"I was in the Court of the Women, Mistress, during the early service, when I came upon her. I recognized her, and I knew she was a follower of the Galilean. So I asked her to tell me if he had come to the Feast. She said he had and that even then he was in the Court of the Gentiles over near the Shushan Gate; today, she said, he would be teaching there, no doubt as soon as the service of the water pouring is finished. Soon the procession will return from the Pool of Siloam; it may be that it's already back. If you'd like to eat, Mistress, and then go down to the Court of the Gentiles...."

"But I need not eat just this minute, Tullia. We'll go now. Here," she said, holding out her robe, "help me get dressed. I really would like to see that man and hear him speak"—she smiled—"and witness any feats of magic he might be prevailed upon to perform." But quickly her expression sobered. "Tullia, you'll have to fix me so that no one would even dream he was looking at the Procurator's wife."

"Yes, Mistress, but a veil and simple stola will serve that purpose."

Claudia peeked into the adjoining bedchamber. It was empty. "Pilate no doubt has gone to the Praetorium," she said. "He needn't know I'm going down into the Temple precincts."

With Tullia's aid, she dressed, and they descended to the ground level and went out through the great vaulted doorway on the south side of the Tower. A moment later the two women, heavily veiled, entered the Temple enclosure through the North Gate of Asuppim and headed toward the Soreg, a lacy latticework of carefully carved and interwoven stones four and a half feet high surrounding the Temple itself. From there they turned left and strode eastward through the vast Court of the Gentiles with its jam of worshipers and the idly curious. 226

"Mary said that he usually sits over there"—Tullia pointed toward the cloisters along the eastern wall of the Temple—"near the Shushan Gate." The Shushan Gate was at the northern end of the wall, directly east of the Beautiful Gate. Steps led up from the Court of the Gentiles to the Chel, a corridor running between the Soreg and the walls of the Temple proper, in which sat the resplendent, great Shushan Gate. The Court of the Women, in turn, was several feet higher than the Chel. At the western end of the Court of the Women, centering the wall, was another large opening, the Gate of Nicanor, and directly west of this gate and on a still more uplifted platform, stood the Great Altar. A person at the Gate of Shushan could look above marble steps ascending from one court level to another to the priests performing their orders before this tremendous and imposing pyramidal altar of burnt offerings.

As Claudia and Tullia neared the eastern end of the Soreg they could see the Shushan Gate, but no group was knotted about it. They could look across the cloister and out through the gate to the rise of the Mount of Olives beyond the Brook Kidron far below. "He's not there," Tullia said, her tone revealing disappointment. "Perhaps he went with the procession to the Pool of Siloam and has not yet returned. Surely he will be here soon."

But as they turned the corner to their left, the two women saw a motley throng pushed together in a half circle about the steps that led up to the Chel. "Maybe Jesus is there," Tullia exclaimed, keeping her voice low, for now they were nearing the outer edge of this crowd. She turned to confront a lean and bearded tall Israelite. "We have just come here," she said. "We wonder why all these people are gathered about. Is some rabbi expounding the law?"

"Yes, the Galilean whom some hold to be the Messiah of God. The priests and the scholars have been trying to confuse him, but he has thrown their words back into their teeth." 227

They moved forward into the outer fringe of the group and eased their steps toward the man sitting before the Beautiful Gate until soon they had an unobstructed view of him. From where they stood they could also see through the wide portals of the Beautiful Gate across the Court of the Women and the Gate of Nicanor to the Great Altar, upon which the High Priest Caiaphas, with two other Temple dignitaries assisting him, had tipped the golden ewer of water from the Pool of Siloam as a libation to Yahweh. Many of those now listening to the discourse of the Galilean had been present for the ceremonies of the water pouring, including a small knot of lavishly robed Israelites whom Tullia immediately recognized as the men who had been attempting to confound Jesus with their hate-inspired but politely phrased questions.

Evidently one of these men, a stout Pharisee from the looks of his garb, had just so challenged the Galilean. But if Jesus was perturbed, he did not indicate it. He was speaking calmly, and his resonant but gentle Galilean Aramaic came clearly to them above the din of the cattle in the stalls along the northern cloisters. "He doesn't speak with the fire and thunder of that Wilderness prophet," Claudia observed in whispered comment. "He seems not to be

the fanatical type, and I'm surprised. He's handsome, too, and I'm even more surprised at that. I thought he would be another lean and burnt, arm-waving, shouting fanatic, one with a long messy beard, flaming eyes, and soiled clothing—a generally anemic look. But this one's a strong fellow, though his manner's gentle enough. Even so, there's something odd about this. I wonder...."

But suddenly she stopped speaking, for the rabbi had raised his bronzed hand, long forefinger extended, to point to one of the Pharisees who had been questioning him. "You say that I am but testifying to myself and that therefore my testimony is invalid. But I say unto you, my brother, that my testimony is valid. Is it not written in the law that the testimony of two witnesses establishes the fact? Then my testimony is true, for I bear witness and likewise my Father that sent me bears witness. That makes two witnesses; that establishes the truthfulness of the testimony I have borne." 228

"Who is this father of whom he speaks?" asked a man standing near the two women. "Is he not the son of a carpenter of Nazareth long dead? How then does he say that his father's testimony corroborates his own?"

"He's not speaking of his natural father," another man standing near-by replied. "He means the God of Israel as his father."

"But isn't that blasphemy? How can a man call himself the son of Israel's God?"

"But if indeed he is the Messiah..." The second man paused, his hand on the questioner's arm, for Jesus had arisen and, turning, was pointing toward the high altar before the Holy of Holies. "Behold, I am the water of life! If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." The Galilean spoke in calm tones but with warmth of feeling, and in the pause that followed none of his hearers spoke. Again he pointed, this time toward the giant candelabra below the Gate of Nicanor in the Court of the Women; last night the great court and all the environs of the Temple had been ablaze with light from the candelabra and the hundreds of flaming torches. "I am the light of the world!" he declared. "He that follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life!"

Claudia nudged her maid. "What does he mean, Tullia?" she whispered.

"I'm not sure I know, Mistress," the girl answered. "But I take it he's using a kind of symbolism that the Jews can understand. He must be referring to the ceremony of water pouring and to last night's illumination of the Temple."

But the carping Pharisees and the other Temple leaders pretended likewise not to understand.

"The water of life, the light of the world. And your father being a witness to the truthfulness of the testimony you present. These things are incomprehensible to us," one of them declared. "Rabbi, wasn't your father a carpenter in Galilee? And where is he to support your witness? Isn't he dead? How then can you say that you and your father make two witnesses? We have not seen your father, nor have we heard him speak." 229

"You speak the truth when you say that you have not seen my Father." His voice was calm, even gentle, but his eyes were filled with fire. "Neither have you seen me. For if you had seen me, you would likewise have seen my Father, for the Father is in me and I am in the Father. My Father and I are one."

"Is he speaking of the God of Israel as his father?" A portly Pharisee near the two women had turned to speak with one of his colleagues. "Is that the meaning of his strange utterance?"

"I think so."

"Blasphemy!" declared the questioner. "He makes himself one with God!"

But Jesus had heard.

"No," he declared, looking the fat one full in the face. "Only truth. And if you knew me and were willing to live by my teaching, you would know the truth, and the truth would make you free. You would not walk in darkness, but in the light of the world, in the fullness of life."

"But, Rabbi, we are free. We are children of Abraham. We are not slaves. How can you say that we would be made free? We have never been slaves to any man."

"Any man who sins is a slave, and no slave is a son of the house; yet if the son of the house sets him free, he is no longer a slave."

"But we *are* sons of Abraham. We are no bastards. We are the children of the God of Israel."

Jesus leveled his forefinger at the protesting Pharisee. "No, you are not the sons of the Father; you are rather sons of the Evil One, for he is the enemy of truth and you likewise are its enemies." His words were uttered in calmness, but they were emphatic, and his eyes flashed. "You will neither hear the truth nor comprehend it."

"But, Rabbi, you must be mad."

Jesus smiled, and Claudia, who had been watching him in complete fascination since her first sight of him, thought she detected a hint of restrained amusement in his dark eyes. "No," he said, "I am not mad; I speak the truth, and whoever lives by the truth, my brother, will not even see death." 230

"But haven't all the fathers in ages before—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Isaiah, all the righteous ones of old—haven't they all met death? Then how can you say that others will not die?"

"I dare say, he is not speaking of physical death," Tullia whispered. "It's obvious he's referring to the afterlife of the spirit. But these sniveling Pharisees don't even want to understand him."

Yet Jesus did not answer the Temple leader, for in the rear of the press about him a commotion had arisen and the Galilean had turned from the questioning Pharisee to look out over the heads of the people now craning their necks to see the cause of the tumult. The questioner and his little knot had turned, too; the Galilean's inquisitor, Tullia surmised, was quite willing for the exchange to be ended, for he had not been faring well in matching wits and words with the tall one from Nazareth.

Tullia and Claudia, too, had twisted about to look eastward toward the sounds that so precipitately had disturbed the strangely inspiring discourse and the carping questions of the Nazarene's challengers. In that same instant they saw, out in front of the gate of Shushan, several coarse men half-dragging, half-carrying a bedraggled Jewish woman toward the throng ringed about Jesus. As the crowd opened a lane inward to the Galilean, the men rushed the poor creature toward him and savagely thrust her to the ground at his feet. A man who had been walking in the rear of the pitiful procession, whom Tullia took to be a minor Temple priest, stepped in front of Jesus.

"Rabbi, this woman has been taken in the act of adultery, in the very act, Rabbi, as the witnesses will testify. Now the law of Moses says that such a woman must be stoned." He paused, and his eyes surveyed the half circle of intent, set faces. Along the rim heads nodded in agreement.

"Is that really the law of the Israelites?" Claudia whispered. "Stone to death a woman for such offense, by all the gods!"

"Yes, it's the old Mosaic law, Mistress."

"That is barbarous, Tullia. By all the gods, if I were a Jew, then they...." But she paused, for the man had turned back to question the Galilean. "You, however, Rabbi, have been teaching a new law. What would you say to her punishment? Must she be stoned in accordance with our ancient laws or not?" 231

Jesus was eying the poor woman, who had scrambled to her feet and was trying to smooth out her disordered robe. Frightened and humiliated, she kept her eyes on the ground; then, as the man finished his question and the suddenly quiet throng listened for the reply, she raised them and looked, with a mixture of defiance, contempt, and fright, at the tall bronzed man before her.

"But what can he say?" Claudia whispered. "Aren't they trying to trap him into advocating violation of their laws?"

"Yes, Mistress. And they know, too, that they have no authority to stone anyone to death unless the person is first condemned by the Procurator. Either way, it's a trap they're trying to set."

"Then I shall speak to Pilate...." She stopped; Tullia had laid a gently restraining hand on her arm, for Jesus had bent down suddenly and without offering to answer the Jew who had questioned him had begun to trace with extended forefinger certain markings in the dust of the marble pavement.

About him stood the silent crowd. Some seemed fearful of the horror they might soon be witnessing; others, their cold smiles attesting to their sadistic natures, were waiting expectantly to witness the woman's death agonies; only a few solemn faces revealed concern and deep pity. But the little knot of Pharisees stood with arms folded across their rounded paunches; their smug smiles betrayed their confidence that at last, on the final day of the great festival, they had run to earth this annoying and dangerous young Galilean who had been so cleverly eluding them.

Then, raising his head, Jesus faced the man who had questioned him. "You have testified aright as to the law of our father Moses," he said, his voice calm, deliberate. "The law of Moses commands that the woman ... and the man ... taken in adultery be stoned. But you ask me my interpretation of this law?"

"We do, Rabbi. What will you do with this woman?" The man looked about the semicircle of cold, hard faces, and one by one the Pharisees nodded approval of his questioning. "Rabbi, what is your law in this case?"

"I answer you, my brother, in this wise, and this is my interpretation of the law. Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone." His quiet, dark eyes rested a moment on the startled countenance of the man who had just propounded the question, and then quickly they moved along the line of the challenging Temple leaders. 232

Now once more he bent forward and with stiffened forefinger traced symbols in the dust.

For a long moment his eyes remained fixed upon the pavement. When he looked up, the little group of sneering Pharisees had departed. The others in the ring about him had fallen back from the steps on which he sat and stood regarding him with frank amazement; some of them revealed their delight at his having confounded his enemies, and on the faces of others could be seen a heightened responsiveness to the young man's teachings and for the Galilean himself a strengthened affection.

"Woman, where are your accusers?" he asked the amazed poor creature, from whom in the swift moment of his answer had fled all trace of defiant insolence. "Does no man remain to condemn you?"

She lifted her tear-streaked face to him. "No man, Lord."

"Neither do I condemn you. Go now, and sin no more."

Claudia could not understand the woman's murmured reply, but on her face clearly discernible was a look of

radiance as she bowed to the Galilean and, turning, slipped away out of the crowd. At the same time the Procurator's wife noticed a large, bushy-bearded fellow, wide of shoulders and heavily muscled, pushing through the throng from the direction of the Gate Shalleketh. He walked up to Jesus, who had stood up as the woman was leaving. "Master, you have been here a long while; you must be weary. Let us go over to Bethany to rest a spell."

"That's the fisherman I saw one day at Tiberias," whispered Tullia. "He is of the Galilean's company; his name, I think, is Simon."

The crowd now began to disperse, for Jesus and the big fisherman were moving off toward the Gate Shushan. They came past the two women, so close to them that Claudia could have reached out and touched the tall Galilean. Their eyes met; he smiled and passed on. She stood rooted, watching the two until they had passed out of sight down the slope toward the Brook Kidron. "He seemed to recognize me," she said to herself, as suddenly a fanciful thought crossed her mind. "But of course he didn't; he's never in all his life seen me before."

With the two men's disappearance, however, the spell was broken. Claudia caught her maid's arm. "We'd better be going now," she said. But she was still lost in her own thoughts; they had rounded the corner of the Soreg and were nearing the North Gate of Asuppim before she spoke again. "By the gods, what a man! What a marvelous, strange Jew. And he didn't do any feats of magic either. Little one, I'm so glad you brought me down here."

"Mistress, now that you've seen him and heard his discourse, even though for but a few minutes, what is your opinion of him? Do you think that perhaps he really is the Messiah of Israel?"

"I know nothing of the Messiah of Israel ... and care nothing. And this idea of a man's being a god, even though we Romans are supposed to believe that the gods come to earth in the form of men, is just as incomprehensible to me as it is to Longinus. Maybe that's because I don't believe in the gods in the first place." They were going through the great North Gate of Asuppim when Claudia stopped and caught Tullia's arm. "Nevertheless, little one—and you asked me my opinion of him—there is something tremendously different about that man. I'm sure I have never encountered another like him. He's a quick thinker and able to out-wit his enemies, and he's evidently a good and just man. But there's something else"—she paused, her forehead creased in a frown—"something to me, at any rate, mystifying. The way he looked at me, Tullia...." Her solemn expression relaxed into a quick, warming smile. "Perhaps he *is* your Messiah of the Jews, little one, whatever that means!"

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38

On her return to Caesarea from the Feast of Tabernacles, Claudia learned from Sergius Paulus that Longinus had sailed for Rome. The message from the centurion to the commander of the Roman constabulary had been brought by a ship's master who had sailed southward from the Antioch port of Seleucia shortly after Longinus had gone aboard a ship there for his voyage to the capital.

The message had been brief, the commander said; its purpose was to let him know that Longinus had been sent to Rome by the Legate Vitellius on what the legate must have considered an urgent mission, probably to the Prefect Sejanus.

"Longinus must have sailed from Seleucia on one of the last boats out," Sergius observed. "From now until spring there'll be few crossings; any ship attempting to make it will be braving the heavy winds." He smiled wryly. "It must have been important business the legate was sending him on."

Claudia suspected that Longinus was going to the capital to relay the legate's report on the situation in Palestine. Particularly important, she knew, would be the question of whether or not King Aretas was planning to attack Herod and thereby involve the whole Palestinian region in war. But she had no direct message from the centurion.

Longinus was acting wisely, she realized, in sending her no written communication. He could hardly evolve any innocent appearing reason for writing her, and it would be impossible to send her such a message without Pilate's learning about it, and possibly even the Prefect. And any message sent would of necessity be innocuous. But as the weeks pushed deeper and deeper into winter and no word of him came to her at all, she began to wonder if he would return to Palestine or if, the gods forbid, Sejanus might have sent him once more to Germania or Gaul or to some other post far remote from the now increasingly dreary Palestine.

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Despite the fact that it was Herodias who had urged her to go up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, the two women had hardly seen one another during those days in Israel's capital. Claudia recalled that even then the Tetrarchess had seemed somewhat reserved. And once when mention was made of the journey of Longinus to Antioch in response to the summons of the Legate Vitellius, Herodias had appeared to grow even more coldly formal. Perhaps the Tetrarchess suspected, Claudia thought at the time, that Longinus was reporting on Herod's visit to Machaerus and the appearance there of the ambassadors from King Aretas, and even of her own bizarre conduct at the Tetrarch's birthday banquet. Nor had Herodias, as they were preparing to leave Jerusalem, invited her to come to Tiberias.

And at the Feast neither she nor Pilate had seen Antipas. She wondered if perhaps he, too, might have suspected that Longinus was even then in Antioch reporting what he had seen and heard at Machaerus. But her failure to be honored by the Tetrarch in Jerusalem troubled her not at all. She had less respect for him, she confessed to herself, than she had for the Procurator. And she hoped that Longinus was finding opportunity for dropping some poisoned, if discreet, words into the ears of Sejanus concerning Pontius Pilate and his continuing difficulties with the Jews.

Nor was the Procurator's administration of affairs in Judaea, as the winter advanced, serving to establish him in better favor with the people he was governing. Stubborn and unimaginative, he steadfastly refused either to learn anything or forget anything. Scorning his subordinate officials and refusing to give consideration to their counseling, fearful of his superiors, including the Legate Vitellius and particularly the Prefect Sejanus, Pilate provided no stable rule of Judaea; his administration vacillated from fierce oppression and arbitrary action to cowardly yielding to priestly demands. His tax gatherers, working through the despised publicans, those native hirelings of Rome whom the Israelites looked upon with loathing as traitors to Israel and Israel's Yahweh, demanded and received exorbitant tribute in money and produce of the land; this did not add to the Procurator's popularity among the Jews. Both the people and the Temple leaders were growing increasingly enraged. 236

The natural breach between the Procurator and the Tetrarch, too, was widening as the weeks went by; an incident at the Temple during one of the great festival occasions in which Pilate's soldiers had slain a group of roistering Galileans had infuriated Herod Antipas. And Pilate's effort to use Temple funds in the building of an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem had evoked the bitter animosity of the Temple leadership. On all sides, then, the Procurator, beginning with his flaunting of the Roman ensigns in Jerusalem shortly after his arrival in Judaea, had been strengthening rather than weakening the natural hostility the Israelites had for the representatives of conquering Rome.

All this Claudia had observed; she wondered how long this mounting burden of tension and hate could continue to build upon the broad shoulders of Pontius Pilate before inevitably it should topple him from the Procuratorship. The answer, she was confident, lay not in Judaea, but in Rome. Pilate would last only so long as he did not too greatly displease Sejanus. And from the moment the tribute from Judaea to Rome ... and Sejanus ... began to shrink, she reasoned, her spouse's days as Procurator would be numbered.

... Perhaps Sejanus may have begun to suspect already that Pilate's fingers have become sticky, that too large a proportion of the revenues are failing to reach Rome; perhaps he has revealed, or hinted, his suspicions to Longinus, and Longinus will tell me everything when he returns.

... If he does return. But surely he will be back in Caesarea when winter relents and calming weather permits the ships to resume their sailing. Surely he will arrive in time to go with us to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover....

Thinking one day of the coming Feast, she recalled her earlier visit with Tullia to the Temple. "Do you remember that last day of the Feast of Tabernacles?" she asked, turning to her slave maid. The girl nodded and smiled. "That Galilean," Claudia continued, "your Messiah of the Jews, I wonder what has become of him. Do you suppose he'll return to the Jewish capital for the Passover festival?" 237

"I would say so, Mistress," Tullia answered. "Every devout Jew tries to go up for the Passover Feast. And certainly the Galilean is a devout Jew. Even though the Temple priests are bent on destroying him, I'm sure he will wish to go there to worship."

"If he does, maybe we'll have an opportunity to hear him again ... and perhaps this time he will perform some feat of magic."

"But, Mistress, those who hold him to be the Messiah insist that he does not work magic; they declare he does his miracles of healing by the will of God."

She smiled. "Well, however he does them—and even from you, little one, I've heard reports that he does—is no concern of mine. But should he come up to the Temple and perform some such feat, either by his own cleverness or with the aid of your Yahweh, I would like to be there when he did it."

"But, Mistress, you saw him that day they dragged the woman before him...."

"Yes, but his saving her from that mob was not magic, little one. That was only the working of a quick intelligence and a good heart. But they say he can make lame persons walk again and blind persons see. And Cornelius, you remember, declared he healed his little servant boy, though Longinus thinks it was only a coincidence that the boy's fever broke just at the same time the Galilean supposedly was curing him. Cornelius even believes that the carpenter once actually restored to life the son of a widow; he told me they were bearing the young man to the tomb when the Galilean happened along and brought him back to life. Of course, the boy may have been in a trance; certainly no sensible person can believe that he was really dead and then came back to life when the Galilean said some mysterious words and made some queer motions over him." She paused and looked Tullia in the eyes. "Or do you, little one?"

"But if he is actually the son of our God...."

"Oh, you gullible Jews, even you, Tullia." Her countenance revealed an amused tolerance. "And Cornelius. A soldier of Rome. But how, by all the gods, Tullia, can any present-day person of education and culture embrace such blatant superstition to believe that a man could come to earth as a god, even if he could believe that there are gods in the first place?" 238

But Tullia skillfully evaded answering the question. "If you saw him restore to life a man who you knew was dead, what would you say about him then, Mistress?"

"When I see him do that, little one, I'll tell you then."

Nevertheless, Claudia had not dismissed the Galilean from her thoughts, for that night she dreamed about him. It

was a confused and illogical arrangement of stories she had heard about Jesus, interwoven with the experience she and Tullia had had that day at the Temple during the final exercises of the Feast of Tabernacles. In the dream she and Longinus had strolled with Cornelius down from the Tower of Antonia into the Court of the Gentiles. Rounding a corner of the Soreg, the three had come upon a throng ringed about the Galilean. They had pushed forward to the inner circle, and there, they had discovered on the stones of the court at the carpenter's feet a crushed and bloody woman.

"Rabbi," a burly fellow beside the woman was saying, "this woman is dead. We caught her in the act of adultery, and in accordance with the law of our father Moses we stoned her to death. I ask you, Rabbi, did not we do well in thus upholding the ancient law of Israel?"

"It is the law that the woman and the man taken in adultery be stoned to death," the Galilean replied, and then his eyes flamed and his voice took on a new intensity, "but you who stoned her, were you without sins?" Then he lowered his eyes to the stones beside the dead woman and began with his forefinger to trace symbols in the dust. After a moment he stood up and, bending down, caught the stiffened body underneath his arms and raised it, unbending, until it stood upright.

"Remember," said Cornelius, "she is dead, completely dead; see her mangled face, her crushed skull. Watch the Galilean."

Jesus was steadying the rigid corpse with one hand. Now he raised his other hand to a position above her head and began to intone words that to Claudia were strange and utterly incomprehensible. 239

"Watch now," said Cornelius. "Keep your eyes on him. And, remember, the woman is dead; there is no life in her, none."

Incredulous, their eyes straining, they saw the stiffened limbs beginning to relax and the head bend forward slightly; the crushed bones of the shattered face rounded outward, the torn and bruised flesh smoothed, the clotted blood melted away, and the desecrated ghastly countenance was restored to a calm beauty; the woman, looking now into the serene face of the Galilean, smiled.

"By all the great gods ..." But Longinus hushed precipitately, for Jesus was speaking to the woman, now fully alert. "No man condemns you, my sister, and neither do I," Jesus said, as he pointed toward her executioners, now slinking away toward the Gate of Shushan. "Go, and sin no more."

Longinus turned now to the Procurator's wife, and on his face she saw an expression of utter amazement. "But, Claudia, the woman was dead! Her head was crushed; her face was a bloody pulp. And now, look! She is walking away, around the corner of the Soreg! The Galilean, Claudia, he must be a god! By all the gods, Claudia, this man must be a god! He must be...."

But Longinus' voice was fading, and he was receding, slipping away, and so were Cornelius and the Galilean and the woman....

Claudia opened her eyes; her chamber was flooded with light. She closed them again, trying to recapture the scene in the great court of the Temple. But the dream had fled. "Bona Dea," she said aloud. "It was so real. That woman. And the Galilean. And Cornelius and Longinus. So vivid. Maybe"—the notion suddenly occurred to her—"I'm dreaming now, maybe I'm dreaming that I was dreaming."

She sat up, swung her feet around to the floor, stretched and yawned. Then quickly she arose and crossing to the window, looked down at the ships in the harbor. Bright sunlight flashed from the hulls and the billowing sails. On the docks slaves struggled with casks and crates as they loaded and unloaded vessels. The world she was seeing was real; she stood looking through her window upon things tangible and comprehensible. The dream, with 240 all its implications of the inscrutable, was gone, vanished.

But she was not to forget it entirely. One day Tullia revealed that while at the market place she had encountered some travelers from Galilee who had gone up to Jerusalem and were returning by way of Caesarea. On their journey, they told her, they had come upon the Galilean and several of his band in a hamlet in the mountains of Ephraim. Jesus had returned to Galilee from the Feast of Tabernacles, but after several weeks he had gone back for the Feast of Dedication. From Jerusalem he had retired into Peraea.

As Tullia related the story she had been told, her eyes began to shine. "While he was on the other side of the Jordan," she went on, "he received a message from Bethany...."

"Bethany?"

"It's a small village a few miles—a mile or so—just west of Jerusalem, Mistress."

"What was the message?"

"Jesus had three friends who lived there, a man and his two sisters. While he was over beyond the Jordan he had word that the man was near death. So he and his band returned to Bethany. When they got there, they found that his friend had been dead four days."

"And the Galilean brought him back to life?"

"Yes, Mistress! That's what the travelers said."

Claudia laughed. "Cornelius should have been there. No doubt, though, he's already heard about it. And, of

course, he believes the story.”

“But you don’t, Mistress?”

Claudia wasn’t sure that the servant woman was teasing. “No, Tullia, I don’t,” she replied. “Very probably this story has been repeated many times and has been added to by each teller. No doubt it was like the one Cornelius was telling about the widow’s son, or even the incident in which his own little slave boy was supposed to have been cured by the Galilean. Obviously, the man at Bethany was not dead; no doubt they thought he was....”

“But, Mistress, they said he had been in the tomb four days.”

“They said it, yes. Perhaps he hadn’t been entombed that long; but if he had, what of it? He wouldn’t have suffocated; tombs aren’t sealed that securely. In all probability the man was in a trance when they put him away; no doubt the carpenter roused him from the trance into which he had fallen.” 241

“Mistress, you have little faith in the Galilean.” Tullia’s dark eyes were serious now. “You cannot see how he could be the Messiah of the Jews and armed with unearthly power, can you?”

“I don’t believe that any man can restore life to another man, if that’s what you mean, little one. I cannot believe that any human possesses supernatural power; in fact, as I have told you many times, I doubt the existence of supernatural beings, including your Yahweh.” She laughed again. “But you and Cornelius outnumber me. I should have Longinus here to support me.”

But when a few weeks later the Centurion Longinus did sail into the harbor at Caesarea, Claudia had no longer a thought for the Galilean mystic and his reported wonder-working.

The centurion journeyed on a coastal vessel bound from Seleucia to Alexandria. He had sailed from Rome as soon as weather conditions permitted; from Seleucia he had moved on to Antioch to report to the Legate Vitellius. Returning a few days later, he had boarded another vessel destined for the Palestinian ports and Alexandria.

On coming ashore at Caesarea the centurion went first to the garrison headquarters and reported to Sergius Paulus. That duty completed, he visited the Procurator’s Palace, ostensibly to pay his respects to Pontius Pilate. The Procurator, polite but coldly formal, talked with him for only a moment before excusing himself and leaving the palace. Longinus, remarking about it to Claudia, wondered if the Procurator was finally becoming jealous.

“No, he isn’t jealous, by all the gods, and that makes me furious with him!” Claudia had answered. “But he may suspect that you’ve been spying on him and that Vitellius called you to Antioch to report on his administration of affairs in Judaea and then sent you to Rome to relay information and suggestions to Sejanus.”

“He would be entirely right, too, in thinking so. And you can add old Herod Antipas to my watched list.” He thought, with sudden amusement, of the third name on the list given him by Sejanus when first the Prefect sent him out to Palestine, but he did not comment. “And what I told the Prefect about both of them, for the Legate Vitellius and from my own observations, didn’t make them any more secure in their positions, by the gods!” 242

Quickly he related his experiences in Rome; he had met several times with Sejanus, once to discuss ways of increasing the output of the glassworks in Phoenicia. On another occasion the two had gone out to Capri for an audience with Tiberius. “The Emperor asked about his beloved stepdaughter,” he said, “but I professed to have little information about you. Sejanus also quizzed me—I’m sure he still suspects us—but he, too, learned nothing.”

“But what is going to happen, Longinus—about us, I mean—and when? Is there any likelihood still of Pilate’s being recalled ... soon?”

“Yes, I’d say there was. I know Sejanus is losing patience with Pilate; he seems to hear everything that happens out here, and Pilate’s inability to rule Judaea without continually provoking turmoil and protesting by the Jews angers the Prefect. The only thing that’s kept Pilate as Procurator this long, I suspect, is the fact that Sejanus apparently doesn’t suspect that Pilate is dipping too heavily into the taxes, if he is ... and I can’t say yet that he is. That was one question he kept coming back to in talking with me, if there was any evidence that the Procurator was not sending to Rome all the revenues he was supposed to.”

“Did the Prefect indicate that he might call Pilate to Rome for questioning?”

“I couldn’t say that he did. But if the Procurator should be ordered to the capital to justify his administration of Judaea, he won’t be returned, you can be sure. The same thing is true of Herod Antipas. I believe the Procurator and the Tetrarch stand in precarious positions; the next few months could determine the fate of both.”

Longinus left the palace soon after Pilate had departed; he and Claudia, they agreed, would meet again when the opportunity was afforded. But that opportunity did not come quickly; he did not return to the palace until the Procurator summoned him there to discuss plans for the forthcoming journey to Jerusalem. 243

A week later the Procurator and his party, with Longinus commanding one of the escorting centuries, set out for Israel’s capital and the great Feast of the Passover.



39

The caravan from Galilee had halted on the plain before Jericho for rest and the midday meal, and now the Tetrarch's party and the escorting soldiers of Cornelius' century were preparing to resume their journey. Two days and a half of steady traveling southward had brought them from Tiberias through the rapidly greening gorge of the Jordan, and soon they would face the most grueling and dangerous part of the journey, the steep and boulder-locked climb to Jerusalem.

Centurion Cornelius, who had been making a quick inspection of the assembled legionaries, approached Herod Antipas and saluted. "Sire, I need now to determine your wishes"—he bowed to Herodias—"and the wishes of the Tetrarchess, for the remainder of our journey up to Jerusalem. If you wish to rest awhile, we could make camp here and leave early in the morning for Jerusalem. Or we could move on now and camp for the night where the Jericho road begins its ascent to Jerusalem. But if you prefer, we can set out now and not stop until we reach the capital, though it will probably be well past nightfall before we enter the city."

"Are you fearful of traveling the Jericho road after the sun has set, Centurion?" Antipas inquired. "Do you think that perhaps robbers or zealot bands might sweep down on us from the rocks?"

"I have no fear, Sire; certainly none, if they knew our strength, would attempt it. And before we enter that region, I'll rearrange our order of march to strengthen our guard against a surprise attack."

"Then I suggest that we continue on to Jerusalem today," Herodias spoke up. "We can rest better tomorrow in the palace than we can here in camp, even though"—she turned malevolent eyes on the Tetrarch, and her tone was bitterly sarcastic—"we shall be lodging in the old Hasmonean Palace in order that our Palace of the Herods 248 may be occupied by the Procurator and his wife."

"Yes, the Tetrarchess is right, Centurion," Antipas agreed complaisantly. "Let's push on to Jerusalem today." He ignored his wife's caustic remark. "We'll have tonight and all tomorrow to rest before the start of the Passover celebration."

Beyond Jericho, where the Peraean road joined the road up from Galilee and one that came down along the western side of the Jordan from the region of Ephraim, the way began to fill with pilgrims going up to Israel's capital for the annual great spring festival of the Passover. As the caravan neared the point where the road began its steep climb, Cornelius called a halt. While the Tetrarch and Herodias were having a brief respite from their saddles, he called in his legionaries and changed the pattern of their advance. Down through the Jordan valley they had been moving in column along the roadway with guards ahead of and behind the Tetrarch's party and only now and then a few soldiers on the flanks.

But now Cornelius gave orders to Decius to divide the century into three groups, the largest of which would continue along the Jericho road, while the other two would move forward with the Tetrarch's group, one on its right flank, the other on the left, and each several hundred yards from the road.

"I'm not expecting any trouble," he explained, "but if there are any Zealots lying in wait for us, in all probability they'll be up there in that defile where the road cuts through the rocks. You men out on the flanks will be able to beat them off; if they're crouched beside the road, we'll trap them between your columns and us."

When the division of the century had been completed, the centurion had a final warning. "Stay abreast of us, and keep in contact. And now, let's get moving. Men, keep your eyes open. These Zealots are bent on killing every Roman in Palestine. They're clever, and they know every foot of ground in this region."

The steep rise of the narrow Jericho road and the push of pilgrims trudging ahead slowed the progress of the caravan, and it was nearing sunset when once more Cornelius halted the column. "It's been a hard climb, and the animals are laboring," he explained to the Tetrarch. "A short rest will refresh us for the last few miles into Jerusalem. Soon we'll be past the boulders and can move faster. And with danger of assault by robbers 249 ended, we can pull in our flanking files. So we should be approaching Jerusalem by nightfall."

But the centurion had spoken too quickly. They went hardly a mile farther and were moving slowly through the last narrow defile in the ascending road before it veered sharply around screening boulders to come on a level plateau extending to the vicinity of Bethany; the caravan was strung out in a long column and the advance guard had disappeared around the turn in the gorge-like roadway. In the instant that Herod and the Tetrarchess, with Cornelius and several of the escorting legionaries just ahead of or behind them, had advanced into the narrowest portion of the rock-walled canyon, they heard a sudden commotion above them. Looking up, they saw on each side of the pass, glaring down upon them and with spears poised, a group of grizzled, fierce-eyed insurgents.

"Halt, Roman dogs!" shouted a hulking, reddish-bearded fellow, as he drew back his spear menacingly. "Get down from your beast before I nail you to his belly like a thief to his cross! And you"—with his free hand he gestured toward the Tetrarch—"you traitor to Israel, you fawning puppet of evil Rome, stay where you are! You, too"—his

angry black eyes were studying Herodias—"you adulterous sharer of your uncle's bed, don't you move!"

"Who are you? What do you want?" Cornelius demanded loudly, in the hope that his soldiers in the flanking columns would hear.

"You needn't be screaming, soldier," the burly fellow said calmly. "There's nobody to help you. We have you surrounded. See?" He pointed to his men in the rocks on the other side of the road. "One wrong move and we'll stick your carcasses full of spears. And you needn't be hoping for help from those up ahead"—he motioned—"or down there." He threw back his bearish great head and roared his laughter. "We have them cornered, too." Then suddenly he was scowling again. "You dogs of Rome! Throw down your weapons! Quickly, before we forget ourselves and let our spears fly!"

"Do as he says, men," Cornelius commanded, dropping his sword. "But what do you want?" he asked the highwaymen's leader again. He had decided that the safest course would be to pretend that he knew 250 nothing of the rebel group, that ruthless party of guerrilla-fighting revolutionaries known as Zealots who had sworn not to rest until every imperialist Roman had been vanquished from their nation's soil. "We have brought little money," he said casually. "We aren't Jews, you know; we aren't going up to Jerusalem to purchase animals for the Passover sacrifices."

The centurion's thrust at the Israelites seemed to incense the fellow. "No, you mongrel of a Roman," he roared, "nor would your sacrifice be acceptable to Israel's God were you of a mind to offer it! Now get down, all you Romans! We're taking your horses. But you and your woman, Herod, stay where you are. We're taking you with us for ransom, and if the money isn't quickly forthcoming to redeem you"—he tugged at his flaring dirt-caked beard and once again laughed uproariously—"we'll skin you and one dark night pin your worthless hides to the door of old Herod's Palace." But quickly his demeanor changed again. He turned to glare at his comrades. "Get down there and pick up their weapons," he commanded, "and mount the horses. We've got to be getting back into the hills. And you, Bildad and Achbor, I'll hold you accountable for the Tetrarch. Dysmas and Cush, you take charge of the woman." His sneering countenance softened into an evil grinning. "And see that no harm comes to her. I may wish myself to examine her seductive charms."

Antipas sat staring stonily ahead, his countenance a frozen mask of fear. But anger added a flush to the cheeks of the frightened Tetrarchess. She did not venture, however, to challenge the man's insulting remark.

The revolutionaries scampered like sure-footed mountain goats down from the rocks and quickly assembled the swords that Cornelius' soldiers had thrown to the ground. The leader, who had stayed in his position atop an overjutting boulder, watched eagle-eyed along with several of his band who had continued to stand guard. "Issachar, you and Nadab see to the weapons those frightened dogs have thrown down," he called. "See 251 that not one remains to them when we're gone. Now, Achbor and you, Bildad, get started with the Tetrarch, and let the woman follow. Men, mount the horses"—he paused an instant to watch one of his men who was having trouble getting into the saddle—"all you who know how to ride a horse ... and Coz, you don't, I see."

"But you can't get away into the rocks with these horses. You have our swords; why don't you leave us the horses...?"

"And let you fly into Jerusalem and have old Pilate's soldiers combing through the hills for us? Oh, no, Roman dog, we aren't fools. You'll stand in your tracks until we're gone, or we'll come charging back and slit your throats and leave you here for the vultures to clean your bones." He suddenly whirled about, for from behind him came the sound of men running through the rocks back from the road.

"Romans! Romans!" Cornelius heard someone shouting in Aramaic. "Fly! Roman soldiers!" In the next instant a bearded, coarse fellow burst into view above the deep-cut trail. "We can't stand against them, Bar Abbas; there are too many of them!" he shouted. "We'd better get across the road and into those rocks!" He looked down and spied his companions and their captured party. "The Romans!" he yelled. "Fly men! There are too many for us to fight them!"

"Fly!" yelled the gang's leader. "Go out through that ravine!" He pointed. "Get yourselves lost in the rocks, and hurry!" He turned to the man who had just rushed up to him. "How many did there appear to be, Hamor?"

"Many. I could not count them. We speared several before they discovered us...."

"Fools! If you'd held your peace and stayed under cover, they wouldn't have known you were there. Now you've caused us to be flushed out. By the beard of the High Priest, Hamor, haven't I warned you...?"

"But we thought there were only a handful...."

"Through that way!" Bar Abbas turned his back toward the road and was signaling the revolutionaries racing toward him. Cornelius, who since his first sight of the burly fellow had suspected he was the notorious 252 Zealot marauder, couldn't see the fleeing Israelites, but he could hear their sandals slapping against the loose stones. And close behind them—he was able distinctly to distinguish the sound of their heavy boots crunching the gravel and scattering the pebbles—came the pursuing legionaries of his flanking file on the west.

Already the assailants in the defile of the road were fleeing. Some clambered up the steep sides of the little ravine that opened into the gulch of the roadway and disappeared into the sheltering boulders above; others ran down the road to the end of the canyon and turned eastward; several went the other way along the narrow trail and then turned off in the same direction the others had taken. But before they had all cleared the road, Bar Abbas and his companions on the boulders above, still clutching their spears, had dropped into the defile and without a glance toward their now liberated prisoners had scampered into the converging ravine.

Hardly had the burly Bar Abbas disappeared before the pursuing Romans were plunging into the boulders beside the road. In another moment several of them were peering down into the narrow roadway. In that same instant Cornelius, looking up, spied Decius. "Here!" the centurion called out. "Down that way!" He pointed. "Hurry!"

"Cornelius, by all the gods, you aren't going to let them get away, are you!" screamed Herodias, having suddenly found her voice.

"But, my dear Herodias"—Antipas turned ponderously in his saddle to face his spouse—"certainly the centurion knows what...."

"Hah! The Tetrarch has come to life! He speaks, now that Bar Abbas and his revolutionaries have fled," she observed sneeringly.

"Bar Abbas," Cornelius said, ignoring the Tetrarchess and Herod, as Decius and several of his detachment clambered down into the road. "They pounced on us from the rocks there"—he pointed—"and had us disarmed. I was hoping you would hear the commotion."

"They jumped us the same way, Centurion," Decius said. "I think they killed two of our men. I left some men with them. We got several of the revolutionaries, though." 253

"It's a poor exchange. But get after him, Decius. Here, Galba, Licinius, Mallius"—Cornelius called out a half dozen of the men who had been in his detachment—"go with them; you saw Bar Abbas; you'll know him." Already the men were grabbing up their swords from the pile Bar Abbas' men had left in their rush to get away. "They were headed east, toward the Wilderness. In a moment they'll be running into Lucius on the flank over there. If he can turn them back, we'll have them in a bag. But they may break through him. Stay after them, Decius; get that Bar Abbas, and try to take him alive." He turned to another of his men. "Livius, take a detachment and go down the road; you saw where the revolutionaries turned off left. Marius, take your squad and go that way"—he pointed up the Jericho road toward Jerusalem—"and run down those that fled in that direction; you saw where they turned off. Follow them. And all of you be careful; we want no more ambushes." He called out several more names. "You men stay here with me," he said. "We'll see that no harm comes to the Tetrarch and his lady." He smiled wryly as he looked toward Herodias. "We almost didn't do that awhile ago." Then he turned again to Decius. "We're moving out of this trap in here, though," he said. "We'll be up there a thousand paces. And hurry, men; it will soon be dark in those rocks." He signaled for them to be off. "I want that Bar Abbas."

Less than half an hour later Marius and his men returned. They were leading a manacled Israelite. "We saw only five men," Marius reported. "Two of them we killed, and this one we cornered between two big rocks. The other two slipped away; we searched, but we're sure they're gone now. This fellow is a Galilean, named Gesmas, he says."

"And you had nobody hurt?" Marius nodded. "Good. Keep a sharp eye on this fellow." Cornelius pointed. "Livius is coming in. No prisoners, I believe."

Livius reported that his men had killed or wounded several of the fleeing revolutionaries. He had had only one man cut slightly by an Israelite's desperately wielded spear; the weapon had grazed the soldier's shoulder. 254
"We saw no signs of Lucius' flanking file," Livius revealed. "They must have been up ahead, and the revolutionaries we were pursuing must have slipped around their rear. They know this country; they simply disappeared like conies into those big rocks. But maybe Lucius intercepted some of those that Decius went after."

"Look!" One of the Romans pointed. "There's Decius." Having moved up from the narrow defile through the boulders, they could see out on both sides of the road. "And he has two prisoners."

"Yes. And one of them, by all the gods"—Cornelius was straining to see more clearly in the gathering dusk—"is Bar Abbas! Great Jove, he caught the big prize!"

The other Israelite, too, they discovered in a moment, was a much wanted revolutionary, one of Bar Abbas' principal lieutenants, a Galilean named Dysmas.

Lucius had stayed out on the flank, Decius explained, to prevent any sudden desperate attempt of the Zealots to rescue their leader. They were still no doubt in the rocks back from the road, perhaps regrouping their scattered forces.

"From here into Jerusalem the road is clear, and they won't be able to prepare any ambush." The centurion called out four soldiers standing near him. "Go tell Lucius to come in nearer. We can move faster that way, and in the deepening darkness it will be safer for everybody. Tell him we're starting at once for Jerusalem." As they were leaving, he turned again to Decius. "See that the prisoners are bound securely, and manacle each one between two of our men. And box them in with guards. Give them no chance of getting away from us or being rescued."

Herodias had been watching silently but with evident interest. "It seems to me, Centurion," she observed petulantly, "that you could prevent either eventuality by executing these rebel scum right now."

"I am a Roman soldier, Tetrarchess. These men have had no trial."

She pointed to her silent spouse, glumly sitting his horse. "He is the Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea. These revolutionaries are Galileans. He is the proper one to try them."

"No, my dear Herodias," Antipas spoke out. "This is neither the time nor the place to conduct any trial. Centurion, let us proceed with your plans to go on into Jerusalem." 255

Herodias lifted her head haughtily, but she made no reply. As soon as the caravan re-formed and was ready for the march, Cornelius gave the command to move forward. Less than two hours later he led the Tetrarch and Tetrarchess through the gate and let them and their servants into the gloomy pile of the old Hasmonean Palace. From there he marched his century to the Fortress of Antonia, where he surrendered his three prisoners to the dungeon jailer, who locked them, still bound securely, in the darkness and squalor of one of the lowest-level cells.

When he had seen to the quartering of his men in their Antonia barracks, he climbed the stone stairway in the southwestern tower and walked along the corridor to the room he had been assigned in the officers' quarters. He had decided he would have a steaming bath and put on fresh clothing before going down to the mess for a late evening meal.

The chamber, the centurion found, was close and warm. He pushed open the window; then he unbolted the door and walked out onto the balcony. Down below lights blazed in the Temple courts, and men scurried to and fro, already in a frenzy of Passover preparations.

40

Once again the household of Procurator Pontius Pilate was settled in the magnificent great Palace of the Herods; once again the ancient capital of Israel was teeming with countless Jews come up for the Feast of the Passover.

From every region and hamlet, almost from every home, in Judaea, Samaria, Peraea, and Galilee, from Antioch, Damascus, Tarsus, Alexandria, Memphis, and Cyrene, from Ephesus, Athens, and Corinth, from all provinces rimming the Great Sea, even to Rome and beyond, from the islands of Cyprus and Sardinia and Sicily and Crete and those numerous smaller ones dotting the Aegean, devout Israelites had swarmed into Jerusalem's crowded narrow ways and squares before the gates. 256

Every Jewish home, whether pretentious stone residence crowning Mount Zion or squalid malodorous hovel burrowed beneath the city's walls in noisome Ophel, was overflowing with pilgrim kinsmen returned for this greatest annual feast of Israel. For every person living in Jerusalem, Centurion Longinus casually estimated as he stood on Fortress Antonia's balcony outside his chamber, perhaps ten pilgrims had squirmed themselves inside the walls of the old city. And countless other thousands had been unable to find living quarters within the walls. Throngs of Passover celebrants overflowed the slope downward to the Brook Kidron and up the eastern rise past Gethsemane to the summit of the Mount of Olives and as far as Bethany. To the south, beyond the ever smoldering fires of the refuse dumps in the Hinnom valley, and to the west, tents and brush arbors of Passover pilgrims dotted the untilled areas through which ran the Bethlehem road. Northward, too, though Longinus could not survey that section of Jerusalem and its environs because of the great tower at his back, and to his right over beyond the massive pile of the Palace of the Herods, for many furlongs past the Ephraim and Joppa Gates, thin curlings of grayish-white smoke spiraled upward from small fires over which Passover pilgrims were bending now in preparation of the evening meal.

Longinus had been quartered near the Centurion Cornelius, but he had hardly seen his friend. The night of Cornelius' arrival from Galilee with the Tetrarch's party and his three Zealot prisoners, they had talked briefly in the mess hall, but they were both weary from the traveling and soon retired to their beds. The next day Pontius Pilate, greatly pleased at the capture of the wily zealot chieftain, had ordered Cornelius to take his century and scour the rocks above the Jericho road into which the evening before the marauders had disappeared. He had commanded the centurion to ferret out every member of Bar Abbas' band and either capture or kill him. 257 "And follow them as far as Galilee if need be, Centurion," the Procurator had instructed him. "Capture any you can, and bring them back here; we will crucify them during the Passover festival, and for the thousands of rebellious, stubborn Jews who will see them dying on the crosses it will be a salutary lesson. It may help them realize what fate awaits those who thus oppose Rome's authority and power."

Longinus wondered what success Cornelius was having. Evidently he had been forced to pursue the fleeing revolutionaries a long way, perhaps even as far as Galilee, where they might expect to find haven among kinsmen and friends. No doubt the attackers of the Tetrarch's party had separated in their flight from the soldiers of Cornelius. It would be particularly difficult, virtually impossible, in fact, to round up all the revolutionaries Bar Abbas had been leading, Longinus felt. In all probability, he reasoned, a number of them had slipped into Jerusalem a few minutes after Cornelius had entered the city, perhaps even ahead of his caravan, and were now safely lost among the tens of thousands deluging the ancient capital.

Nor had Longinus had an opportunity thus far to spend any considerable time alone with Claudia. Though Pilate had been keeping close to his headquarters in the fortress during the day-time, he had been returning to the palace at night, and his bedchamber was beside Claudia's and connected with it by a doorway. The Procurator, too, had issued orders for all officers not on active duty to be quickly available; Pilate seemed unusually restive. Longinus felt that Pilate was determined to prevent any small turmoil among the Jews from developing into a crisis whose handling by him might further jeopardize his standing with the Prefect Sejanus and the Emperor. With so many Jews congregated in Israel's holy city on a festival occasion so characteristically Jewish and one that so emphasized the peculiarly nationalistic spirit of the Jews, the situation was always highly inflammable. A small spark, if not snuffed quickly, could blaze into a holocaust.

One such minor incident that had taken place on the first day of the Jewish week might have provided such a spark, had the principal actor in it been of a mind to cause trouble. And, strangely, without having known what he was seeing, Longinus had witnessed this small happening. 258

He had breakfasted early with several fellow officers and had come up to his chamber this particular morning, when, to enjoy a stirring of the already warming April air, he had stepped out onto the balcony. Down below him the Court of the Gentiles was a hive of bustling activity. Out beyond the eastern wall in the direction he happened to be looking the slopes were alive with pilgrims preparing for the great festival. But up on the balcony he was safe from the stir and seething and the interminable chattering of excited Jewry, and a gentle breeze fanned him. He sat on the wide stone railing of the rampart, and idly his gaze went down the nearer slope to the Brook Kidron and along the meandering road on the other side as it climbed past Gethsemane's olive grove toward the hill's summit.

It was then that he noticed a procession moving slowly but with evident enthusiasm downward over this road toward the city from the direction of Bethany. Immediately his interest was attracted to the motley parade. Above the harsh cries of the hawkers in the Temple courts, the quarrelsome tones of bargaining, and the dull lowing of the cattle in the stalls awaiting sacrificing on the Great Altar, Longinus could distinguish the screamed hosannas of this unrestrained movement of dancing, singing, joyous people. Many of them were waving green branches they must have torn from trees and shrubs along the roadside. Occasionally the centurion would catch sight of an erect, tall man astride a white donkey. He adjudged the man to be tall, because his feet were not far from the gravel of the road as he sat astride the beast. And then he would lose sight of the rider as the shouting celebrants swirled about him.

Some popular rabbi with his people coming up to Jerusalem for the Passover, Longinus surmised, as he watched the writhing column approach the Brook Kidron crossing. Soon it disappeared under the walls down near Dung Gate, but presently it emerged again into his sight; he followed its progress through the cavernous alleys of Ophel, sometimes seeing it crossing a narrow opening between huddled buildings but hearing without interruption its lively shouts and chantings, until it came into clearer view at a stairway in the street pushing upward along Mount Moriah toward the Temple now resplendent in the morning sunshine. 259

Inside the Court of the Gentiles, which the strange little caravan of one rider and his evidently unorganized but plainly joyous adherents had reached by coming in through the Gate Shalleketh, the tall man dismounted, and someone quickly led the little animal away. In another moment the shouting and hosannas had ceased, and soon the centurion lost the rider in the press of the Temple throng.

Later that day in crossing the Court of the Gentiles to go out through the Gate Shalleketh and onto the bridge over the Tyropoeon, which was the easiest way to Mount Zion from the fortress, Longinus learned that the man on the donkey was the rabbi from Galilee. Many of his followers had expected the rabbi, whose fame by now had spread throughout Judaea, to come into the precincts of the Temple, proclaim himself Yahweh's Messiah and the ruler of the world, and call down legions of heavenly angels utterly to destroy every vestige of Rome's dominion. Now these followers were deeply disappointed and utterly chagrined. The tall one from Galilee in whom they had put their trust, the one who would be Israel's new David to deliver it from its mighty enemy, had failed them.

But what if this Jesus had really fancied himself a man ordained to lead his little nation in throwing off the yoke of Rome? What, reasoned the centurion, if he had been as visionary, as passionately though unwisely patriotic as countless other Jews assembled here in Rome for Israel's great celebration? In this tense, highly inflammable atmosphere of Passover week in Jerusalem, with great numbers of his followers believing that he possessed supernatural authority and powers, the rabbi's willingness to allow himself to be proclaimed Israel's king would have resulted in fearful bloodshed. But this Jesus at the last moment had either lost his courage, or else he had never contemplated leadership of Israel except in some vague, religious sense that Cornelius perhaps would term spiritual. At any rate, Longinus concluded, the Galilean was no threat to Rome and of no concern to the Empire. In his report to Sejanus, he would make no mention of the rabbi, unless in some manner Pontius Pilate might become involved with the man from Galilee. He wondered if Pilate had even been informed of the little procession that had come to such an inglorious ending within the Temple court. He wondered if Pilate, in fact, in his harried administration of the affairs of Judaea had ever heard of this Jesus. 260

41

Claudia sat on a small stone bench facing one of the fountains in the garden of the Palace of the Herods. All about her the grass was a luxuriant green and the flower beds, fed, she had been told, with blood drained through subterranean pipes from the overflow of the Great Altar, were already ablaze with color. Birds skipped and twittered in the rich foliage, and now and then some venturing small animal would skitter across an open patch of bright sunshine to disappear beneath the branches of a flowering shrub. The bench, shaded by a gnarled great olive, was invitingly cool despite the day's warmth and heaviness, and the gentle babble of the spraying water ordinarily would have lulled one sitting there into a mood of peaceful contemplation, if not pleasant slumber.

But this afternoon the wife of the Procurator felt neither peaceful nor pleasant. She watched the fountain's waters lifting and arching and falling and draining away in an undeviating pattern of movement and allowed her own thoughts to wander with it.

... There is the picture of my living. Like the water that is the thrust-along prisoner of the pump, or the ram which again and again lifts it and sends it spurting upward only to fall back and sink down and be forced up again, I am the prisoner of some malign power that pushes me along through a dull monotony of days that I am powerless even to protest against; I am swirled about but held fast like that water in a routine of existence I dare not even challenge.... 261

She leaned forward with her head upon her hands and glared, hardly seeing it, at the captive, dancing water.

How, by Bona Dea and all the good and gentle gods, the kind and happily ministering gods, how, by Pluto and all his evil soot-begrimed and blackened imps, could she escape the treadmill of this deadening monotony, this unending, bedeviling frustration? Granddaughter of the great god Augustus, stepdaughter of the great god Tiberius, granddaughter of the almost-great god Mark Antony and the great great goddess Cleopatra, wife of the mighty Procurator of Judaea, daughter through Augustus of Jove himself, princess of the blood....

"Bah!" She said it aloud. But there was nobody near-by in the garden. She sat back against the coolness of the stone. "By all the gods, why couldn't I have been a wench serving tables in a tavern, a strumpet down in the Subura, and had my freedom!"

... Why, by all the gods, can't old Tiberius die? He's past seventy now, and of what service is he to the Empire? And Sejanus, the old rake, must be past sixty. If someone would give the Prefect a neat sword thrust....

She stood up and walked over to the fountain, held out her hands to the spraying water and lifted wet palms to her flushed cheeks. The afternoon was still and depressing. She raised her eyes and saw above the trees and the turreted nearest corner of the great palace rounded soft white puffs of clouds, like newly lifted fresh curds in a deeply blue overturned bowl. "A storm," she said to herself, "one of those swiftly arrived, quickly gone, fierce Judaeian storms. But it will clear the air of this blanket of heat, and it will serve to break for a while the monotony of another fruitless day."

But she did not go inside. She sat down again and watched the gathering puffs of clouds. Never had she been afraid of storms, even ominous thunder and the swift, sharp streaks of lightning. She remembered that once in her early childhood when a governess had warned her against staying outdoors and running the risk of being struck by one of Jove's hurled mighty bolts, she had remarked, "If old Jove is clever enough to strike me with a bolt outdoors, why can't he throw one right through the roof and hit me while I'm inside? I don't believe he can hit me whether I'm outside or inside." 262

Her blasphemous words had woefully shocked the governess, but Claudia had never seen cause to retract them. One thing had led to another; from denying Jove's power she had soon come to deny his very existence, and with his, the existence likewise of the entire pantheon of lesser gods and goddesses.

She was still seated on the bench when a palace servant came out to announce that a soldier had arrived from Fortress Antonia with a message for her.

"Then bring him here," she instructed the servant. Could it be, she wondered, that the man is bringing a message from Longinus?

But the legionary had been sent to her by the Procurator. Pilate, he reported, would not be returning to the palace either for the evening meal or to spend the night. He begged to explain to his wife that he had had a very trying day and that he would be engaged until late in the evening. He had agreed to give an audience to the High Priest Caiaphas, and their meeting might well be extended into the night. He had decided, therefore, to forego the privilege and pleasure of dining with the Procuratoress; he would have supper in his quarters and after he had ended his long day's duties would spend the remainder of the night there.

Her first thought was of getting a message to Longinus. She would write it, seal it fast, and send it by the legionary.

"Thank you," she said to the soldier. "I shall want you to carry a message to the Fortress." She stood up. "I'll go inside and prepare it." But would it be a discreet thing to do, sending a message to Longinus by this legionary? What if by chance it should fall into other hands, even Pilate's? "No, there's no need of my writing it," she said. "Just tell the Procurator that I thank him for informing me and that I shall see him at his pleasure tomorrow."

But she would find a way of notifying Longinus. Tullia. Of course. Tullia was one person upon whose loyalty and good judgment she could always depend. When Tullia returned, she would send her to Longinus.

A soft breeze had sprung up and was pushing the storm clouds gently away; the air had cooled; the storm seemed to have been averted for the day. Claudia rose from the bench and returned to her apartment in the palace. 263

When a few minutes later her maid returned, she was carrying a small wicker basket. "Mistress, I found these in one of the markets near the Temple," she said, beaming as she held out the basket to Claudia. "I thought you might enjoy them."

"Fresh figs? And so early?" She picked one up. "It really is a fresh one, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I've washed them. You can eat it right now. I was surprised to find any this early, but the man explained that in some of the warm coves on the protected side of Olivet they often have figs ripening in early April."

Claudia pulled the fig open and nibbled at the firm reddish flesh inside. "It's delicious," she said, "and such a surprise." She saw that Tullia's eyes were ablaze with an excitement, however, that no discovery of fresh figs could have provoked. "What is it, little one? What happened? Whom did you see?"

"Mistress, I was looking at the figs when I heard a familiar voice speaking to the merchant. I looked around; it was Mary of Magdala."

Jesus and his little group, she had told Tullia, had come down from the Ephraim hills for the Passover. Her master was spending his nights with Martha and Mary and Lazarus out at near-by Bethany; during the day he came into

the Temple courts to teach.

“Perhaps, then, he will proclaim himself the Messiah of Israel and establish a new government,” Tullia said she had said to Mary. But the Magdalene had answered that Jesus seemed to be insisting instead that he would not become Israel’s temporal ruler, that he would even die as a sort of Passover sacrifice, an offering for the salvation of his people.

“But surely,” Claudia commented, “you Jews would never so debase yourselves as to offer a human sacrifice, as do those who worship Moloch.”

“It wouldn’t be that way, Mistress. But ... I don’t believe it will ever happen anyway.”

Mary had asked Tullia to spend the night with her in a cottage out at Bethany near the modest home of Lazarus and his sisters. She might be able to see Jesus and even talk with him. They would meet, if Claudia should be agreeable, at Shushan Gate before sunset and go out to Bethany. 264

“Then you’d best be going soon,” Claudia observed. “But before you meet Mary, I want you to go by Fortress Antonia and tell Longinus that the Procurator will be spending the night there.” She told the maid of the message Pilate had sent her. “And tell Longinus I’ll accept no excuse for his failing to come.”

42

The lean, blue-jowled ascetic face of Joseph Caiaphas, High Priest of Israel, warmed into a disarming smile, and the flames from the chamber’s wall lamps danced in his sharp, dark eyes.

“Excellency,” he said, “you must be exasperated at my coming to you at this late hour.” He faced the Procurator across the ornate, heavy desk. “I know you are tired, and I appreciate the fact that the strain you’ve been undergoing ever since your arrival in Judaea has been intensified during these recent inflammable days of the Passover season.” He leaned nearer Pilate. “I realize, too, Excellency, that you must be determined to prevent the repetition of events in Palestine that might result in the dispatching to Rome of further damaging reports”—the Procurator’s florid round face darkened, but Caiaphas pretended not to notice—“challenging the excellence of the Procurator’s administration of the affairs of this province.”

“I am tired; I’ve had a long day.” Pilate’s tone revealed irritation. “Perhaps if the High Priest would proceed at once to the business he had in coming....”

“Indeed, Excellency,” the High Priest interrupted, “and I shall require little of your time, so that shortly you may go to your well-earned couch. A fortunate event of the day has facilitated the early satisfactory disposition of the business; if the Procurator will co-operate in disposing of it we shall quickly rid ourselves of a grievous threat both to Israel’s peace and to the Procurator’s rule. I have just come from a lengthy session of the elders of Israel, Excellency—that explains my late arrival here—at which we have agreed....” 265

“But what is the business you would lay before me? And how would it affect the Procurator’s administration of the government in Judaea?” Pilate’s impatience had put a sharp edge on his voice. “If it is a question of the alleged violation of certain religious laws of the Jews....”

“It is that, Excellency, but it is more.” Caiaphas leaned forward, and the light of the lamps flashed in the gems of his rings. “Not only would this man destroy our religion, but likewise would he destroy the rule of Rome in Palestine.”

“This man? Are you speaking of one Bar Abbas? He has been seized, with two of his fellow revolutionaries. They go to the cross tomorrow.”

The High Priest shook his head. “It is not that one, Excellency. The man is a Galilean, one Jesus bar Joseph, not a robber like Bar Abbas, but a far more dangerous revolutionary, whom his misguided followers—and their number is growing, Excellency—are proclaiming not only the Messiah of God but also the next King of Israel. Were noise to get back to the Prefect Sejanus or the Emperor that such a person was being permitted to advocate and plan Rome’s overthrow and your Excellency’s supplanting....”

“But does the High Priest know where this man is? Does the Sanhedrin have him in its custody?”

Calmly Joseph Caiaphas stroked his oiled and braided long beard. “He is in Jerusalem at this moment, Excellency, or within the close environs of the city. It is possible that already he has been seized by the Temple guard. He has been at the Feast since the first day of the week when he entered Jerusalem riding on a white donkey, which among the Jews is a symbol of royalty, Excellency. It was then that he had planned to enlist the Passover pilgrims, led by his fellow Galileans, in proclaiming him the new David, the King of Israel suddenly freed of Rome’s domination. He lost his courage, though, or in some manner his plans failed of materialization. But”—his hand stabbed out again at the Procurator—“the fellow is still intent on seizing power, and his countless misguided followers are determined to see him established on the throne as King of Israel. They will plunge our ancient land into revolution, Excellency. Blood will flow freely throughout Judaea and Galilee. Many Roman soldiers will die before the rebellion is crushed, unless”—his forehead wrinkled in heavy concern—“this fellow is quietly slain, Excellency, before his followers can rally.” 266

“You say that perhaps he has been arrested already. How could he be taken without alarming these supporters of

whom you speak?"

The High Priest leaned back in his chair and folded his long arms across his chest. "The God of Israel has favored us, Excellency. He has delivered this blasphemer into our hands through his betrayal by one of his own band. This man came to us and after seeking pay told us he would point out where the man might be found and taken with little commotion. We gave the fellow thirty pieces of silver. By now no doubt he has delivered his leader into the hands of the guardsmen...."

"You say this man's a blasphemer. Don't you know that the Procurator is not concerned with violations of your religious code? What is it to Rome if your Yahweh is blasphemed? We will not enter into the religious quarrels of the Jews. I presume you have come here to ask me to try the man and find him guilty. I say, O High Priest, try the man yourself."

Caiaphas smiled indulgently, but then his brow furrowed again and he scowled darkly. "That is true, Excellency. Rome has no concern with Israel's worship of our God. But is not Rome concerned when a man, under the guise of teaching a new religion, declares openly that he will establish a new government in Israel? Would not Sejanus and the Emperor consider then that Rome was concerned ... and deeply concerned?"

The High Priest's clever thrust had made its mark; Pilate's face flushed; his tone, when he replied, was petulant. "Of course, the Prefect and the Emperor would be concerned; so would the Legate Vitellius, and so would 267 the Procurator; so, in fact, would any loyal Roman." Now the Procurator extended his own finger to point. "But how do you know that this Galilean advocates the overthrow of Rome? Has he come to trial? Has he faced witnesses against him? What would the High Priest have me to do, send a man to his death without trial? Certainly the High Priest must know that Rome is ruled by law, that no man under the rule of Rome may suffer death until he has been adjudged guilty, and that any such judgment can come only after a fair trial in which the man has been confronted by witnesses against him."

"Indeed, O Procurator"—Joseph Caiaphas held up a soothing palm—"we well know that and approve. We, too, would never consent to sending this revolutionary to his death without trial, even though his crimes against Israel and against Rome have already been conclusively established. But he is being brought to fair trial, Excellency, before the great Sanhedrin of Israel. Perhaps he has already been apprehended in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he had planned to conceal himself with certain of his followers, as we learned from the traitor who came to us. He will be examined, no doubt before my beloved father-in-law Annas, known for his piety and his wisdom, learned in the laws of Israel"—he smiled warmly—"and strong in his devotion to the Prefect and the Emperor. And then, Excellency, as soon as the dawn of the new day makes it legal under our laws to conduct such a trial, the Galilean will be brought before the Sanhedrin, confronted by witnesses against him, and given proper trial."

"Then why has the High Priest," Pilate asked in exasperation, "come to me?"

"O Excellency, the Procurator must know that the ancient laws of Israel, now that Rome has become master, no longer apply in every detail. Should our Sanhedrin find this revolutionary Galilean guilty of base crimes and sentence him to death, it would still be powerless to carry out its sentence without the approval of Rome. I am here, O Excellency, to petition the Procurator to approve our verdict and sentence. And I urge you to do this quickly, in order that the man may be executed while it is yet early and before all Jerusalem, and the 268 Galileans in particular, are astir. Then much commotion and bloodshed would be prevented and," he added with a suggestive smile, "there would be no necessity of any report's going to Rome."

"But you wish me to condemn a man to death *before* he has been tried?" Pilate's anger showed plainly in his frown.

"Indeed, no, Excellency," the High Priest replied calmly. "We only wish you to approve and order into execution the sentence of the Sanhedrin in the event that *after* he has been tried, he is judged guilty."

Pilate shook his head. "No, I shall send no man to the cross or to death by stoning until *I* have tried him. To do so would be an unspeakable breach of Rome's system of justice."

"But, Excellency, would you show your scorn of Israel's highest court?"

"I would show only my determination to uphold Rome's laws and procedures. If you wish this man tried, then bring him before me at the Procuratorium." He bowed coldly. "And now, if the High Priest will excuse me...."

The High Priest stood up as though to leave. "Indeed, Excellency, I too am greatly fatigued," he said, "but one more point detains me. A moment ago, Procurator Pilate, did I not hear you say that on the morrow you were sending Bar Abbas to the cross? If so, Excellency, have you not already convicted him?"

Pilate's smile was contemptuous as he, too, rose to his feet. "I did say that, and I have no doubt that he will go to the cross. But not, O High Priest, until he has been given trial, before he has been confronted by witnesses who will testify to what they saw and heard as concerns those charges that will be placed against him. I presume that many will appear against this Bar Abbas and that he will be convicted. But I do not say now that he will. I say only that he will be given a fair trial." He lifted a heavy fist and brought it forcefully down upon the surface of his desk. "And so, by all the gods, will your Galilean!"

269

... The knocking is insistent. Can it be that the Praetorian Guardsman has been there a long time pounding on the door between the atrium and the peristylum while I slowly awakened? Bona Dea, what can old Sejanus want this time? Will he never cease hounding Longinus and me?

... Longinus. By the Bountiful Mother, maybe it's Longinus returned from Germania. Maybe he's at the bedroom door opening on the peristylum....

"Just a moment, Centurion, until I get my robe!" Claudia sat up in bed, rubbed her eyes, and shook her head to clear it. A narrow slash of natural light showed through the not completely drawn draperies. It was dawn. And burrowed in the pillow beside her was the close-cropped head of the Centurion Longinus.

Now the knocking had begun again. But it came, Claudia realized, from the other side of the door between her bedroom and Tullia's. And though insistent, the knocking was not loud. "Mistress! Mistress! Oh, Mistress!"

She recognized her maid's voice; Tullia was trying to awaken her without making too much noise in the early morning stillness of the Palace of the Herods. "Just a moment, little one," she called out softly. At the door she slid back the bolt. "But, Tullia," she demanded, keeping her voice low so that she would not awaken Longinus, "what are you doing back so early? It must be hardly daylight. Why, little one...." she paused, seeing the maid on the verge of tears.

"Oh, Mistress, he's in grave danger!" Tullia burst out. "They've seized him. We fear great harm may befall him. That's why I have come back to seek your help for him." She was making an obvious effort to gain control of herself; somewhat calmed, she continued. "I started from Bethany at the first glimmering of light, almost as soon as we heard that he had been taken. We're so afraid, Mistress, that great harm will come to him unless...." 270

"Let's sit down"—Claudia's tone was soothing—"and then quietly you can tell me why you're so afraid he's going to suffer great injury. And who, Tullia? You haven't even told me his name."

"The Galilean, Mistress; I thought you knew. Sometime during the night some Temple guardsmen came and seized him in the Garden of Gethsemane; he'd gone there with his little band to rest after eating the Passover meal at the home of Mary of Cypress. They say it was one of his own band who betrayed him, who told the Temple priests where he could be found and arrested without there being a big stir. Of course there would have been a great commotion if they had tried to take him anywhere near the Temple; they wouldn't have dared to do such a thing if...."

"But how do you know all this?" Claudia interrupted. "Maybe you're getting yourself upset without good reason."

"No, it's true, Mistress. Jesus and those of his immediate company, along with his mother and certain other relatives, have been staying in the Bethany neighborhood during the festival period," Tullia revealed. "Jesus himself lodged at the home of Lazarus and his sisters. But yesterday afternoon the Master and the twelve men of his band went into Jerusalem. That's the last time Mary of Magdala saw him." Her face was a mask of pain and apprehension. "Then, early this morning, we were awakened by several of his band who had come running back to Bethany in great panic to report what had befallen him. All of them forsook him in the garden when the soldiers appeared; even Simon, after he had slashed out with his sword at one of the guardsmen, turned on his heel and ran, too, they said."

"But where did the soldiers take him?" Claudia asked. "And why have you come to me?"

"They said there was talk that he was being taken before the High Priest or else old Annas, Mistress. And we're afraid that he may suffer a terrible fate if he falls into the hands of the Temple priests. They're determined to kill him, Mistress." She paused, eyes tearful. "I knew no one else to whom I could turn for help, no one but you. I thought that you might speak to the Procurator and he might rescue the Galilean before they have him killed." 271

"But don't you know that they have no authority to execute the death sentence until the Procurator has given approval?"

"Yes, but they're so inflamed against him, Mistress, that they might risk it. But if you could send a message to the Procurator...."

"He was probably up late into the night. To awaken him now with a message might offend him, and that would be doing the Galilean more harm than good. But Pilate usually returns to the palace before beginning his morning duties; as soon as he does, I'll lay before him this matter of the Galilean's arrest. Certainly no harm can come to him before Pilate has had an opportunity to sit in judgment on him."

44

This Passover season there would be only three burdened crosses on top of the desolate Hill of the Skull, but they would be enough. The ugly spectacle would provide a frightful ending to the Jews' annual great festival.

In other times in Palestine, Centurion Cornelius had been told, Rome had moved swiftly—and with far more terrifying effectiveness—to dramatize the utter futility of any province's attempt to contend against the mighty conqueror. In Galilee they still talked, though even now in carefully guarded conversations, of that dreadful day at

Sepphoris hardly more than twenty years ago when the Roman general Varus had crushed a rebellion and crucified two thousand Jewish insurrectionists.

Perhaps Pontius Pilate, who a week ago had sent him chasing the rebels of the now leaderless Bar Abbas band, had tired of awaiting the centurion's return with more captives for the crosses; perhaps he had already ordered to slow and agonizing deaths the revolutionaries' leader and the two followers captured with him. 272
It might be that even now countless pilgrims up for the Passover, drawn by a morbid fascination, were gawking at the scourged, torn, and broken, unimaginably desecrated bodies of the captured robber-Zealots. But Cornelius would provide no additional victims for those crosses on the Hill of the Skull.

"And I'm glad," he said aloud.

"What, Centurion? Glad?" Decius, riding beside him, had heard.

"I was just thinking aloud about this business of crucifying slaves and depraved criminals. I was glad those four revolutionaries we cornered in the Ephraim hills chose to fight to their deaths rather than surrender. It's better not having to take anybody back to Jerusalem to be nailed up on a cross."

"It's not one of the most pleasant assignments a soldier gets, being on a crucifixion detail," Decius agreed. "I've been on three, and I'll never forget those poor devils, the first one especially, maybe just because he was my first. He was a boy in Germania, hardly sixteen, but a sturdy, strong fellow. I can still see him, Centurion. He was fair and his hair was the color of ripened grain, and his eyes were as blue as the sky. He had killed one of our soldiers, they said."

"Probably after our soldier had killed the boy's parents and raped his sister."

"I can't say as to that; you could be right, Centurion. But our commander ordered him to the cross, and I was put on the detail. We took that boy and tied him to the low stake and scourged him until he was a bloody pulp, Centurion. I can still see those bone-tipped whips slashing that white skin and flicking off bits of flesh, and one of them got him in the eye and knocked the ball out of the socket; it was hanging down when we nailed him up." Decius shook his head ruefully. "By the gods, Centurion, do you know that boy even then fought us and cursed us as long as he had a hand or foot loose, and when we got all four spiked down he tried to butt us with his head. He was a strong one, that fellow; I remember he didn't die until well along in the second day, and then he was spitting at us and cursing us almost to his last breath." Decius stared thoughtfully for a moment at the road unwinding ahead. 273 "Many times I've dreamed about that boy, Centurion, and I can still see him plainly and hear his screaming and cursing. It's not a pleasant dream. I'd rather dream about those yellow-haired women in Germania."

Cornelius nodded his head solemnly. "Yet we Romans call ourselves modern and civilized people." They rode on in silence for a few moments. "Maybe we did well in being away from Jerusalem most of the week of the feast," Cornelius finally commented. "Maybe we escaped being assigned by the Procurator to a crucifixion detail."

"I hope so; I've no stomach for serving on one again," Decius agreed. "You know, Centurion, I've just been thinking that very likely many of Bar Abbas' cutthroats are right up there in Jerusalem in that Passover crowd. It wouldn't surprise me if some of them should try to rescue those three Zealots."

Cornelius nodded. "It wouldn't surprise me either. I suspect that most of them, in fact, doubled back that night and beat us into Jerusalem and got themselves quickly lost in the surge of Passover pilgrims. And only the gods know how many other Zealots are swarming all over the city with their daggers sharpened for our throats."

It was almost midday when they moved through the defile between the boulders where a week before they had been waylaid by the Zealot chieftain. This time Cornelius sent a scouting party ahead to reconnoiter. But no marauder was encountered.

In the level beyond the rocks the century paused to eat and rest. But not for long. Soon Cornelius gave the order to reassemble in marching formation. The sun was straight overhead, and the air was warm and heavy; a stifling stillness presaged a violent storm. "I'd like to get into Antonia before it breaks," the centurion observed to Decius, as they mounted their horses. "Look." He pointed off toward the southwest where an immense angry black cloud hovered low. "By mighty Jove, it must be already dark in Jerusalem."

274

45

The tall Galilean arose from the steps before the Beautiful Gate and bending over, caught the hand of the prostrate, frightened woman. "Neither do I condemn you, my sister," he said gently, as he helped her to her feet and she lifted tearful, penitent eyes to him. "Go, and sin no more."

"He is truly a good man, Tullia, a noble man of warm heart, a generous, forgiving, good man. But a god? No, little one." They were watching the woman as she neared the corner of the Chel toward the Fortress of Antonia. "There are no gods."

The woman went out of their sight around the Soreg. They turned to look again toward the Galilean at the marble steps.

But the steps had disappeared, and the Beautiful Gate, and beyond it the Great Altar. Only the man stood there,

and his arms were bound behind him now, and where the Chel had been was the Procurator's tribunal. Solemn but unafraid, he faced the judge. At his back the Temple leaders who a moment ago had dragged the poor woman before him were shouting execrations upon him and demanding of the Procurator his crucifixion. "Crucify him!" they were screaming. "Crucify him!"

And in the magistrate's chair ... by the Great Mother, there was Pontius Pilate!

Pilate, his round face livid with anger, was remonstrating with the priests. "But shall I crucify your King? Shall I crucify the King of the Jews?"

Crucify Jesus of Galilee?

"No, Pilate! No! No!" She was running toward the Procurator to stand beside the Galilean. "No, my husband, have nothing to do with this good man!"

... But Pilate does not see me or hear me. Nor does the Galilean. Am I a disembodied spirit? But there are 275
no spirits. Oh, Tullia. But Tullia neither hears nor sees me....

"Then take him yourselves and crucify him. His death be your responsibility." Pilate was speaking again. "I am free of his blood."

"No! No! No, Pilate! You are sending an innocent man to his death! You can never disavow responsibility! Oh, hear me, my husband! Hear me!"

But the Praetorium and its tribunal, the tall, bound Galilean, the railing priests and their blood-hungry supporters were suddenly vanished.

The great throne room of the Imperial Palace in Rome was strangely darkened. She could hear the voice of the Emperor, but she could hardly distinguish his features. Was he her stepfather Tiberius, incredibly old now, or a younger Emperor? The voice was somewhat strange, too. "You have failed miserably," the voice was saying. "You have been rash and stubbornly determined to govern in accordance with your own whims, you have not only permitted, but you have, through your intemperate governing, created much turmoil and insurrection within your province; in short, your rule has been a travesty of Roman administration." The voice paused. "But I shall not order you executed, as you deserve. Instead, I decree that you be banished, forthwith and forever...."

The voice had faded out as the light came up, and she saw standing with bowed head, old and bent and his once round face thinned and haggard and hopeless, Pontius Pilate.

"No! No! If you had only listened...."

But no one heard her, and the great chamber was dark, and not a sound came to her out of the stillness.

"Oh, by the Great Mother! By all the gods, great and small. Oh, Galilean!"

Now as she stood immobile and weightless in the blackness and silence, she began to sense a luminosity thinning the darkness below, and looking down she saw a great way off a point of light that spread and lifted and came up in ever widening circles to illuminate the heights about her. For she was standing on the summit of a great mountain, higher even than the sun-baked granite bluffs on which Machaerus sat above the Dead Sea, and 276
far below she could discern the imprisoned, restless waters of a mountain-rimmed small lake.

Then, as she raised her eyes from the waters and looked across toward an opposite peak, she saw him. He stood, bent and shrunken and old with the weight of centuries, on a jagged thrust of rock that came out from the mountain to overhang the agitated surface of the lake. He was looking down at the waters; the light was reflected from a head completely bald, and it played on cheek bones guarding cheeks long sunken, so that his head even in life appeared to have dried away to a skull, and only long dewlaps hanging down showed signs of animation.

"No! No! It cannot be!"

But she knew it was, though Pontius Pilate had shriveled into a pitiful husk of the vain and pompous Procurator he had been.

In the same moment she heard voices, and looking around, she saw people on the slopes of the mountain, coming up, pushing outward, swelling, and growing until all the mountain was filled with people, and they were of all races and times and colors and tongues. But strangely enough, she could understand their words, Roman and Greek and Egyptian and the tongues of the yellow-haired sons of Germania and the dark-haired women of Gaul, and even the babblings of the barbarians in faraway Britannia, and the curious utterances of the many unborn strange peoples of places beyond the as yet uncharted seas. And each in his own way was saying what all the others were saying.

The man on the precipice appeared not to see or hear the people; he seemed preoccupied, fearful, oblivious of everything about him, and struggling with the burden of some monstrous inner distress. He raised his hands and held them before his face, and then it was that she saw they were red to the wrists with the color of blood freshly spilled; he rubbed them together, as though struggling fiercely to scrub the blood away; he lowered them as if to dip them in a basin, then lifted them again to study them, his bloodless face, in contrast to the hands, a shade of ashen horror.

But the frenzied washing had done no good; the hands shone fiery red. Despairing, Pilate dropped them to his sides and stepped to the very edge of the yawning gulf. "I didn't know!" he cried. "By all the gods, I didn't know."

He raised his cavernous face and with eyes wide looked into the void. "O God of the Jews"—his shrunken head swayed on the wrinkled neck—"had I but known. Had I but known...." His words whispered into silence, and he closed his eyes.

"Don't! No! No!" she screamed. "No, don't!"

She forced herself to look down.

Pilate's lean frame was dropping, slowly turning and twisting, toward the angry waters; his bony arms and legs were thrust out stiffly from the shroud of his too large toga, which streamed above the plummeting body, flapping furiously in the wind. Rigid with horror, staring into the abyss, she saw the body strike, heard the sickening blob, and watched it gradually disappear.

But the waters would not grant oblivion. Angrily they flung the broken, thin body back to the surface, and to Claudia, watching in frozen fascination, it seemed to be twisting and eddying in continuous agitation above the seething waters. Looking more closely, her eyes rooted to the scene in morbid horror, she saw white arms thrust upward and hands still reddened, cleansed not one tint by their plunge into the watery depths. Now suddenly the hands seemed detached from the stiffening arms, and alive; like wounded rodents seeking haven in a dark fissure among the rocks, they were feeling their way along the ascending stony slope toward her, and in that dreadful instant there lifted to her also the babble of countless voices in many tongues blending once again into a swelling chorus. The light breaking slowly above the mountain showed the plain below and the steep rises teeming with a multitude drawn from all races and nations.

On the faces of some she read swift anger and deep hate, and their fists were lifted skyward and their voices raised in execrations; others revealed only indifference, and their words were but the prattled monotony of chanted creed; but here and there on the level and along the slopes she saw those whose words fitted without disharmony into the growing chorus but whose faces as they uttered them revealed sorrow, deep pity, and a forgiving spirit.

She closed her eyes against the vision of the myriad chanting faces, but she heard their voices and she understood their many tongues ... "Crucified by Pontius Pilate ... Crucified ... suffered under Pontius Pilate ... suffered ... suffered ... Pontius Pilate...." 278

"No! No!" She opened her eyes to see the mountain cleared of the people, the vision gone, the voices silenced. But there on the ledge at her feet, rubbing one against the other, endlessly, eternally, fruitlessly seeking to be cleansed, were the two gory, dismembered hands.

"No! Back! Back! Go back!" She whirled about to rid herself of the frightening apparition, and burying her face, eyes shut, against her crossed arms, she leaned down upon the cool hardness of the boulder beside her. "No! No!" she sobbed. "Get back! Go! Please go!" Would those hands, the horrible thought came suddenly to her, come closer? Would they attempt to exact vengeance upon her? Might they even now be creeping upon her to fasten cold, bloody fingers about her neck, to choke the life...?

"Get back! No! No!" she screamed, as she freed an arm to beat frantic fist against the stone. "Don't touch me! Tullia! Longinus! Oh, Longinus...."

"Claudia! By great Jove!" The centurion, sitting up fully awake, shook her hard. "Claudia! Wake up, woman! Wake up! Come out of it! What on earth...."

She opened her eyes. "Longinus! Oh, by all the gods, it was terrible, terrible!" Nor was the terror completely dispelled; in her eyes, wide, staring, her fear still spoke. Her shoulders shook in an involuntary shudder.

He pulled her up into a sitting position and grasped her hand. "But it was only a nightmare, Claudia. You're all right. You were just dreaming." She blinked and ventured a thin smile. "You were screaming like a wild woman and beating the bed with your fist." His excited concern gave way to a grin. "It must have been a bloodcurdling dream."

"Oh, Longinus"—she clenched her eyelids tightly against the light streaming in through the window—"it was the most horrible dream I ever had, the most frightful thing anyone could imagine. I dreamed ... oh, it's too horribly near; I can't tell you now." Still shaking, she turned to snuggle within the haven of his arms. "Bona Dea...." 279

A sudden light knocking on the door interrupted her. Tullia entered to ask softly if anything was wrong.

"It was only a nightmare, little one," Claudia answered, leaning back on her pillow. "It was so vivid, so frightening. But I'm all right now. I'll call you when I need you."

"Was it about what I told you, Mistress, the Galilean?" Her question and tone of voice betrayed Tullia's deep concern.

"Yes ... about him and Pilate; horrible, horrible. I...."

"Oh, Mistress, could it have been a message to you, a vision sent...?"

"From your Jewish Yahweh, perhaps?" Claudia affected an uneasy laugh. "No, it was a dream, little one, that's all. Get back to your bed; you must still be weary."

Claudia saw Longinus' look of puzzlement. "Tullia returned late in the night from Bethany and reported that the High Priest had schemed the arrest of the rabbi of Galilee. She was afraid he might prevail on Pilate this morning

to agree to the crucifixion of the Galilean.”

“Crucifixion? By all the gods, on what charge?”

“That he seeks to overthrow Rome.”

“The Galilean? But he’s no revolutionary. Surely Pilate knows that.”

“Yes, surely he must.” She frowned. “But you know how Pilate fears the High Priest and his Temple crowd, how he’s always afraid they’ll send reports to Sejanus.”

“And you dreamed that he had sent the Galilean to the cross?”

“Yes. It was all confused, all horrible.” She sat up precipitately and looked toward the window. “Bona Dea, it must be late. And Pilate begins his trials soon after daybreak. Mother Ceres, I do wonder...” She sprang from the bed and drew on her robe. “Tullia!” she called. “Fetch me a wax tablet and stylus! Hurry, little one! I must send Pilate a message.”

280

46

The sun was lifting above the Mount of Olives when Pilate’s orderly awakened him from heavy sleep. “Sir, the High Priest Caiaphas and others of the Temple leadership,” he said apologetically, “insisted that I inform you that they have arrived with the prisoner about whom he spoke with you last night. They said that they were most anxious for you to proceed at once to dispose of the case.”

The Procurator sat up in bed and blinked his heavy-lidded eyes. “Insolent Jew!” he muttered. “He would not only tell the Procurator what to do, but when to do it! By the great Jove, I may surprise him!” He threw back the covering and rose ponderously to his feet. “Go tell the High Priest to have his witnesses ready. I shall be there shortly.”

The great Fortress of Antonia, Rome’s bastion in the Jerusalem region, consisted actually of four straight-walled, high buildings joined together by corner towers to compose an impregnable stone structure some fifty by one hundred paces on the outside walls. The space within the inside four walls had been paved with great stone slabs to form a tremendous courtyard reached by huge gateways, one on each of the edifice’s four sides. Massive gates guarded the fortress against sudden attack; when opened, they admitted a flow of nondescript traffic into the courtyard.

Along the southern side of the fortress there was another paved court from which a wide flight of stone steps led up to a terrace; the terrace, in turn, led into the interior courtyard. In a high-ceilinged chamber on the ground floor of this structure, Pontius Pilate had set up his Praetorium. A Roman praetorium, or trial place of a praetor, consisted of a semicircular dais on which the curule, or magistrate’s chair, had been placed.

In the rear of this chamber was a small doorway, and it was through this doorway that Pilate, shortly after the orderly had reported to High Priest Caiaphas, came into the Praetorium. 281

The Procurator strode straight to the dais, mounted its several steps, and sat down on the curule. Frowning, he glanced toward the tall, manacled prisoner. Flanking the man on both sides were several guards, all Roman soldiers, who had been assigned to the Temple detail. Though a throng had already assembled in the court beyond the gateway, the Procurator could see from where he sat on the tribunal that not a Jew had followed the prisoner inside the vaulted chamber. “What charge is brought against this man?” Pilate snapped. “And where are his accusers?”

The captain of the guard saluted. “High Priest Caiaphas commanded me, Excellency, to bring the prisoner before you with instructions that he has been tried before the Jewish Sanhedrin and found guilty of crimes punishable by death. He said you, O Excellency, were to confirm the verdict of the Jewish court and order its sentence put into execution.”

Anger suffused the Procurator’s round, usually bland face. “And why hasn’t the High Priest come himself to bear witness to the Sanhedrin’s action? Why has this man no accusers confronting him?”

The captain was plainly ill at ease. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, started to speak, then swallowed. “The Jews, O Excellency, will not enter the Praetorium for fear that to do so will be a profanation, that it will render them unfit to eat of their Passover evening meal,” he finally revealed. “They will come no nearer than the steps”—he pointed—“out there.”

Pilate, as the captain had expected, was furious. “Profanation! Profanation! All I hear in this rebellious, proud province is profanation! Hah! They would profane themselves by entering a Roman hall of justice!” His already flushed cheeks were purpling. He stood up quickly, strode down the steps of the tribunal, and stalked forward to the stairway; from there he could survey the mass of excited, chattering Jews, who quieted perceptibly on seeing him emerge from the Praetorium.

“The prisoner,” he said, motioning with his head toward the chamber from which he had just come, “what charge do you bring against him? And where are his accusers?” 282

The multitude was silent. Eyes turned toward a group near the foot of the steps; in the center of the knot stood the High Priest. He advanced a pace and bowed to the Procurator. "O Excellency, this man has been tried by our Sanhedrin and found guilty of grievous crimes. If he had not been found to be a criminal of desperate wickedness, then we would not have brought him before the Procurator to be sentenced."

The bold insolence of the High Priest's reply did not escape Pilate. "If you have tried him then and found him guilty, why don't you also take him and execute upon him your sentence?"

Caiaphas stood silent for a moment. "But the Procurator must know, O Excellency," he replied at length, a humorless smile lifting the corners of his mouth, "that under the dominion of Rome the Sanhedrin has not the authority, however heinous the criminal's deeds may have been, to execute upon him the sentence of death. Therefore, O sir, we petition the Procurator to order executed upon this vicious criminal the sentence of death which the Sanhedrin has found him so fully to deserve."

But Pilate was obdurate. "You would ask a Roman magistrate to find a man guilty and send him to the cross, even though no accusation had been made against him and no witnesses had confronted him," he declared. "Don't you know that were I to do so I would violate every principle of Roman justice?" He jabbed a pudgy forefinger toward Caiaphas. "Would you, O High Priest, ask the Procurator thus to violate his oath as Rome's regent in Judaea?"

The Procurator, however, had failed to gauge the High Priest's cunning. "Indeed, O Excellency, of course I would not seek to lead the Procurator into violating his oath to uphold Roman justice." He smiled and bowed, mockingly. "Nor would I stand silent and unprotesting while the Procurator released a clever though iniquitous criminal who seeks not only the demoralization of Israel's religion and the perversion of her people but also the overthrow of Rome in this province and the establishment of himself as King of Israel."

The High Priest's answer was not only a skilful parry of the Procurator's question but it was, moreover, a well-aimed thrust of his own most effective weapon. Caiaphas knew that Pilate lived always in mortal fear of being reported to Rome; he knew that the Procurator would not dare to ignore any situation in Judaea, or even the hint of it, that might be fostering incipient revolt against Roman rule. 283

But Pilate maintained his composure; he would not yield obsequiously to this hateful symbol of Jewry's stubborn pride of race and nationality and her cold scorn of everything Roman. He studied the group for whom the High Priest professed to be speaking; it was a nondescript assemblage, Temple hirelings, a knot of Pharisees, and surrounding the High Priest himself, his own Sadducean coterie; the others were, for the most part, sunburnt fellows who might well be, the thought came to him suddenly, Galilean and Judaeen revolutionaries come in for the Passover feast from their mountain and Wilderness strongholds. Scowling, Pilate confronted the cynically smiling Caiaphas. "You say this man is guilty of heinous crimes, you declare he would set himself up as King of Judaea, but, O High Priest, you have made before me no accusation, you have brought no witnesses to testify against him." He turned to point with a sweep of his arm toward the Galilean, standing calmly beside his guards. "There stands the prisoner before the tribunal. I ask you again, O High Priest, what charges do you bring against him? Where are his accusers?"

Caiaphas realized that the Procurator was refusing to admit what he had assumed, at last night's meeting, had been a tacit agreement, that a retrial of the prisoner would be unnecessary; perhaps he was fearful that Rome would disapprove such a disposition of the case. At any rate, reasoned the High Priest, further verbal sparring would mean delay in sending the upstart Galilean to the cross, and he wished this Jesus dead and taken down before the beginning at sunset of the sacred Sabbath. Too, the longer they delayed, the more likely it was that other hot-blooded Galileans would get noise of the trial and come storming to their leader's support; they might even succeed in effecting the fellow's release. He would not, therefore, challenge Pilate further. 284

"O Excellency"—Caiaphas raised his hand and the rays of the morning sun flashed in the gems of his rings—"we charge that this fellow not only sought to lead astray the people from the true worship of our God of Israel, but that he did also forbid them to pay tribute to Caesar, and that he did declare that he himself was rightful King of Israel and would so establish himself!"

Pilate would give no consideration to the first charge, the High Priest was sure, but, he reasoned, the Procurator could not ignore the other two. And the soundness of his reasoning was immediately demonstrated. Pilate turned his back upon Caiaphas and the crowd and returned to the Praetorium, where he mounted the tribunal and sat down. "Are you"—he pointed toward the prisoner, who still, though weary, stood erect and calm—"the King of the Jews?"

"Do you ask this of your own desire to know"—the trace of a smile lightened the solemn countenance—"or has someone else said it of me?"

The Procurator shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Am I a Jew?" he asked sarcastically. "Your own nation, your High Priest, and the others of the Temple leadership have delivered you unto me. What have you done?"

"I am a King," Jesus replied calmly. "But my Kingdom is not a worldly kingdom; if it were, then my servants would fight against my being delivered to these leaders of the Jews. The Kingdom I rule is not of this world."

Pilate's round face betrayed bafflement. "Then you profess to be a king, but in another realm, the world of magic, spirits...?"

"I was born into this world to bear testimony to the truth," Jesus answered. "Everyone who is of the truth will understand and acknowledge my Kingship."

Then this man was, as Pilate had suspected all along, in no sense a revolutionary planning Rome's overthrow; he

was but another of these eastern mystics, dreaming of the imponderable and intangible. Hadn't Herod Antipas beheaded another such fellow because of his slurs against Herodias, slurs undoubtedly deserved at that? 285
The man before him, Pilate realized, was simply a religious leader, someone whom, perhaps, Caiaphas feared as a possible rival, who Caiaphas felt might even supplant him in the office of High Priest. Of course, reasoned the Procurator, the fellow might well be a little addled through too long immersion in this utterly foolish and depraved one-god religion of Israel. "Those who know the truth," the fellow had just proclaimed, "will recognize me, acknowledge me as their king." Hah!

"Truth"—Pilate shot forth his finger toward the prisoner—"what is truth?" He hunched his shoulders and waved his hands, palms up, in a gesture he had borrowed from the Jews. And without looking toward the man of whom he had asked the question, he stepped down from the tribunal and strode out to the High Priest and his restive throng.

"I have examined the prisoner as to the charges you have brought against him," he announced to Caiaphas. "I find nothing criminal in him. He's a religious man, a dreamer, but he is no revolutionary." He was glad to be rid of the man, though, he confessed to himself; he was happy to wash his hands of this Jesus, Caiaphas, and the rest of them; if he could only be freed of all Palestine, if he could never lay eyes again upon another Jew. "I find no fault in the man; I shall release him."

"No! No! O Excellency, no!" Hands were waving wildly in the air. "No! O Pilate!" The Procurator, scanning the throng, saw the priests fomenting the agitation into a swell of shouted disapproval of his verdict. Once more the High Priest stepped forward a pace or two from the front ranks. "The man is amazingly clever, O Excellency," he declared, smiling agreeably, "as he has just demonstrated in thus deceiving the Procurator. But he is a criminal, and one of the most vicious and depraved order, O sir. And he is a revolutionary. Beginning in his native Galilee, he has deceived and perverted the people, and by his dangerous and evil perverting, his criminal teachings in opposition to our religion and Rome's government, he has brought into Peraea and Judaea...."

"Beginning, you say, in Galilee? Then this man is a Galilean?"

"Indeed, O Excellency, and one of the worst of the Galilean revolutionaries, one of the most dastardly clever," He smiled sardonically. "He smites with words rather than a dagger." 286

... A Galilean, by great Jove! Then send him to Herod Antipas. Let the Tetrarch dispose of this case. He assumed jurisdiction over that fanatical Wilderness prophet and ordered him beheaded. Well, this man, too, is a Galilean. Let Herod stand between this persistent, obstinate High Priest and old Sejanus. Let the Tetrarch, for once, bear the brunt of any reports sent back to Rome; this time Sejanus may not overlook what he considers a mistake of administration in this gods-abandoned province. If there's to be a mistake, let the Tetrarch make it....

"Then this man," he said to the High Priest, "is a subject of the Tetrarch Herod Antipas. He should be remanded to the Tetrarch for trial."

Pilate returned quickly to the Praetorium. "Captain of the Guards," he commanded, "conduct this prisoner to the Tetrarch Herod Antipas. Bear to the Tetrarch the Procurator's compliments and say to him that the Procurator is sending him the King of the Jews"—a sneering smile for an instant pushed away the scowl on his round face—"a Galilean. It may be that the Tetrarch will wish to examine the prisoner concerning the charges that have been brought against him by the High Priest Caiaphas. At any rate, the prisoner, being from Galilee, is a subject of the Tetrarch and under his jurisdiction." He nodded curtly. "Go."

Quickly the guards formed about the tall prisoner and led him from the Praetorium, down the steps into the Court of the Gentiles. Leaving the Temple area through the Gate Shalleketh, they crossed the bridge above the Valley of the Tyropoeon and arrived shortly in front of the sprawling Xystus. A few moments later they paused before the gate giving admittance to the gloomy and forbidding ancient stone residence of the Hasmonean kings.

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47

Perhaps it was the thin slash of early sunlight venturing across her bed that had aroused her; perhaps she had awakened early because she had retired early. Pleading weariness and an aching head, Joanna had stayed away from the Tetrarch's lavish dinner, the preparation of which she had directed. She had felt certain that the banquet, safely hidden within the old palace's thick walls from the prying, sanctimonious eyes of the priests, would turn into a drunken debauch, and the Feast of the Passover, she held strongly, was no occasion for such frivolity.

The drafty old palace and the grounds about it were quiet. With the exception of the servants, she surmised, there was likely to be no one astir in the Tetrarch's household, particularly Herod Antipas himself. No doubt he would arise late, in time to bathe and dress for his ceremonious partaking of the Passover meal.

Joanna, who had come up from Tiberias with her husband Chuza and others of the Tetrarch's staff, lay still and listened to the small sounds of early morning in old Jerusalem: birds twittering on the sill of her open window, cattle lowing in the stalls at the Temple, the rising hum of the densely packed city's coming alive.

So, lying quiet and keenly awake now, she heard in the court below her window a babble of men's voices and the uncadenced slap and shuffle of sandaled feet on paving stones. Quickly she slipped from the bed and crossed her chamber. Peering out from behind the draperies, she saw, hardly twenty paces from the palace wall, a motley

through that numbered several Temple priests resplendently robed, with their luxuriant beards fastidiously plaited and oiled. One of the elegant ones, she was surprised to discover, was the High Priest Joseph Caiaphas himself. But why, she wondered, would the High Priest and his Temple aristocracy be coming with such a nondescript mob as this into the palace courtyard? 288

She ventured to open wider the slit between the draperies and the window frame and lean further forward. Ahead, leading the strangely discordant procession, was a detachment of Roman soldiers, currently assigned, no doubt, as guardsmen in the Temple service, since they were in the vanguard of the High Priest and others of the Temple leadership.

Then, in the center of the marching soldiers, she saw the manacled prisoner. Bareheaded, he was half a head taller than his guards; his reddish-brown hair fell straight to curl at his shoulders. He held his head erect, but he seemed to be walking with labored stride to keep in step with his captors; his wide shoulders sloped as though pulled down by the weight of his long arms and the pinioned hands; his brown homespun robe, already sweat-stained, hung awry and loosely open at the neck.

Though his back was toward her, there was something vaguely familiar about the tall one, his carriage, manner of walking, the way he arched his back, weary though he must have been for a long while. Then he turned his head to look over his shoulder, and she saw the twin-spiked short beard and the curling earlocks.

“By the beard of the High Priest!” She had almost screamed it aloud, but she restrained herself. “The rabbi of Nazareth!” The man who had healed her son of the deadly fever, who had also cured the Centurion Cornelius’ Lucian, the good teacher whom many believed—and she, too!—to have in those fettered hands the veritable healing power of God Himself.

The procession stopped. A soldier stepped to the entrance way and spoke to the sentry on duty there. Now the sentry was talking with a manservant who had appeared at the portal. In another instant the servant disappeared inside.

“It’s the High Priest’s doing!” she said aloud. “He’s bringing the Nazarene here for the Tetrarch to condemn; he’s determined to destroy Jesus.”

She stepped back from the window and began quickly to dress. As she pulled on her clothes she tried desperately to evolve some plan that might thwart the High Priest’s evil scheme. Certainly Antipas, incredibly fearful of displeasing Caiaphas and his fellows in the Temple leadership, would be disposed to yield to the High Priest’s demands, even to beheading the Galilean. Had he not beheaded the Wilderness prophet? Had he not yielded then, against his better judgment, to Herodias? Herod would be more inclined to give way to Caiaphas than would the Procurator Pontius Pilate. But if Herodias would intervene.... 289

The Tetrarchess indeed! Hurriedly Joanna finished dressing and rushed downstairs as quickly as she could without exciting undue attention, to find the palace servant with whom the sentry a moment ago had spoken.

“They have brought the Galilean wonder worker to the Tetrarch for trial,” the servant revealed. “The High Priest is charging him with many crimes, the soldier said. They took him first before the Procurator, but when Pilate discovered he was a Galilean, he ordered him delivered here for trial before Tetrarch Herod. Now they are in the judgment hall awaiting the Tetrarch’s arrival.” He smiled glumly. “Herod, I suppose, was fit to burst at being awakened so early.”

Next, Joanna went in search of Herodias. She found her in her apartment; the Tetrarchess had finished her bath and now Neaera was doing her hair. In a few words Joanna revealed that Pilate had just sent the Galilean teacher and miracle worker to the Tetrarch for trial and that the High Priest Caiaphas and other Sadducean leaders were awaiting Herod’s arrival in the judgment hall; they planned to present charges that Jesus was guilty of crimes deserving of death.

Herodias listened patiently. When Joanna finished her recital, the Tetrarchess shrugged. “But what do you wish me to do? How does this Galilean’s fate concern me? Just because he beguiled you and Chuza into believing that he drove out the fever and healed your son....” She broke off with a patronizing smile.

“He concerns you, Tetrarchess, in that the Tetrarch is greatly concerned, though he may not suspect it. The High Priest schemed this man’s arrest and carried him before the Procurator, who rules in Judaea. But Pilate, realizing that whatever judgment he might render, whether to release the prisoner or execute him, would cause a great outcry in the province and be reported to the rulers in Rome, has cleverly sought to evade his responsibility and put it upon the Tetrarch. Thus, the Tetrarch in trying the Galilean, will be the one to be judged both in Israel and in Rome.” 290

The smile on the face of the crafty Herodias had vanished, and her forehead wrinkled in sudden concern. “But the man is a Galilean, and Pilate in sending him before Antipas recognizes the Tetrarch’s authority and compliments him....”

“He professes to do that, but what he’s really doing is shifting the burden onto the Tetrarch. And when this commotion develops into a great storm in Rome, then the Tetrarch, too late, I’m afraid, will know he’s been tricked. Let him free this prisoner, and the High Priest will inform the Emperor that the Tetrarch has released someone who was plotting to overthrow Rome. On the other hand, let him execute the Galilean and the report will go by fastest ship to Rome that another prophet in the Wilderness....”

“No! No! Joanna, never mention that man!” Herodias cried out. But quickly she recovered her poise and smiled weakly. “You see, mere mention of that Wilderness fellow still frightens Antipas. When he began to get reports of

this Nazarene's appearance before throngs in Galilee and other places, Antipas was obsessed with the idea that this one was the Wilderness preacher returned to life. Lately he seems to have returned to his senses, but, as you know, he's a very superstitious person. And frankly, Joanna, I myself don't like to be reminded of the Wilderness prophet." She relaxed somewhat. "You're right about Pilate, I daresay. He probably does wish to evade trying the Galilean. Claudia, though, would want him to get himself involved in further difficulty; that would make it easier for her and Longinus." She turned to speak to her maid. "Hurry, Neaera," she ordered, "I've got to get out of here quickly. We can finish all this later. I must see the Tetrarch before he goes." Then she spoke again to the wife of Herod's steward. "Thank you, Joanna; you have done Antipas and me a great service."

291

48

As the Temple guardsmen withdrew with their prisoner from the Praetorium, Pilate beckoned to one of the Antonia soldiers.

"I wish to proceed with the trials of the revolutionaries captured last week by Centurion Cornelius," he announced. "If the centurion has returned with any other captives, have them brought in too."

"He has not returned, sir," the soldier said.

"Then we shall try the three we have."

Bar Abbas and his two henchmen had already been brought up from their cells deep under Antonia; the witnesses who would testify against them, including several soldiers from Cornelius' century, were waiting in an anteroom. In the group of witnesses were several Temple priests, elegantly robed, their beards elaborately braided and oiled, their plump fingers weighted with rings.

The prisoners, shackled at wrists and ankles, were led shuffling into the chamber to stand before the tribunal. After a week in the blackness of the dungeon, their eyes were unaccustomed to light; they stood blinking in the growing brightness of the chamber. Then from an anteroom on the other side of the courtroom another soldier escorted the witnesses to a position facing Pilate's curule several paces across from the three bound men.

Quickly the prisoners were identified: one Bar Abbas, long sought chieftain of a Zealot band preying upon travelers in various sections of the province, particularly the boulder-bordered steep ascent of the Jericho road, and two others of his fellow revolutionaries, one Dysmas and one Gesmas, all three of Galilee.

"With what crimes are these men charged?" the Procurator asked. He made no reference to their being Galileans, nor did he question his jurisdiction over them, though he had just sent another Galilean to the Tetrarch.

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The accusations were made. As members of a notoriously desperate Zealot gang of revolutionaries, they had pillaged caravans, waylaid tax collectors and robbed them of their revenues, descended from the hills upon merchants' pack trains and looted them, even assailed detachments of Roman soldiers and slain some. Then the witnesses confronted them. One of the priests, accompanied by fellow priests of the Temple, was returning from Caesarea when the party was set upon and robbed. He identified the three as among his assailants; he declared he was positive the shackled men standing there were the culprits. Then another lavishly robed priest was called upon to give testimony.

"O Excellency," he began, "it was on the Jericho road that these men, this Bar Abbas and these other two"—he pointed to each in turn—"came down from the rocks and seized me. I was bearing a large pouch of gold and silver, funds of the Temple I was taking to be put in its coffers, when this big fellow here...."

"He was coming *from* the Temple!" screamed Bar Abbas, interrupting the testimony, as he lifted his pinioned hands and shook them so that the chains rattled loudly. "He had stolen the money from its coffers! But we took it from him and gave it to feed the poor and those dispossessed by the traitorous publicans!"

"Silence!" commanded Pilate. "You will have your turn to speak."

Next, two soldiers, one after the other, who had been coming to Jerusalem the past week as members of the century commanded by Centurion Cornelius, testified that the three were among the marauders who had swept down from the rocks beside the Jericho road to capture for a few minutes the detachment that was escorting Tetrarch Herod Antipas and his wife and to assail the near-by flanking columns put out by the centurion. In this assault, the witnesses testified, several of the Roman soldiers had been killed.

The three offered no evidence in rebuttal. The one called Dysmas, who looked both grave and resigned, seemed to be studying the pattern of the mosaic at his feet; Gesmas glared sullenly at the smirking priests who had witnessed against him; and Bar Abbas stood, as wide-legged as his chains would permit, with his sharp black eyes fixed in defiance on the round face of his judge and his lips above the tangle of his beard twisted in a sneer.

293

"I adjudge you guilty," Pilate said, looking in turn toward each of the prisoners. He called to one of the soldiers on courtroom duty. "Go tell the commander to send me three centurions."

When after a short wait the soldier returned with the three officers and they had reported to the Procurator, Pilate faced the convicted revolutionaries. "I sentence each of you to the lash and the cross. And may all such dastardly wicked enemies of Rome so perish!" He turned again to the tribunal attendant. "Prepare a titulus for

each," he commanded, "and write thus: robber-assassin-revolutionary." He leaned forward. "Take them now into the courtyard and scourge them, and then conduct them outside the walls to the Hill of the Skull, and crucify them. Each of you centurions will choose a quaternion to assist, and each will have charge of the scourging and execution of one of the prisoners. And do not dally. I wish them on the crosses quickly, so that the Passover crowds may see what becomes of those who plot revolution against Rome. It should have a salutary effect." He waved his arm imperiously. "Take them away!"

49

Hardly had the Procurator climbed the stairs to his apartment and ordered his long delayed breakfast to be brought in, when a soldier assigned to the Praetorium reported to him.

"Sir, the Galilean whom you sent to the Tetrarch Herod has been returned to you," he announced. "The High Priest and his Temple associates, together with a throng of excited Jews, are down there awaiting your return to the Praetorium to resume trial of the prisoner." 294

"By great Jove!" The Procurator's scowl was heavy. Why had Herod sent him back? Surely the bumbling Tetrarch hadn't been clever enough to comprehend Pilate's scheme to evade responsibility.

He did not question the soldier, however, and a few moments later he mounted the tribunal again and sat down upon the curule. From the pavement before the Praetorium the captain of the Temple guards and his detachment, forming a square about the Galilean, advanced to the tribunal. Jesus, Pilate saw, was wearing a bedraggled, purple-bordered robe. One of the soldiers was carrying the folded brown homespun robe which the prisoner had been wearing before.

Pilate, color mounting, pointed to Jesus and glared at the officer. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Why is he wearing this emblem of authority? Speak up! Who is responsible for this mockery?"

"Not I, sir," the captain hastened to declare. "The Tetrarch ordered one of his old robes to be placed upon the prisoner; he said he appreciated the Procurator's raillery in calling the man the King of the Jews, and he ordered him arrayed in the purple in order to further your joking, sir."

"Didn't he examine the prisoner?"

"He questioned him, sir, and sought to have him work some tricks of magic, but the prisoner made no reply."

Once again Pilate descended from the tribunal and went out upon the pavement before the Praetorium. At first sight of him the mob began to raise a clamor. "Bar Abbas!" a man toward the rear of the multitude screamed. "Bar Abbas! Give us Bar Abbas!" Others joined in the uproar. Pilate seemed not to understand them. "They want to see the revolutionaries' leader," he said to the soldier who had accompanied him. "They will see him as the condemned men start for the Hill of the Skull. But not until I have disposed of this Galilean. There is already too much commotion. Go into the courtyard, and tell the centurions not to start to the execution ground until I give the order." He turned back to face Caiaphas and the priests and behind them the motley crowd. "You brought me this man and charged that he was a revolutionary, that he sought to overthrow the rule of Rome in this province, but I found no guilt in him, and when I sent him to the Tetrarch Herod, ruler of Galilee, he, too, found nothing worthy of death. So I shall discharge him. And now, disperse and let us have no more of this tumult." 295

"No! No! O Procurator, crucify him! Bar Abbas! Bar Abbas!"

"Crucify the King of the Jews!" Pilate looked toward the High Priest as he said it, as though he were jesting, but he could not effectively conceal the scorn in his voice and on his face. "I must let him go free!"

His words provoked another storm of shouted entreaties and demands. "Bar Abbas! Bar Abbas! Give us Bar Abbas!"

"When I have disposed of this Jesus of Galilee, you shall get to see that revolutionary"—he smiled glumly—"as Bar Abbas goes to the cross."

"The Passover release! It's the long-established custom, O Procurator. Give us the Passover release!"

Pilate stared in surprise at the crowd shouting below him. Could it be, then, as he had first suspected, that this throng hated the Temple priests and especially Caiaphas and wanted the release of the Galilean? But he had found Jesus not guilty and technically had already released him. If, however, he should find him guilty of some minor crime, such as causing a great disturbance and commotion among the people, for example, and punish him for that, then he might logically release him as the Passover recipient of the Procurator's pardon. At the same time he would dull considerably any report concerning this case that might find its way to Rome.

"I find no serious fault in this Galilean," he declared, as he held up his hand to signal for silence, "but because of his indiscretions and his provocation of tumults and unrest and much bickering among the people, I shall have him scourged before I release him."

He returned to the tribunal and gave the formal order for the scourging of Jesus. Then once again he climbed the stone stairway to his apartment and called for his breakfast. His food was placed on a small table by the window,

for already the morning sun was warm and out beyond the smoldering Vale of Hinnom dark, thickening clouds had begun to form. But the Procurator was not permitted to relax calmly over his morning meal. The din below not only continued, but the shoutings grew increasingly loud. After awhile, Pilate pushed back his plate and stood up. 296

"I'll abide this no longer!" he shouted to his orderly standing near the doorway. "The obstinate, cantankerous provincials! They'll end this disgraceful tumult, or I'll have the Antonia garrison on them with their swords!" He caught up his toga and started once more for the Praetorium.

"Bring out to the pavement the robber Bar Abbas and the Galilean miracle worker," he commanded, when he arrived in his tribunal chamber.

"Bar Abbas! Bar Abbas! Bring forth Bar Abbas, O Procurator!" the multitude began to shout, as Pilate appeared on the mosaic in front of the Praetorium. "The Passover release! Give us Bar Abbas!" The Procurator, studying the vociferous throng, saw that the cries for the release of the robber chieftain seemed to be coming from a group of wild-eyed, fanatical-looking rough fellows bunched behind the High Priest and his clique. The thought came to him that they might be Zealots, even some of the escaped members of the Bar Abbas band broken up a week before by the Centurion Cornelius. But the supporters of the Galilean mystic, he reasoned, would outnumber these men screaming for the release of Bar Abbas.

The multitude calmed perceptibly as the scourged revolutionary appeared on the pavement before them and then, recovered somewhat from the shock the man's sad state had caused, burst into a new clamoring for his release. Bar Abbas stared stonily ahead, as if indifferent to the screams and yelling of the people, no doubt still half dazed from the ordeal from which he had that moment been delivered. Although his coarse robe had been returned to him after the scourging and was thrown loosely about his shoulders, the milling crowd saw at once that the leather-thonged whip had stripped and torn the flesh of his shoulders and back; already the robe was reddening into a gory, clinging covering like that which a butcher might have worn to carry on his shoulder a freshly slaughtered lamb. 297

But Jesus, when he was led forth from the courtyard to the pavement before the Praetorium to stand near the robber chieftain, made an even more pitiable figure. The purple robe he had been wearing when he was brought back from Herod's judgment hall was once again about his sagging shoulders, and it was soaked with blood. His long hair was matted with drying blood where it curled above his flayed and bruised shoulders, and his naked upper arms were crisscrossed with bleeding cuts and great reddened welts. But more shocking than the lacerations and the bleeding flesh, the blood-soaked purple robe, the mercilessly flayed, drooping shoulders burdened beyond human strength to endure, was the evidence he wore upon his head of a sadism past comprehending. Pressed down hard against his skull, so that the sharp points in some places actually had pierced the skin of his forehead and temples, was a circlet hastily fashioned from a long thin branch torn from a rhamnus thorn.

Pilate noticed it immediately. "Why the victor's wreath?" he asked the soldier guarding the Galilean.

"It's not a victor's wreath," he answered. "Sir, it's the royal crown of the King of the Jews." He ventured a smile. "The soldiers made it from a shrub growing near the scourging post and crowned him with it."

"Indeed, the crown goes well with the Tetrarch's purple." Pilate smiled humorlessly. Then he held up his hand to command silence. "It must be well known to you that each year at the Feast of the Passover it is the custom of the Procurator to release a prisoner. Here before you are the revolutionary and murderer and robber, one Bar Abbas, who has been sentenced to the cross, and the prisoner brought by the High Priest, one Jesus of Galilee"—he paused and looking directly at the group of Temple priests, smiled appreciatively—"the King of the Jews...."

"We have no king!" shouted Joseph Caiaphas, and a chorus of angry voices supported him, "no king except Tiberius. This man is not our king; he is a blasphemer, an enemy of Israel's God; he stirs up the people; he declares himself to be king in Israel; he calls himself the Son of God!" He paused, as if fearful at having uttered the ineffable name. 298

"Crucify him! Crucify him!" The mob renewed its angry demanding. "He claims to be the Son of God, the blasphemer! Crucify him!"

But Pilate paid them little heed. Turning his back upon the High Priest and the clamoring throng on the esplanade below, he withdrew into the Praetorium. "Bring him inside," he said, motioning with his head as he looked back. And then he spoke to the soldier guarding Bar Abbas. "And remove that one from the sight of the multitude. But presently I shall call for him again."

The Procurator had hardly mounted the tribunal when a soldier entered the chamber from the courtyard and handed a tablet to one of the attendants. The two whispered, heads together, for a moment. Then the attendant strode quickly to the tribunal, saluted, and presented Pilate the wax tablet. "A message, sir, from the Procurator's wife," he explained. "The messenger reported it was urgent."

Hastily Pilate scanned the tablet. He scowled, then beckoned to the man. "Fetch me the soldier who brought this tablet."

In another moment the soldier was standing stiffly before the tribunal. "Soldier," Pilate inquired, "did you bring this message from the hand of the Lady Claudia?"

"No, sir," he answered. "It was handed to me in the courtyard over there."

“By whom?”

“The Centurion Longinus, sir; he had just come, I understood, from the Palace of the Herods.”

A quick frown darkened the Procurator’s countenance. “And where is the Centurion Longinus now?”

“Sir, I think he went up to his apartment in the fortress.”

Pilate nodded and waved the man aside; his face was heavy as once again he read his wife’s message:

Hear me, Pilate:

Take no responsibility for that righteous man’s blood, for in the night I had a frightful dream concerning him.

What on earth, he wondered, could Claudia have dreamed about this Galilean fanatic? And how did she know that the man had been brought before the Procurator’s tribunal? Yes, and by all the gods, why had the message come from Longinus, and why, moreover, had Longinus not delivered it himself? 299

Still frowning, Pilate turned once again to question the prisoner standing calmly before the tribunal, his face streaked with drying sweat and blood, his robe turned deep crimson from the whip’s fearful wounds, his matted hair still crowned with the circlet of thorns. “They say you claim to be the son of their god,” he said. “What do they mean? Tell me, where *do* you come from?”

Jesus appeared lost in introspection. If he heard the Procurator’s question, he ignored it. An infinite sadness seemed to possess him.

But Pilate, still scowling, perhaps upset further because of his wife’s message and the manner in which it had been brought to him, revealed his impatience. “Will you answer me?” he asked testily. “Don’t you know that I have the power either to release you or to condemn you?”

Calmly, looking the Procurator in the eyes and with no tone of rancor, Jesus replied. “You would have no power over me were it not granted you from above. Therefore, he who delivered me to you”—he pointed toward the esplanade where the High Priest and his cohorts awaited—“has a greater guilt than you.”

Once again the Procurator stepped down from the tribunal and strode out to the pavement in front of the Praetorium. “Bring forth the prisoner,” he commanded. “And have Bar Abbas brought to me, too.”

“I shall release to you a Passover prisoner,” he announced to the multitude when the two scourged prisoners stood before him. “Here stand a robber and assassin”—he pointed toward Bar Abbas—“and”—he smiled grimly as he waved his hand toward the Galilean—“your King of the Jews. Which shall I release?”

“Bar Abbas! Bar Abbas!” the people howled, and Pilate could see the priests exhorting them to shout their demands. “Release Bar Abbas! Bar Abbas!”

“But what shall I do with the King of the Jews?”

“Crucify him! Crucify him!” they stormed. “Release unto us Bar Abbas!” 300

“He is not our king!” shouted Caiaphas. “We have no king but Caesar!”

Grudgingly, Pilate nodded to the robber chief’s guards. “Release him.” The Procurator had lost. He had been sure the Galilean’s followers would outnumber the vociferous Zealots. But Caiaphas had been the better schemer.

Quickly the soldiers freed the hulking Bar Abbas, and in another moment he disappeared with a tumultuously happy group of his supporters, probably members of his own band, in the mass of people thronging the Court of the Gentiles. But the High Priest and his hirelings kept their places on the pavement before the Praetorium. Now the Procurator, pointing toward the Galilean, spoke to them.

“What then shall I do with the King of the Jews?” His tone was sarcastic. “I find no fault in him. I shall release him, just as I have already released your robber.”

“No! No! Crucify him! He is not our king! He is a blasphemer who would destroy us!”

“Crucify your king?” A cold smile lifted the corners of the Procurator’s heavy lips. “Crucify the King of the Jews?”

“We have no king, O Procurator,” Caiaphas declared evenly, when he had lifted his hands to still the clamor, “no king but Caesar. And if you are a friend of Caesar, O Excellency, you will rid us of this one who not only seeks to destroy our religion but also to set himself upon the restored throne of King David. Should word get to Tiberius or Sejanus in Rome....” The High Priest shrugged and smiled suggestively.

Word would certainly reach the capital. And the story would be of the High Priest’s coloring. The Procurator Pontius Pilate, despite repeated warning and ample testimony establishing the guilt of the accused, it would be told, had released a dangerously clever revolutionary intent upon restoring the ancient kingdom of the Jews in Palestine with himself as king.

“But he declares that his kingdom is not of this world,” Pilate tried to protest. “He’s nothing but a harmless babbler, a religious fanatic whom too much reasoning has driven mad....” 301

“So he would have you think, O Procurator. The man is cunning, amazingly clever, captivating.” Caiaphas smiled

indulgently. "Has he not already deceived even the wise and discerning Procurator?"

The High Priest Joseph Caiaphas had won. Already too many reports of the conduct of the Procurator's office had gone to Rome; one more might be sufficient to arouse the wrath of the Prefect Sejanus. Nevertheless, since the High Priest had forced the verdict, the responsibility would rest on him. He clapped his hands and when a servant came running, called for a basin of water. A moment later, as the servant held the basin before him, the Procurator plunged his hands into the water and rubbed them together vigorously. "Let the people heed," he said loudly and with ostentation, "that I wash my hands of the blood of this man. I am guiltless. His blood is not upon me."

"Indeed, O Procurator"—the High Priest's smile was scornful, his tone sneeringly derisive—"let his blood be upon us, yea, and our children!"

"Then take him, and crucify him." Pilate glanced toward the prisoner, standing tall and calm and regal in the blood-drenched discarded purple. But when their eyes met, Pilate's shifted in that same instant to the mosaic at the Galilean's feet, so that momentarily the judge's head was bowed to the prisoner. Then, in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper, Pilate spoke to the guard who held the fetter binding Jesus' wrists. "Lead him into the courtyard."

As they were going out he summoned an attendant. "Fetch a tablet that I may prepare the titulus." His eyes fell upon the wax tablet that his wife had sent him. "Wait," he said. "This one will suffice. There's space enough on it for what I have in mind." The soldier picked up the tablet with the attached stylus. "Write this," Pilate commanded, "and when you have written it, take the tablet into the courtyard and have the words inscribed on the headboard in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew." He paused, reflecting. "Write what I say: *This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.*" 302

Joseph Caiaphas had heard. "No, O Procurator! Write that he says he is King of the Jews!"

Pontius Pilate stared in stony silence at the furious High Priest. "What I have written," he said after a moment, "I have written." He turned to the soldier. "Go prepare the titulus board." Then, without a glance toward the High Priest and his group, he returned to the Praetorium and mounted the tribunal. Only the few soldiers in attendance remained in the vaulted great chamber. Pilate sat down upon the curule; his eyes, unseeing, were fixed on the pattern of the mosaic at the foot of the tribunal steps.

... Great Rome's vaunted justice. But must not justice yield sometimes to expediency, the expediency of the greater good for the greater number? Will not his death end a developing tumult in Palestine that might have brought even bloodshed and death for many Jews and perhaps even Roman soldiers? And now no report will go to Sejanus from Joseph Caiaphas.

... The Galilean. A dreamer, a devotee of the Jewish religion, a visionary ... a righteous man, Claudia said. "Take no responsibility for that righteous man's blood." Claudia's dream, bah. Superstition, astrology maybe, foolishness. Calpurnia had a dream, and Caesar laughed at her warning. Caesar laughed, and Caesar died.

... But no report will go to Rome of the Procurator's releasing a dangerous revolutionary who was planning to establish himself on the restored throne of ancient Israel. Joseph Caiaphas has been silenced....

Suddenly a cold, numbing fear clutched Pontius Pilate. "By great Jove!" But he had not exclaimed aloud. No report would go to Rome from the High Priest, no fawning spies would tell how the Procurator had freed a cunning revolutionary, but Claudia had warned him not to judge the Galilean. Could his wife, by all the gods, be a secret follower of this mystic? Didn't many high-placed women of Rome become devotees of this strange Jewish one-god religion? Could the Emperor's stepdaughter, by great Jove, have become, of all persons, interested in religion, in any religion? Could Claudia really feel strongly about this Nazarene fellow? 303

... And Longinus had fetched her message. Longinus, yes, by all the gods....

The soldier who had led Jesus forth from the pavement into the courtyard had returned to the Praetorium. "Sir, the titulus board is complete. They are ready to proceed with the crucifixions, except...."

"Then start at once with the three prisoners to the Hill of the Skull." He paused. "Except? What were you going to say?"

"You have assigned no centurion, sir, to have charge of the crucifixion of this fellow whom you have just condemned. Do you wish Porcius, who was to have crucified Bar Abbas...."

"No." Then, in a flash came an idea. Pilate maintained a sternly impassive countenance, but inwardly he exulted in the suddenly revealed manner of solving his dilemma. Now *no one* would be sending stories to Rome, for certainly nobody would be foolish enough to reveal to Sejanus the execution of an innocent Jew if *he himself* had participated with the Procurator in that Jew's crucifixion. "I wish Porcius for another duty today." He pointed upward. "Go at once to the apartment of the Centurion Longinus and inform him that the Procurator assigns him to take charge of the quaternion and orders him to proceed immediately with the crucifixion of the Galilean."

They had attained the summit of the Mount of Olives. Steady climbing from the Jericho plain had lathered the laboring horses, and the dust-grimed faces of the men were streaked with perspiration. Since the passing of midday the heat had grown increasingly oppressive; now, as they approached Jerusalem in the eerie half-darkness, it weighed upon them like a heavy blanket. 304

The dark cloud over the city that hardly two hours ago they had seen from the narrow defile between the boulders had grown to envelop them, and as they came over the rise and looked across toward the walled density of flat-roofed stone structures, they could scarcely make out the usually dominating mass of the Temple. Ordinarily on an early afternoon in April the sun would have been reflected brilliantly in the gold plates of the Temple's roof, but today it was barely able to penetrate the overcast. In the strangely thickening gloom the resplendent plates had taken on a dull coating of bilious green. Faintly discernible to the right were the darker masses of the Fortress Antonia towers upthrust in the cloaking shadows; but westward, beyond Antonia, the great Palace of the Herods and the other splendid abodes of the privileged were completely shrouded; Mount Zion and the Ophel shared equally in oblivion.

"What is it, Centurion?" Decius shook his head perplexedly. "I've been out here a long time, but I've never seen anything like it. This strange darkness, this stillness, and the peculiar blue-green cast. Centurion, this isn't just another storm coming up, another thunderstorm following excessive heat. It's got a queer, ghastly look, as if the gods might be angry ..."

"The gods, Decius?"

The soldier laughed uneasily. "I use the term broadly, for want of one more accurate." He waved an arm in the direction of the darkened city. "But it does have a sort of supernatural look, doesn't it, Centurion?"—he smiled—"though of course I have little belief in the supernatural." He shrugged. "How do you explain it?"

"It does have a strange, unearthly look," Cornelius agreed. "But I don't believe it's a manifestation of the gods' anger, though I've never seen one before like this. Could it be a heavy mass of sand borne in from the desert? If that's it, then maybe the sun shining through the concentration of sand accounts for this strange greenish color."

"That's probably it," Decius agreed. "But then, where is the wind?" 305

"It may be the lull before the wind. This unseasonable heat is bound to bring on a storm. Look!" He pointed. "The sun."

High above the city, beyond its southern wall and past the ever smoldering refuse heaps in the Vale of Hinnom, the sun rode like a pale copper disk behind a thinning portion of the veiling cloud. In the same instant its rays found a rift in the mantle covering the city and shot a pinpoint of light to bathe in sudden brilliance a small eminence just beyond and slightly to the right of the Fortress Antonia.

"By all the gods! Bar Abbas and the two henchmen we captured last week!"

On the summit of the little hill stood three crosses, and stretched upon each cross was the body of a man. A staring throng of spectators stood scattered about below.

Then suddenly the rift in the covering cloud was healed; darkness swallowed the burdened crosses.

"Poor devils," Cornelius said. "That's an assignment I'm glad I didn't get. Being late returning may have saved me." He looked up again toward the lowering sky. "But we'd better be getting on to Antonia. This storm may break at any moment, and when it does, I don't want to be in it."

Quickly the cavalcade moved down the slope toward the Garden of Gethsemane and the Brook Kidron beyond. Entering the walled city by Dung Gate, it went through Ophel and ascended the slope westward to move along the lower level of Mount Zion and cross the bridge spanning the Tyropoeon Valley. At the eastern end of the bridge the procession turned northward and marched along the way paralleling the Temple's wall to the entrance gate of the Antonia.

When Cornelius had dismissed his men, he went up at once to his apartment in the officers' quarters on the south side of the fortress. He had been looking forward eagerly to a refreshing bath and a short nap before dressing in fresh clothing for the evening meal. But as he was about to enter his quarters he encountered a centurion coming into the corridor from the apartment next to his. 306

"By Hercules, Cornelius!"

"Porcius!" He clapped a hand on the other's shoulder. "I didn't know you were quartered here."

"I've come since you left, Cornelius. I heard you were out pursuing a gang of those Zealots. Did you overtake any of them?"

"Yes, and killed several. But we didn't capture any."

"This morning they crucified two of the ones you captured last week."

"Three, you mean, don't you? Bar Abbas and two of his company."

"But Pilate released Bar Abbas."

"Released him? Bar Abbas?"

"Yes, released him. It's amazing, isn't it? But the mob demanded his release as the Passover prisoner—you know, don't you, that the Procurator each year, in accordance with tradition, releases one prisoner at Passover time?"

Cornelius nodded. "But weren't there three men crucified?"

"Yes. I was supposed to have had charge of the crucifixion of Bar Abbas. Pilate had already condemned him to the cross when the demand for his release was made. So he released him, and I was relieved of a most unpleasant task."

"You were fortunate, Porcius. But if three men were crucified, who was the third? I didn't know another revolutionary had been captured."

"He was no revolutionary, Cornelius. Pilate knew he wasn't and wanted to free him. But the High Priest insisted that the fellow was a troublemaker who planned to attempt to set himself up as King of Israel. So, rather than run the risk of having the Temple leaders report him to Rome as protector of the Emperor's enemies, Pilate yielded and sent the fellow to the cross. And luckily for me, he assigned Centurion Longinus the task of conducting the man's execution."

"Longinus! By all the gods, Porcius, who was the fellow?"

"A Galilean. A religious fanatic, I judged him to be, but entirely harmless. His name, if I recall it correctly, was Jesus, I think, one Jesus from a place in Galilee called Nazareth, they said." 307

"Jesus! Oh, by all the gods, when...."

"But do you know the man, Centurion?"

"When did they lead him to the Hill of the Skull?" Cornelius ignored the centurion's question. "How long...?"

"It was in mid-morning. He's been on the cross for several hours now. And he was unmercifully scourged before they started with him to the crucifixion ground." He stared at his companion's suddenly ashen face. "But, Cornelius, why...?"

"Jesus! Oh, great Jove!" Anger, utter amazement and pain were written in swift succession on his still sweating, dust-covered face. "O God of Israel! O his God! O *my* God, Jesus!"

Turning, he raced along the corridor toward the steps that a moment ago he had ascended, stone stairs that went down to the ground-floor open area just inside the great western entrance to the fortress.

51

Cornelius had reached the gate in the north wall when the storm broke with sudden fury. He darted beneath the flimsy awning of a fish stall to wait out the blast.

"Here, let me help," he said to the frantic shopkeeper as he caught a side of the filthy cloth with which the squat Jew was trying desperately to cover his malodorous fish to protect them from the dust and powdered dung swirling along the cobblestones. "You're lucky your market has the protection of the wall, or everything would be blown away. This is one of the worst storms I've ever.... By all the gods!" The ground had begun to tremble.

"An earthquake!" the shopkeeper shouted. "Wind and torrents of rain, and now the earth shakes!" His eyes were round and frightened. But in another moment the tremors subsided, and the man regained his calm. "I'm not surprised, soldier," he observed, lifting his hands, palms up, and shaking his head solemnly. "And it makes no difference, I'm thinking, that my stall sits in the lee of the great wall. By the beard of the High Priest, it, too, will be leveled to the ground!" 308

"What do you mean? Hasn't this wall survived many an earthquake before this one?"

"Indeed, soldier. But we've never had anything like that before." He indicated with a quick nod of his head the hill beyond the gate's square. "Never *him* on a cross." He looked the centurion in the eyes, and Cornelius fancied he saw a sudden hostility. "Soldier, have you been up there?"

"No, I've just come from the Fortress Antonia, and only an hour ago I arrived in Jerusalem. What do you mean?"

"I mean that one up there, soldier, on the middle cross." He pointed. "It's that rabbi from Galilee. Your Pilate tried him this morning and sent him to the cross, and unjustly, too, it's my opinion. And I heard it said that the Galilean told how he would cause the Temple to be destroyed and in three days raise it up again." He dabbed a greasy forefinger against the centurion's soiled toga. "And I'm of the opinion, soldier, he's got the power to do it. Didn't he raise that fellow over at Bethany from the dead? This storm and this earthquake"—he paused and on his countenance was an expression of understanding suddenly gained—"soldier, maybe he's doing it now! Nor could I blame him." He shook his head slowly. "I'd hate to be in Pilate's sandals, or those soldiers' up there!"

Almost as quickly as it had burst upon them, the storm was ended. The rain ceased with the blowing away of the clouds, the winds quieted, and the great blazing disk of the sun, still high in the sky toward the Great Sea, shone down bright and searing. The shopkeeper rolled back the grimy cloth, crumpled it into a heap, and with it dabbed

lightly at several fish it had failed to protect; then he hurled it into a corner and turned to wait upon pilgrims in the vanguard of a procession Cornelius saw coming down the slope of the Hill of the Skull.

"The Galilean, is he...?"

309

"He's dead," the man answered before the fish merchant could complete his question. "He died just as the storm broke. This fish"—he pointed—"where was it caught?"

"No earlier than the day before yesterday, and fetched by fast cart from the Sea of Galilee. Good, fresh carp, perches, bream." With grimy fingers he poked at now one and now another of his offerings. "The finest fish in Jerusalem, and the most weight for your money!"

Cornelius stepped away from the stall into the warmth of the freshly cleansed air. As he walked quickly along the road he could now see plainly revealed the three crosses and their inert, mutilated burdens. The pause in the fish market during the raging of the storm had given him time to catch his breath after racing over the cobblestones from the square in front of Antonia.

But why had he come on the run to the Hill of the Skull? Why had he come at all? Porcius had said that Jesus had already been nailed to the cross for several hours. Had the centurion hoped in some mysterious manner to save the Galilean, to get him down from the cross and revive him? Had he thought he might countermand Pilate's judgment and sentence?

He hadn't thought. He had acted on his emotions. He had wanted to see Jesus, to protest to Longinus, to scream out his denunciation of everyone who'd had a hand in this abominable act. He hadn't reasoned any course of action. He had only come as fast as he could to the place of horrors, his whole being seething with resentment and anger and a terrible bitterness.

And now Jesus was dead. The good man who had done no man ill, who had done countless men good, who had restored Lucian, and Chuza's son. Or had he really?

Would he be up there now, perhaps already dead on a Roman cross, if he had had the power to heal Chuza's little boy, if he had been able by his own mighty will to rid Lucian of the fever that was consuming him? Would he?

Longinus had been right. Those "miracles" had been only remarkable coincidences. The Galilean wonder worker, the good man, the son of the Jews' one god—Cornelius ventured to raise his head from the ascending path and look upward toward the central cross—was hanging spiked to a crossbeam, crumpled and lifeless, as dead, or soon to be, as those two revolutionaries who hung there with him. And Longinus, though unhappy that Pilate had required him to crucify an innocent man, would remind him that all along he had been right in denying that Jesus of Galilee had been anything more than a good man. 310

He found Longinus seated not far from the crosses on a low stone outcropping. His head was bent forward, cradled in his hands, and his eyes were fastened to the ground.

"I've been expecting you, Cornelius," he said, looking up as his friend spoke. "I knew you would be coming."

"We didn't get into Jerusalem until a short time before the storm. As soon as I heard at Antonia, I came running; I was at the gate down there when the storm struck."

"I knew you would come." He shook his head slowly; his eyes were fixed, unseeing. "And I deserve everything you're going to say." He lifted his face, and Cornelius saw on it fear and sorrow and a great revulsion. "I'm undone, my friend." He arose slowly to his feet, and his eyes, for an instant before he looked away, encompassed the crosses behind Cornelius.

"But, Longinus, you didn't ... it was Pilate...." He reached out to put his hand on his comrade's arm, but Longinus drew back, hand raised.

"No, Cornelius, Pilate condemned him, but I *killed* him! I, this hand. Look!" He held it before him and turned it slowly. "His blood! His innocent blood! I tortured to his slow death an innocent man, a good man, Cornelius, a perfect man, yes, and by all the gods, even more than a perfect man!"

"I'd thought that he was more, that perhaps he possessed powers no man could have, I'd hoped so; I'd hoped that he had called upon a supernatural power to heal Lucian. But would a god, would the son of *the God*, if there is one, my friend"—Cornelius' countenance was darkly pained—"allow himself to be put to death, to accept the tortured death of the cross?"

"I know that my saying it sounds strange, Cornelius, but ever since this morning I've had the feeling that he was *allowing* himself to be crucified and that at any moment, if he had wished, he could have destroyed us all. Yet in the midst of his agonies, while we were spiking him to the crossbeam, he prayed to his god to forgive us. To forgive us, Centurion!" He shook his head sadly. "To forgive *me*. But I killed him. By all the gods, let me show you." 311

They walked over to the foot of the center cross. The body of Jesus, naked except for a bloody loincloth, hung out from the upright at a grotesque angle, held by heavy spikes through the palms of the hands and supported by a narrow wedge between the legs. The head had slumped forward so that the twin points of his short beard splayed out across his chest. Other large spikes through his purpling feet held them to the upright.

"See?" Longinus pointed to a gaping wound from which blood and body fluid still dripped slowly. Blood had gushed forth when the wound was made, for below it the tortured flesh was wide streaked and the loincloth was

gore-soaked; his blood had run down the length of one leg, and even as Cornelius stared, a crimson bead swelled at the end of the great toe and dropped to the bloodstained ground.

"But why this wound?" Cornelius asked. "Did you...?"

"Yes, it was my lance that did it. He must have been already dead, but I didn't know. And I couldn't bear for him to have to endure any more agony."

"You did it in mercy, Longinus."

"Yes, but I killed him, Cornelius. He's dead, and I can never have his forgiveness. And I'm soiled, ruined, undone. I can never cleanse myself"—he studied his hands—"of this man's death." He lifted his eyes to stare at his friend. "Strange, Cornelius, but ... well you know what I've always thought of the gods, Roman, Greek, Jewish, any of them, and of the survival of the spirit or whatever you want to call it. And you know what I thought of"—he gazed a moment at the dead man stiffening above them—"him.... Well today I've been with him for several hours, *long*, terrible hours of torture for him, and for me, too." He paused, trying painfully to choose his words. "Now I don't know, Cornelius; I'm confused, my smug assurance is gone. I'm not sure any more. But he"—he looked up 312 again—"by all the gods, Cornelius, he was!"

"Then you think now he may have been...?"

"If there are any gods, Cornelius"—he stared into the blood-drained face of the Galilean, and his voice was infinitely sad—"if there exists any being like the one your old Greek tutor spoke of, a good, all-wise, all-powerful one god, then this man must have been the son of that god."

52

As soon as Longinus left the palace with her message, Claudia went back to bed in the hope of finding relaxing sleep after the terrifying dream. But sleep would not come; she was almost afraid to close her eyes for fear the nightmare would return. And even as she lay sleepless, staring wide-eyed at the high ceiling of her bed-chamber, she began to envision a pair of disembodied blood-red hands feeling their way stealthily around and across the intricate plastered figures and medallions of its surface.

"Tullia, it's no use trying any longer," she called to her maid, as she swung her feet around to stand up. "I just can't seem to shake off the dream. Maybe if I dress and busy myself at something, I'll think no more of it. Thank the gods, though, I sent the Procurator that warning."

But as the morning hours went by the dream did not go away; it persisted in all its horrible detail in the forefront of her consciousness, and the harder she tried to dispel it, the more determinedly it stayed with her. "Why, by the Great Mother, little one, am I so disturbed by a dream?" she at length demanded of her maid. "I put no faith in dreams. I must have had thousands, and not one has ever before bothered me. I know they're nothing but rearrangements, often fanciful and sometimes, like this one, frightening, of things that have happened to 313 us, people we've seen, places we've visited. You can always explain them. Even this one I understand. You came in late from Bethany with the fearful news of the Galilean's arrest and the High Priest's plotting to have Pilate condemn him. Then soon afterward I went to sleep and dreamed about it. It's simple enough to understand...." She paused, silent in thought. "Or is it?" she asked softly. "Are people ever warned in dreams? Is there really some power...?" The question was unfinished.

"I don't doubt it, Mistress. Our ancient scriptures tell of many instances in which God spoke to His prophets in visions, which must have been dreams or the like." She paused. "And there's the story of Julius Caesar's wife, you know."

"Yes," Claudia's eyes narrowed. "But if your god wished to save the Galilean's life, why didn't he let Pilate have the dream?"

Tullia shook her head thoughtfully. "I can't say. I can't fathom the mind of God, Mistress." A suggestion of a smile crossed her face. "Maybe He thought you might have more influence on the Procurator than He Himself could."

Claudia smiled. "Certainly I'm more real to Pilate—and threatening, no doubt—than your Yahweh." With a quick lifting of her shoulder, she changed her tone. "But why talk of it further? I'm sure my message warned him sufficiently. And I want to forget the dream and the Galilean. This terrific heat is exhausting enough. Still, I do wonder...." She scowled and said no more.

The heat grew more intolerable. Longinus did not return, nor did any news come from Antonia. Midday passed, and as she had done the day before, Claudia retreated into the garden and sat on the stone bench before the spouting fountain. But today, unlike yesterday, there were no white puffs of clouds. Instead, from noon on, a thick overcast began to settle upon Jerusalem, so that inside the palace servants lighted lamps, which added, it seemed to Claudia, to the oppressiveness. As she sat staring introspectively at the spray of water, the heat, despite the covering of clouds screening off the sun's rays, seemed to be mounting as the skies darkened; in the thickening gloom the air grew still; yesterday's singing, twittering birds had taken cover under the heavy, drooping 314 foliage, and all nature seemed silently expectant of a coming upheaval. But maybe, thought Claudia, the impending storm will not descend; maybe the winds, like yesterday, will spring up and blow the clouds away and bring welcome relief from this oppressive heat.

It was during this foreboding lull, some two hours past midday, that a sedan chair entered the palace grounds, and when the bearers set it down at the doorway, the Tetrarchess of Galilee and Peraea emerged and was admitted to the sumptuous edifice. A moment later, with much bowing and murmured directing, servants conducted her to the wife of the Procurator. But the two had done little more than exchange greetings and sit down together when the winds did come, and with a suddenness and severity that sent them scurrying for the protection of the palace. This time the clouds were not immediately blown away; crash after crash of lightning sundered them, and for a few wild moments they poured a deluge upon the steaming, crowded capital of ancient Israel.

"Claudia, I know you wonder why I have come," Herodias said, when they were settled in one of the inner chambers into which little of the noise of the storm penetrated. "But soon the Feast of the Passover will be ended, and we will be going back to our posts; I'm sure you, at any rate, are unwilling to consider Caesarea home. So we may have little further opportunity to talk together alone, Herod's engaged at the palace, and Pilate, I presume, will be busy at Antonia." Claudia nodded. "Yes. Well, you remember once in Rome when you came over to see me and we were talking about Antipas and Longinus, and you wondered why I was interested in the Tetrarch...." Herodias paused, and Claudia, smiling, nodded again. "You may recall, too, I told you that I was interested in what the Tetrarch could become, in the position he might attain, rather than in Antipas as a man...."

"Yes, I recall. You said he might become a king like his father."

"I did. Some day he might, I believe I said, with my conniving." She leaned forward and looked Claudia directly in the eyes. "The time has come," she said quietly, "for us to begin our determined conniving."

"Our?" Claudia queried, her tone intent.

315

"Yes. What I'm scheming will concern you, and Longinus, as much as it will Antipas and me." Her brow suddenly furrowed. "You still feel the same way about the centurion, don't you, as you did when you left Rome to come out here?"

"Well, yes, but...."

"Oh, I know, Claudia, you must be careful, must guard your tongue. But you needn't worry about my making indiscreet remarks, you know." She shrugged. "I haven't thus far, have I? And I've known all along. And now"—she did not wait for Claudia to answer her question—"the time has come for us to strike out for what both of us want. Soon Longinus will be going back to Rome, and more than likely this time he'll have much to tell the Prefect."

"But, Herodias...."

The Tetrarchess laughed and shrugged. "Oh, nobody has told me anything," she said, "but I do have eyes and ears and an ability to put things together. I know that Senator Piso and Sejanus are more than friends; they're bound to be business partners, for Sejanus, you may be sure, has his fingers in any enterprise that has been operating with considerable success. I know that Longinus has had unusual freedom for a centurion presumably on active duty and that he has made trips back to Rome, to Antioch, and to many another place that no centurion ordinarily would be called on to visit in the course of duty. And you told me, remember, that he was being sent out to Palestine on a special mission." She paused, and when Claudia made no comment, she smiled and gestured with outflung hands. "Well, it makes little difference whether he was sent out to watch Pilate or not, and maybe Antipas and me ..." she paused, grinning, "and possibly even you, Claudia. He'll probably be called back to Rome soon to make some sort of report, even about the operation of the Senator's glassworks...."

"But how would that affect you and Antipas, and Pilate ... and maybe me?"

"Longinus might be called back to Rome to report on Pilate's ... well, shortcomings."

"Even then I fail to understand how...."

"This is the way I envision what might easily happen should he be ordered to Rome," Herodias interrupted. "Longinus certainly must have strong influence with Sejanus, because he's Senator Piso's son, for one thing. Should he point out, and with emphasis, Pilate's failures as an administrator—and certainly he'd have little trouble supporting his charge—he might very likely cause the Prefect to dismiss Pilate as Procurator or move him to another province. And with Pilate disgraced, surely you would be permitted to divorce him." She smiled and airily lifted her hands. "Then, my dear, you could marry Longinus and return to Rome to live."

316

"Maybe so. But even then how would that affect you and Antipas?"

Herodias leaned toward her hostess, her expression intent. "Suppose Pilate is dismissed, transferred, even, by the gods, beheaded...." Her eyes narrowed. "That would cause you no grief, would it?" But she did not pause for Claudia's comment. "Then Sejanus, regardless of Pilate's fate, might extend Antipas' realm to include Judaea, don't you see, and elevate him to kingship. And I"—she sat back and smiled feline—"would be queen." Quickly the smile vanished. "And I shall never be content, Claudia, until I'm a queen. Why, soon as Tetrarchess I'll have no higher station than little Salome." She paused, her expression suddenly questioning. "Did you know that she is marrying Herod Philip?"

"Her father?" Claudia exclaimed, aghast. "By all the gods, surely...."

"Of course not, my dear." Herodias laughed. "The other Herod Philip, her father's half brother and"—she grinned—"my half uncle. He rules the puny tetrarchy over east of us, Batanea and Trachonitis. He's considerably older

than Salome, naturally, but....”

“Then he’s Salome’s half great-uncle and half uncle as well as half stepuncle, and ... well....” Claudia broke off with a shrug. “You Herods really never let anything get out of the family, do you?” Then she was serious. “But what about old King Aretas? If he should attack Antipas....”

“Certainly he hasn’t attacked yet,” Herodias hastened to reply. “And he probably never will. But even if he does, that might just strengthen Antipas with Rome. At any rate,” she added, “the Arabian isn’t making trouble at the moment.” 317

“But, Herodias, what if Sejanus, instead of putting Judaea under Antipas and making him king, should send out a new Procurator to succeed Pilate?”

The Tetrarchess of Galilee and Peraea was not abashed. “In that case,” she replied without hesitation, “he might even make Longinus Procurator, although I’m sure he—and surely you too, wouldn’t you—would prefer to be assigned a post in some province other than Judaea. But in any event, Claudia, if Longinus should very strongly recommend and urge the transfer of Pilate and the extension of Antipas’ realm to embrace Judaea, then I’m confident it would have great weight with Sejanus. That’s why I came to see you, Claudia, the principal reason, I mean. I hope you’ll suggest such a course to Longinus. It’s a way by which you and Longinus and I—I’m not considering Pilate and indolent old Antipas—can attain what all three of us want most.” She leaned forward again, and her expression betrayed a malevolent cunning. “Claudia, Longinus would have good reason to advise Sejanus to withdraw Pilate from Judaea. Pilate from his first days out here has failed to get along with the Jews, from the High Priest on down. And now, today, the suddenly bitter hostility of the followers of this Galilean fellow whom he tried this morning....”

“Galilean fellow?” Claudia’s expression was suddenly grave. “Who...?”

“Maybe you haven’t heard of him. He has a large following devotedly attached to him, so large that the Temple leaders are both jealous and fearful of him. They brought him before Pilate this morning, and the Procurator, wishing to evade responsibility”—her tone was sarcastic—“sent him to Antipas for trial, since the fellow was a Galilean, from the village of Nazareth, I believe. But I learned about it in time to warn Antipas to have nothing to do with the fellow....” She paused, and the bitter lines around her mouth deepened in a scowl. “He’s never forgotten that Wilderness fanatic at Machaerus. So he sent the Galilean back to Pilate.” She smiled. “Whatever the Procurator does with him, or has done, will add to his troubles with the Jews ...” she paused—“or at any rate, we hope so, don’t we?” 318

“Then you don’t know whether Pilate has tried the man?” Claudia tried to conceal her anxiety.

“No. I only know that Antipas didn’t fall into Pilate’s trap.”

... *Thank the Bountiful Mother I sent Pilate the message....*

“You were always a clever one, Herodias. Antipas is fortunate.” But she did not elaborate and quickly changed the subject.

With the same suddenness that it had begun, like the opening and closing of a great door, the storm ended, and the sun shone down through skies sparkling and refreshed. “I must be going,” said Herodias. “I’ve much to do before we start back to Tiberias. My dear”—she laid her hand affectionately on Claudia’s arm and stood up—“do come to visit us again. And won’t you talk with Longinus about this? You’ll be seeing him, of course, perhaps tonight?”

“Perhaps.” But Claudia’s smile was thin.

Herodias’ visit and the dissipation of the storm clouds had done nothing to dispel Claudia’s misgivings; the news brought by the Tetrarchess had, in fact, served to deepen her foreboding. Why hadn’t Pilate acknowledged receiving her message, if indeed he had received it? Suddenly the desperate notion possessed her that the Procurator had failed to get her hurriedly scribbled warning. And why, if he had seen it, had he failed to reassure her that Jesus would not be condemned? What, by the gods, had Pilate done with him?

She summoned her maid. “You must go up to Antonia and discover what’s happened to the Galilean, Tullia,” she said. “Until I hear, I shall have no peace.” She hesitated, brow furrowed. “No, wait. I’ll go myself. Call the sedan-chair bearers.”

319

53

When Herodias returned to the Hasmonean Palace she learned from Neaera that the Tetrarch had shut himself away from all company in the seclusion of one of the inner chambers. He seemed to be entering a period of depression, the maid reported, like the one into which he had plunged after the beheading of the Wilderness prophet.

The Tetrarchess found him sprawled in his chair, staring at the wall, his heavy jowls sagging. For a moment he appeared unmindful of her entrance. Then he turned ponderously to face her. “The Galilean,” he said slowly, as though in pain, “is dead. Crucified.”

"Dead already? How did you learn it?"

"Joanna. She was at the Hill of the Skull with some of his friends, including Mary of Magdala. They saw him die. But she declared she knew that the Galilean"—suddenly his dull eyes brightened with the pain of sharpened fear—"would rise from the dead and avenge himself upon his enemies. Herodias"—he got heavily to his feet and flung out his hands in desperation—"why did you make me do it? By the beard of the High Priest, Tetrarchess, why, why?"

"Are you mad, Antipas?" Her dark eyes snapped. "You didn't kill him! By the gods, Pilate did. The Procurator tried him. You sent him back to Pilate, don't you remember?"

"Of course I sent him back to Pilate. But I had it in my power to free him; instead, I sent him to his death. When he rises, he will wreak upon me a double vengeance."

"Double vengeance?"

"Yes, the vengeance of both the prophet of the Wilderness and of the Nazarene." His eyes glittered with incipient madness. "The Nazarene was the prophet returned to life. When he arises, he will be the two returned." 320

"Nonsense!" Herodias advanced, her eyes flaming, and grasped her husband's arm. "If the Galilean is dead, he's dead, and you know it. Must you give heed to Joanna's superstitious drivel?" Her scowl lightened into a crafty smile. "Pilate has served you well in crucifying this fellow. Can't you see that the Galilean's followers will be all the more determined to do the Procurator ill?"

"But how will his misfortune help me?" the Tetrarch asked.

"Your father ruled this whole province. Should Pilate's mishandling of his duties drive him from the Procuratorship, the Emperor might elevate you to king of all the region. It's not for nothing that your father is called 'Herod the Great.'" She shook a ringed forefinger under his nose. "If you had one-fourth the ambition and energy that he had, you'd already be wearing the crown!"

"But I don't want to wear a crown," Antipas protested. "Crowns often become greater burdens than they're worth. We can live out our lives at Tiberias, happy and unchallenged, and enjoy the benefits of the royal prerogative without risking its dangers and burdens, my dear, and with considerably less chance of drawing the ire of old Sejanus."

Herodias stamped her foot angrily. "Don't you have any aspirations, Antipas? Are you willing to continue being a mouse instead of a man?" Her tone was coldly sarcastic, and she knotted her hand into a fist to emphasize her stern words. "Well, by the beard of the High Priest, Antipas, I'm going to see to it that you sit on the throne of Judaea as your father did. I've just returned from talking with Claudia about my plan ... and my determination ... to get you elevated to kingship. She will help; she wants to see Pilate disgraced so that she can divorce him and marry Longinus."

"I don't know about that, my dear Tetrarchess. What would be the difference anyway, except in titles? Wouldn't it be best to let well enough...?"

"And spend the rest of our lives in an out-of-the-way poor district of illiterate fishermen and grape growers! Never!" she stormed. "Would you be willing for me never to occupy a station higher than Salome, by all the gods?" She studied him, her contempt plainly revealed. "I do believe you *would*. Well, I'm not willing. I'll leave you first ... and go back to Rome!" She was silent for a moment and when he made no retort, continued. "This is what we'll do," she said, her tone even now. "We'll return to Tiberias and begin to assemble choice presents for the Emperor, and most important, for Sejanus. And you will increase the revenue going to the Prefect. The gifts will please and flatter him, and the increased revenues from Galilee and Peraea may suggest to him that if you were governing the whole province the increase in taxes would be substantial. And we won't send them to Rome, the gifts, I mean, but we'll take them ourselves, and then we can personally petition Sejanus to make you king over the entire province."

Herod Antipas shook his grizzled head slowly, and his countenance was troubled. "But I foresee only disaster if...."

"I don't care what you foresee or how agitated you may become," she said, with a defiant toss of her head, "we are going to Rome to ask the Prefect to make you king, and I'm either coming back to Palestine as queen or I'm not coming back at all!"

54

As Claudia and her maid entered the anteroom adjacent to the Procurator's great chamber in the southwestern tower of Antonia, two men of serious mien, well-dressed and with beards oiled and carefully braided, emerged from Pilate's room and walked quickly into the corridor.

Claudia motioned Tullia to a seat and without pausing strode past the attendant through the still unclosed doorway.

Pilate stood before one of the windows facing westward. His long shadow reached out to her feet across the high-

domed room; soon now the sun would be dropping beneath the wall of the ancient city, and the solemnity of the Jewish Sabbath would still the Passover festivities. He turned to face his wife, and she saw that his expression was deadly serious. She questioned him with a lift of her head. "Those men who just went out?"

"Wealthy Jews," he replied. "One of them anyway, a merchant from Arimathea. Both of them members of the Sanhedrin. They came to petition me." He saw that she was still not satisfied. "A small matter; they asked for the body of one of the men crucified today. They want to bury him." He advanced toward her and managed a thin smile. "Here, my dear Claudia," he pointed, "have this chair." His smile warmed. "To what am I indebted for the honor of your visit?"

"This man whose body they wished," she asked, ignoring his question, "could it be that he was the Galilean mystic?"

"Yes, they said he was from Galilee." His eyes avoided her probing stare.

"He was called Jesus?"

"I believe they called him that."

"Then you did not receive my message ... about the dream I had?"

She saw in his eyes a mounting panic. "Yes, Claudia, but it was only a dream, and the High Priest demanded...."

"You condemned to the cross an innocent man"—she stood up and pointed a trembling finger at the Procurator, and her eyes blazed furiously—"because the High Priest demanded it! The great Procurator, representative of imperial Rome, *crucified* an innocent man because a jealous and mean little Temple strut-cock *ordered* you to send him to the cross! By all the gods, Pilate, *and* you condemned him after *I* sent you that warning!"

"But, Claudia, I was being pulled at from both sides. I didn't want to condemn him. I told them I found no fault in the man. I had a basin of water fetched and before the multitude I washed my hands of his blood, and...."

"You washed your hands of his blood! Never! Oh, by all the gods, those hands! Those blood-red, crawling, slinking hands!" She held her palms before her face. "In the dream I saw them. Now you'll never be able to cleanse those foul, polluted hands." 323

"But if I had released him, Claudia, and news had got back to the Prefect that I had allowed a dangerous revolutionary to go free...."

"You knew he was no revolutionary." Her voice was almost a hiss. "You knew he was an innocent man, and you sent him to the cross." She crossed the room quickly and looked out toward the Hill of the Skull. The shadows were heavy in the square before Antonia, but the sinking sun shone levelly upon the three burdened crosses on the hill. "Which cross is his?" she asked, without taking her eyes from the macabre scene.

"The one at the center," he replied, his eyes fixed unseeing on the polished surface of his desk.

"And he is dead, you're sure of that?"

"I don't know. I've sent for the centurion in charge of the execution, and now I'm waiting for his report. I told the two Jews I would not release the body until I was certain the Galilean was dead. Should the body be taken down and the man revived, and should word, as it would, get to Rome...."

"Are you concerned only with what sort of reports go to Rome?" she demanded, her voice heavy with sarcasm. "Have you no interest in seeing justice prevail even in Judaea?"

"I am interested, my dear Claudia"—he appeared somewhat to have regained his composure—"in maintaining myself in the office of Procurator. Perhaps I erred in the case of this Galilean. Perhaps I should have given greater heed to the message you sent me. But I've spent many hard years in the army, and I have long dreamed of being the Procurator of a province of imperial Rome. Now that I have attained it, I must not gain the further enmity of the Temple leadership, or I might lose the post, you know."

"Then your only concern is in remaining Procurator of Judaea?" Her tone was coldly scornful. "And you might have the post taken from you, at that. Much depends, you know, on the attitude of the Prefect toward you."

Pilate blanched. "But, my dear, surely you wouldn't suggest to him that he carry to Sejanus an evil report about my conduct of affairs...." 324

"To *him*? To whom, Excellency"—she paused, and her tone was taunting—"do you refer?"

But once more he was evasive. "Perhaps you are tired, my dear," he said with a short, humorless laugh. "Perhaps you should return to the palace. I can order the sedan-chair bearers...."

"Mine are outside," she replied evenly. "But why are you trying to get rid of me, Pilate? Does the Galilean haunt you already?"

"Indeed, no." Again he attempted a laugh, but it lacked conviction. "Any minute now the centurion will be reporting to me, and I thought perhaps you would not wish to be reminded again of the Galilean's death or your strange dream...."

"No, I will stay. Perhaps it is you who do not wish to be reminded that you condemned to a terrible death a man innocent of the crime charged against him, innocent of any crime, and known by you to be innocent!"

"But, my dear Claudia, had I freed...."

The Procurator's protest was interrupted by a knock on the door, and a moment later at Pilate's bidding the attendant entered. "The Centurion Longinus, Excellency," he said, bowing, "has arrived to make his report."

"Longinus! By great Jupiter, did you send Longinus to crucify the Galilean?" She whirled to face the centurion, who had entered the chamber. "Surely, Longinus, you didn't..." Abruptly she stopped; her face, suddenly drained of fury, betrayed apprehension and pain.

"Yes," he said, "I killed him. I was ordered by the Procurator to do so, but that doesn't absolve me from guilt. I crucified an innocent man"—his eyes shifted to level on Pilate—"as the Procurator well knew when he condemned him to the cross." He paused, but Pilate did not challenge the statement. "Excellency, you sent for me to report. The Galilean is dead. Your order has been carried out."

"Thank you, Centurion. Then I shall grant those Jews' request for the body for burial." He spoke calmly, but his flustered manner betrayed an inner stress. "You may return to your duty and notify the men, who will be at the execution ground, that I grant their petition. You may have your quaternion help them remove the body from the cross and ..."

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He broke off suddenly. Through the slit in the doorway, which Longinus had failed to close completely behind him, came the insistent voice of a man talking with Pilate's aide in the anteroom. "By the gods, I'm glad to catch him. I've come from Caesarea with a message for him from the Commander Sergius Paulus. And I was given emphatic instructions to deliver it myself into his hands with the seals unbroken," they heard the man say. "I've been searching all over Jerusalem for him; I even went out to the crucifixion hill." He lowered his voice. "It's bound to be an important message. It came from Rome, probably, by the gods, from the Prefect or even the Emperor."

"Centurion, perhaps you'd prefer to go out there"—Pilate's face had paled perceptibly—"to accept the message."

Longinus nodded and left the room. As the door closed behind him, Claudia turned with renewed fury upon her husband. "Why did you assign Longinus to crucify the Galilean?" she cried. "Was it because I sent my message by him and you suspected he had spent the night with me and you finally did me the small honor of being jealous? Well, by the gods"—her voice was tremulous as her anger rose—"that's exactly what he did!" With hatred in her eyes she approached him, coming so close that their faces nearly touched. "And, you fool, that wasn't the first time," she added with a low, harsh laugh, "nor even, by Jupiter, the last!"

The Procurator stepped back and sank heavily into his chair. For a long moment he sat silent, staring at the floor. Then he raised his eyes to his wife's bitter, scornful face. "Surely you cannot believe me that stupid, Claudia my dear," he said quietly, "to think that I haven't known. Surely you must know that I am not entirely deaf and blind, that I have even contrived to spend many an evening away so that you...." He paused, pensively contemplating the woman before him. "But perhaps you don't know...."

"Oh, how I despise you!" she screamed. "I knew you were a weakling, a coward, a ... yes, today, even a murderer. But I didn't know you were a crawling worm who would willingly lend his wife to another man! By all Pluto's fire-blackened imps, I...."

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"But perhaps you don't know," the Procurator went on, "that I was commanded by the Prefect and the Emperor, at the time our marriage was arranged, to do everything possible to keep you content in this dismal province ... even to overlooking any indiscretions...."

"Then you've been willing to do anything, by the Great Mother, in order to stay in the good graces of old Sejanus," Claudia hissed. "You're willing to send a good and innocent man, maybe a god-man, to the cross rather than displease a contemptible High Priest who might complain against you to the Prefect!" She clenched her fists and brought them down, hard, across the desk. "You're even willing to surrender your wife to another man's enjoyment in order—you said it—to keep her 'content' but *really* to keep that man from reporting to Sejanus your bumbling incompetence, your foolish provocations, your utter imbecility!" Her voice had risen to a shout. Slowly she moved toward the window, and then she whirled about to face him again. "Well, I'm not 'content,' and I never will be ... with you! And by all the gods, I hope Longinus will go to Rome and reveal to Sejanus how miserably you have administered the affairs of the Empire in this province!" She pointed at him from across the room. "And how you have dragged in the dust Rome's vaunted justice, how in all probability"—her voice dropped to a menacing tone—"you have withheld funds from the Empire's treasury...."

"No! Oh, no, Claudia! I have kept back nothing due the Empire or the Prefect! Nothing! Not one shekel, not a denarius! Longinus knows it's true." He lowered his voice. "Hasn't he been watching; hasn't he been reporting? Surely you don't think I haven't suspected..." But suddenly he broke off his protests. Quickly crossing the chamber, he opened the door and summoned the centurion. "You have heard my wife's words?" he asked, as he closed the door behind them.

"I've heard excited words," Longinus replied cautiously. "I didn't get the full import of them, though."

"Claudia has been hurling accusations at me. She said she hoped you would report me to the Prefect when you go to...." He paused, and both his face and voice revealed his fear. "The message was from Rome, wasn't it? From Sejanus? He asked you to report to him on the situation out here, how I'm administering...?"

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"He asked me to come at once to Rome, but he said only that it was to meet with him on a matter of utmost

concern, the nature of which he did not indicate. Here, Excellency"—he handed the letter to the Procurator—"you may read it yourself."

Eagerly the Procurator accepted the message. His forehead creased as he studied it. "True," he said, handing it back to Longinus, "there's no mention in it of the Procurator. But surely the Prefect will ask you how I'm administering affairs. I beg of you, Centurion, don't give him an unfavorable report; don't make any charges against...."

"What of the Galilean you've just crucified?" Claudia interrupted. "Can you contend that you even thought you were acting justly? Didn't you just tell me you found no fault in the man? What else could Longinus tell the Prefect concerning your trial...?"

"But the centurion will say nothing of this Galilean, surely." The trace of a sickly smile flickered across his round face. "The centurion will remember that it was *he* who crucified the man."

"Yes, I shall never forget that I killed him," Longinus said. "And I suspect that to the end of his days the Procurator, too, will remember the part he played in this horrible thing. But if this Galilean's case comes to the Prefect's attention and he inquires of me about it, I shall reveal fully what happened, and why I was involved."

"But surely, Centurion, unless you report it, Sejanus will never know about it. Caiaphas is pleased. The illiterate, poor followers of the Galilean didn't even attempt to aid him at the trial; their protests, if they offer any, can never reach as far as Rome. I beg of you, Longinus, make no mention of it to the Prefect. The Galilean is dead; soon he'll be forgotten."

"No!" Claudia protested. "I'll never forget him! Longinus will never forget him! Nor will *you*! Look at your hands, Pilate. Soon you will be seeing them as I saw them, cold, clammy, scurrying to hide themselves under the rocks, foul and evil and reeking with *his* blood! By all the gods, Pilate"—her voice was shrill in newly mounting anger—"if Longinus doesn't tell the Prefect of your cowardly flouting of Roman justice, *I* will!"

The Procurator's face blanched. He started to speak, then swallowed. "Claudia, my dear, you wouldn't. Surely you wouldn't be so...."

"Indeed, I would! I have lost all patience with you, Pilate. Today I've seen you as I've never seen you before. You're a small man, Procurator, vain, self-seeking, pompous, and yet a sniveling coward too fearful for his own skin to rule justly. And at the first opportunity I shall so describe you to the Prefect ... and perhaps to the Emperor."

"No, my dear! No! Please...." His panic changed quickly into abject pleading. "Please don't, my dear. Why should you wish to ruin me? What would it gain you ... and Longinus?" He sat down wearily behind his desk. "Why can't we continue as we have been ..." he paused, "enduring this trying land and these troublesome people? Centurion"—he faced Longinus—"for a long time I have suspected, and known, the ... situation. But haven't I been understanding, even co-operative?" The suggestion of a smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "Why, then, cannot the three of us, understanding this and appreciating it, just continue to play the roles as we have been? Why can't we...?"

"Oh, by great Ceres!" Claudia shouted angrily, "you are indeed a crawling worm! You *invite* another man to your wife's bed! You pander! You're nothing but a procurer, a Spanish pimp! Gods, but I detest you!" Turning, she strode to the door and opened it. "Summon my sedan-chair bearers," she ordered the attendant, "and quickly!" Then she wheeled about to face the Procurator again. "I'm going back to the palace. I cannot summon the patience to remain longer in your presence. It would please me greatly if I should never lay eyes on you again!" She stormed through the doorway; the door slammed behind her.

Pilate sat unmoving and stared stonily into space.

"A moment ago, Excellency," Longinus ventured, "you directed me to return to the Hill of the Skull. The Jewish Sabbath is fast nearing. Perhaps I should go now." 328

Without raising his eyes, Pontius Pilate nodded. Longinus crossed the darkening chamber and went out. After a while the Procurator stood up and walked to the window. Out beyond Antonia's front square and the squat stone structures flanking it, on a wretched knoll beyond the city's wall, the three crosses still lifted their quiet burdens into the waning light. But already the shadow of the wall was groping for the pinioned feet of the man on the middle cross. For a long moment Pilate stood rooted before the window; when the shadow had climbed to engulf the man's sagging knees, he turned slowly away and sat again in his big chair. As the gloom thickened in the great chamber, the staring Procurator leaned slowly forward to cross his arms on the desk and, bending over, cradled his round head on their crossing.

55

Late in the afternoon of the Jews' Sabbath the Procurator Pontius Pilate stood face to face once again with the High Priest Joseph Caiaphas.

"My visit to you, Excellency, and the petition I bring," he began, "concern that impostor and revolutionary you crucified yesterday, the one who was seeking to establish himself upon the restored throne of Israel."

"But the man is dead and buried," Pilate spoke up irritably. "Can't you let him lie quietly in his tomb? Can't you understand that I wish to have no further mention made to me of that Galilean?"

"Indeed I do understand, Excellency. That's exactly what we also wish, to allow him to lie quietly and undisturbed until his body rots and his name is forgotten." He leaned forward, and his black eyes lighted with new fires. 330
"But, Excellency, as you may have been told, that blasphemer was heard to declare that he would destroy our Temple and in three days with his own hands rebuild it. Now some of his deluded followers are saying that he wasn't speaking of the Temple yonder"—he nodded in the direction of the great structure—"but rather of his own physical body. They interpret his words as meaning that he would of his own accord give his life and then on the third day claim it again and walk forth from his tomb. Of course, Excellency, we know that the fellow is dead and will never rise again"—with the tip of his tongue he licked his thin red lips—"but many naïve ones may be deluded into believing that he really did possess power to call back his life. Even today a report has reached us that certain of his followers are planning in the nighttime to visit the tomb and steal away the body. Then with the tomb empty on the morrow, which will be the third day since he died, they can publish abroad the tidings that the blasphemer really did arise as he had declared he would do."

"But how am I concerned in this nonsense?" Pilate was plainly annoyed. "What do you want me to do?"

"We would have you set a guard over the fellow's tomb, Excellency, to see that no one steals away the body."

"What's this but children's prattle? Surely no one would seriously expect a dead man to walk from his tomb." Slowly Pilate's scowl gave way to a mocking half-smile. "What would the High Priest do if the Galilean *did* rise? *You* contrived his crucifixion."

"But what, Excellency, would the Procurator do? *You crucified* him."

Pilate was not amused by the High Priest's retort. "Maybe it's as well," he observed, "that neither of us will be so tested." For a moment he was silent, looking away. Then he turned back to face Caiaphas. "You have your Temple guards. Can't you use some of them to guard that tomb?"

"But, Excellency, with the great surge of Passover pilgrims still in the Temple courts and about the cattle stalls and the money changers' tables, our guards are all greatly needed. And, more important, your placing a guard would lend greater prestige...."

"The Antonia garrison is just as busy," Pilate interrupted, "and many of our soldiers are leaving Jerusalem. Maybe, though, I can arrange yet again to humor the High Priest." He beckoned to an aide. "Summon the fortress commander." 331

"Are there any centurions available for a special assignment beginning at once and continuing into tomorrow?" he asked, when a few moments later the officer appeared.

"Centurion Longinus, sir, is...."

"No, by all the gods!"

"The only other one not assigned at the present is Centurion Cornelius. He's preparing to return his...."

"Then call Cornelius in and instruct him to select from his century a sufficient detail and mount a guard at the tomb of the Galilean"—he paused and looked unsmiling toward the High Priest—"rather, the 'King of the Jews,' to see that it is not disturbed."

Caiaphas smiled grimly but made no comment.

"Now, O High Priest, you will have your guard, though I consider a guard unnecessary. Once again your will has prevailed." He bowed, and his smile was cold. "I trust your sleep tonight will be peaceful."

56

It was within two hours of midnight after the Jewish Sabbath, which by Hebrew reckoning ended at sundown, when Longinus came to the Palace of the Herods. Claudia was already in her nightdress and prepared for bed. "Aren't you going to spend the night?" she asked eagerly, after he loosened her from their warm embrace.

"With your permission," he said, grinning wryly. "I have your husband's, remember."

"Please, let's not talk of him." Her expression sobered. "Did I speak too frankly yesterday, Longinus? Did I reveal too much to him ... about us, I mean? Is that why you didn't come last night? You were annoyed with me?" 332

"You really spoke your feelings, didn't you? But I wasn't annoyed with you," he said. "In fact, I'm glad you spoke up. And I suspect he was not surprised at what you told him, only that you would say it, and with such fury." She had sat down on the side of her bed. He seated himself beside her and bent over to unfasten his sandals. Then he straightened and faced her. "Claudia, I was too depressed last night to be good company." He shook his head slowly. "I've never been in lower spirits."

“Because of the Galilean?”

“Yes. Because of what I had done. It felt like a crushing load on my back. I couldn’t get out from under it.” He stood up, and laid his tunic across a chair. “After I left you and Pilate, I went back out to the crosses and helped get him down, taking care to see that in pulling the nails out we didn’t tear or further bruise the flesh”—he paused in his narration, and his low laugh was hollow, mirthless—“after I had seen the nails driven through the living flesh and had plunged my lance into his side. Then we put him in the rich Jew’s tomb; they had bound the body the way the Jews prepare their dead for burial, although they didn’t have time to anoint it with aromatic spices as they customarily do....”

“They are going to do that tomorrow,” Claudia interrupted him. “Tullia has gone out to Bethany to go with Mary of Magdala and Chuza’s wife Joanna and some other followers of the Galilean early in the morning to the tomb to finish the burial rites.” She paused. “But I interrupted your story. What did you do when you had finished out there?”

“I came back to Antonia and sat for a long time on the balcony looking out over the Temple courts. Then I went to bed and tried to get some sleep, but I couldn’t, no matter how I tried. Every time I closed my eyes I saw that man ... the death march out to the hill, nailing him down, lifting him to the upright....” He cupped his palm across his eyes. “By the gods, Claudia, it was terrible, frightening. And his crying out to his god to forgive us.” His 333 hand dropped listlessly to his side. “Well, I finally gave up and walked out along the balcony again, and then I went to see Cornelius. He was troubled, too. He hadn’t gone to bed. We sat and talked, mostly about that man, until daylight.”

“Did you come to any conclusion ... about him, I mean?”

“Well, no, I suppose not, except that it was a monstrous crime to crucify such a man, though Cornelius still held to the idea that the Galilean probably was a god of some sort, that he had supernatural powers, even the ability to heal people—he insisted that he had healed his little Lucian—maybe to raise dead people to life. Cornelius even said he thought it was possible that the Galilean might come to life himself, as some of his followers say he will, and walk out of that tomb.” He was silent for a moment. “If he does,” he added after awhile, “he’ll have to move a tremendous stone from the mouth of the tomb ... and *from the inside*.” He sat down again beside her. “And under the noses of the guards, too.”

“The guards?”

“Yes. At the insistence of the High Priest, Pilate has set a guard at the tomb to prevent the Galilean’s followers from stealing the body and claiming that he actually did come to life. The Procurator put Cornelius in charge, and I went out there with him; in fact, I’ve just come from there. Cornelius is going to stay until daylight.”

“Then Pilate is still trying to appease the High Priest, even after all I said to him yesterday?”

“Evidently. The Procurator isn’t likely to change his ways.”

“Maybe I was rash yesterday in losing my temper and speaking with such boldness, but I’ve come to have such contempt for him, to loathe him so. Oh, Longinus”—she clutched his arm in both hands and clung to him—“how can I stay with him longer in this dreary land? Please take me with you to Rome. Hasn’t the time come...?”

“That’s why I’m here, Claudia.” Then his serious expression softened, and his eyes teased. “And because it’s my last night.”

“Must you be leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes. I’m going with Cornelius as far as Tiberias. From there I’ll go across to Ptolemais and get a ship for Rome. Cornelius is providing me an escort to the coast. I’ll have to get the first ship leaving that port for the capital. But I had to see you before I left. Claudia”—in the subdued light of the bedchamber the gentle flame of the wall lamp was mirrored in his eyes as he looked deeply into hers—“it may be that a way of escape is about to open for us. By all the gods, it’s strange, and distressing, too, but the death of the Galilean may actually save us.” 334

“You mean that Pilate in condemning the Galilean may have condemned himself?”

“I believe he has ... in one way or another. And I think he has given you a means of freeing yourself.” He paused. “You’re sure no one can hear us?”

She nodded. But he went to the door anyway, listened with his ear to the panel, and tried the bolt.

“This is dangerous, Claudia,” he said, as he sat down again. “You mustn’t breathe a word of it to anybody, not even Tullia. It could get us both killed.” He lowered his voice. “That message I had yesterday. It brought startling news. I purposely showed it to Pilate, but of course he had no idea what it was saying. But I did. That ‘matter of utmost concern’ was the Prefect’s way of notifying me that now he’s finally ready to proceed with his scheme and wants me in Rome when he makes his move.”

“But this new scheme? What...?”

“It’s not a new one, Claudia. He gave me a broad hint concerning his plans the last time I was home; he said that when I got a message so worded it would mean he was ready to proceed with the final step.” He leaned close to her. “Claudia, Sejanus is plotting *to have the Emperor assassinated*; he is bidding for the throne.”

"But surely"—her face had paled—"he doesn't mean for you to ..."

"Oh, no, not that. Some palace servant out at Capri will probably attend to that. But he wants me in Rome when it's done so that I can help rally his supporters at the crucial moment and make him Emperor."

"But even if Sejanus should become Emperor, how would that help us?"

335

"I would be much closer to him than I am now, one of his advisors," the centurion replied. "I'm sure I could poison him against Pilate, and justly. This case of the Galilean will be just one more example of his unfitness to administer Roman government. His failure to conciliate, his forever keeping Judaea in a stir...."

"But, Longinus"—her face revealed sudden apprehension, fear—"what if the Emperor's supporters should discover the Prefect's plotting and kill *him* before he could have the Emperor killed?"

"Then I would have been on the Emperor's side." Longinus smiled reassuringly and patted the back of her hand on his arm. "Don't worry about me; I'll not let myself get trapped. And soon now, either way the dice fall, we'll be the winners." He stood up and quickly lifted her to her feet. Leaning over, he pulled down the light coverlet. "But for now, my dearest," he said, as he gently pushed her down and lifted her legs to the bed, "let's forget them all; let's make what's left of it *our* night."

57

Once more she felt herself floating upward in a dark morass of confused and tangled dreaming. Then as she seemed to burst through the heavy waters to the surface and a sudden effulgent light, she sat up, eyes blinking and sleep drained from her.

The knocking and calling were restrained but insistent from Tullia's side of the door. "Mistress! Oh, Mistress! Mistress!"

She sprang from the bed. "Just a moment, little one, until I can draw back the bolt." The movement and her exclamation awakened Longinus; precipitately he sat up in bed. "Tullia's returned," she explained to him, as he blinked sleepily. She opened the door. "Bona Dea, you're breathless," she said to the girl. "What's happened, by great Ceres?"

"I've run all the way from the Hasmonean Palace where I left Joanna...." She paused, breathing hard. "Mistress"—her face flamed with new excitement—"Jesus is *alive*! He's come from the tomb alive! He did it, Mistress! He really did it!"

336

"Sit down, Tullia," she said calmly. "You're excited, little one. Calm yourself. Longinus told me that the Galilean was not in a trance; he said he knew he was dead; he said...."

"He was dead, Mistress, I know. But *now* he's alive again! He's *alive*, Mistress, *alive*!"

Claudia shook her head dubiously. "I don't doubt that you think so, but when a man's dead...." She paused. "And you've been under such tension, so troubled...."

"But I'm no longer troubled, Mistress," Tullia said calmly. "Nor have I lost my reason. He *is* alive. Mary of Magdala talked with him at the tomb. We've just come from there, Mistress."

"But where were Cornelius and his soldiers? Surely they didn't all go to sleep and let the Galilean's friends...."

"They had gone," the maid answered. "But nobody stole the body, Mistress. Jesus walked away. He told Mary to tell those of his company that he would meet them down in Galilee."

"Then Cornelius and his guards weren't at the tomb when the Galilean walked from it, Tullia?" Longinus, adjusting his tunic, came through the doorway.

"Oh, no, Centurion, I meant they were gone when we got there. But they had left only a few minutes before. In fact, we met them coming in through the city gate as we were going out. I recognized Centurion Cornelius, although I don't think he noticed me. He seemed greatly disturbed."

"Then, by the gods, Claudia, I must go find him. This is amazing. Tullia, by great Jupiter, do you know what you're saying? Do you realize that you are saying a dead man....?"

His question was interrupted by a knocking on the corridor door. Quickly Tullia opened it. A palace servant announced that Centurion Cornelius was trying to find Centurion Longinus.

"Tell him to come in," Claudia had overheard. "The Centurion Longinus is here."

"I've been trying since daylight to locate you, Longinus," he reported. "I went to your quarters, but I should have known...." He didn't finish the observation. "Something very strange has happened. The Galilean disappeared from his tomb."

337

"So Tullia has just told us," Longinus said. "She contends that he came to life and simply walked out." His eyes narrowed. "By the gods, Cornelius, did your guards go to sleep and allow his friends to slip in and...?"

"No, Longinus, we weren't asleep." He shook his head slowly. "Nobody was asleep. I can't understand it. I had stationed my men so that no one could slip past us to get to the tomb. And that heavy stone ... Longinus, it had to be rolled uphill on its track, and that requires the hard work of at least two or three strong men." His forehead wrinkled in a puzzled frown.

"Well, then," Longinus pursued, "what *did* happen?"

"That's what I don't know. Nothing happened. At least, I saw and heard nothing. I asked the men later if any of them had, and they all insisted, to a man, that they hadn't heard a sound or seen anything the least bit unusual. Only a moment before I had checked the tomb's mouth. The seal hadn't been disturbed. And there was a dim light from a little fire we had kindled earlier to keep off the night chill; it had burned down, but there was still a light on the stone at the mouth. In fact, that's how we noticed...."

"The Galilean?"

"Oh, no, we didn't see him. But one moment the stone was in place, and the next ... well, I looked over there, and it had been rolled up the track and the mouth was wide-open."

"What did you do then?"

"I lighted a torch from the smoldering fire and investigated. The Galilean was gone, disappeared. The linen strips with which the body had been wrapped were lying there, still in folds but collapsed, just as though the body they had been enfolding had melted away." He shook his head, gestured with palms up. "Longinus, I can't figure it any other way."

"You mean you actually believe he returned to life?"

"What else can I believe?"

"But what about the stone? How could he have rolled it back?"

"If he had the power to call back his life," Cornelius said, "rolling away the stone would surely have been 338 no problem."

"But, Cornelius," Claudia interposed, "Tullia, too, has just come from the tomb. She was there with Mary of Magdala and Joanna and some other followers of the Galilean."

"I didn't see them...."

"They got there just after you left. They saw you at the city gate as you were coming away, she said. But Mary of Magdala saw the Galilean and talked with him." She shrugged. "Or at any rate that's what she told Tullia."

The centurion's amazement was not feigned. "Then where did he go? Where is he now?"

"According to Tullia, he told Mary that he was going down to Galilee. He said he would meet his band there."

"Then we may come upon him somewhere, beside the sea with the fishermen or maybe in Capernaum."

"But, Cornelius"—Claudia's expression betrayed a sudden apprehension—"how would he receive Longinus?"

"In a spirit of forgiveness, I hope ... and believe. It was really not Longinus who did it. The guilt was Herod's and Pilate's ... and, of course, even more, the High Priest's."

"Cornelius, does Pilate know ... about the empty tomb, I mean?"

"Yes, Claudia. I reported to him first, before I started to look for Longinus. He was still in his bedchamber."

"What did he say? How did he act?"

"At first he was angry; he charged that the guards had gone to sleep, said the High Priest would be greatly agitated, and threatened to punish us severely. But when I stood my ground and insisted that no one had stolen the body, he began to show concern, and when I left him he was thoroughly frightened." He turned to Longinus. "That's why I want to get started as quickly as possible for Tiberias, before Pilate orders my century to remain in Jerusalem to help protect him from the Galilean. Can you be ready to start by midday?"

Longinus nodded. "Yes. I'm already packed. All I have to do is pick up my bags at Antonia."

339

58

When Cornelius left the Palace of the Herods, Claudia and Longinus walked out into the garden and sat on the stone bench before the fountain. Already the sun was high in the cloudless heavens and the air was growing warm. Birds chattered in the trees and shrubs, and as they watched the spurting water, two small conies skittered across a circle of sunlight to dark safety beneath a heavily leaved fig bush.

"A glorious day."

"Yes." He tossed a twig toward the fountain. "You know, Claudia"—he was looking, she saw, at some invisible point beyond the trembling column of water—"a hundred years from now the world may still remember this day, if...."

"If the Galilean really has come to life?" she finished softly. "What do you think about it, Longinus? Cornelius and Tullia seemed so certain he has."

The centurion shook his head slowly, his eyes still on the lifting and falling water. "I don't know what to think. But"—he turned to face her, and his forehead was furrowed in concentration—"how else can you explain it? The guards awake, the heavy stone sealing the tomb. By all the gods...."

"Are you afraid then?"

For a long moment he was silent. "No," he answered finally, "I'm not afraid. But I'm ... I'm ashamed, Claudia; I'm ashamed for myself, Pilate, Herod, the contemptible High Priest, my quaternion, everybody who had anything at all to do with this terrible thing. If indeed he did come back to life, I hope I may see him in Galilee and beg his forgiveness."

"But what about Pilate? Do you think the Galilean will seek vengeance on him? And on the High Priest, and even Antipas?"

"Up there on the hill as we were nailing him to the crossbeam, that man prayed to his god to forgive us ... 340 to forgive us, Claudia. Didn't he mean *all* his enemies?" Longinus stood up and walked to the fountain; he held his palm against the upshooting column. "A few days ago I was scoffing at him and even at the very idea of gods, any god, or spirit being, or whatever you may call it"—he smiled glumly—"and so were you, my dear. But since day before yesterday"—he shrugged—"and this morning, well, I'm ... I'm changed. You know, I've been thinking about what Cornelius' old Greek tutor taught and how it might fit in with the Jews' notion of their Yahweh. And now, if the Galilean really has taken on life again—and I *know* he was *dead* when we took him down—it may be that he really was ... is ... a physical, tangible manifestation of this all-wise and all-powerful spirit...." Abruptly he broke off. "Oh, I don't know, Claudia, it's too deep for me. But I do know"—his smile was warm—"if there's ever another testing, I'll be on *his* side then."

He strode over to the bench and helped her to her feet, and they returned to her apartment where no other eyes could invade the privacy of their last moments together.

"Has this morning changed things for us, beloved?" she asked, as they sat on her couch. "Your plans, in Rome, I mean, do you still intend to do what you were telling me last night?"

"Of course, my dearest. And it won't be long before we'll have a new Emperor *or* a new Prefect. And in either case there'll be a new Procurator in Judaea and"—he smiled playfully—"a new husband for the present Procurator's wife. It's even possible," he added with a studied air, "that the present Procurator's wife will be the wife of the new Procurator."

"But, Longinus, you wouldn't want to be Procurator in this dreary province...."

"No," he broke in, "but if the present Procurator's wife went with the assignment"—he shrugged—"I believe I could endure it." Then he was serious. "Before the summer is ended, Claudia, I firmly believe that Tiberius or Sejanus will be dead—and little I care which—or both of them even, and there'll be a new regime at Rome. By then, and maybe earlier, Pilate will have been banished to Gaul or Britannia or some other remote 341 province, and you and I will be together ... maybe living out at Baiae."

"Oh, Longinus, I hope so, I do hope so." She clung to him tightly, for in a few minutes, she knew, he would be leaving her to join Cornelius for the journey down into Galilee. "Already it has been so long, and I am utterly weary of waiting. May the beneficent gods grant you swift sailing and an early safe return."

With an arm about her waist he lifted her to her toes. "But there are no gods, remember?" Teasingly, he pushed her chin until her eager lips parted, and then hungrily he bent once again to savor them.

59

Longinus and the orderly carrying his luggage had almost reached the foot of the Antonia stairway when a soldier came hurrying down the steps behind them. The Procurator Pontius Pilate, the soldier announced, wished to speak immediately with the centurion.

"Take the bags to the pack train," Longinus instructed his man, "and tell Centurion Cornelius I'll be there as quickly as the Procurator dismisses me." Then he went at once to the Procurator's chamber.

Pontius Pilate was standing before the window, staring in the direction of the forlorn and frightful Hill of the Skull. When he heard the centurion, he turned quickly and advanced toward the center of the chamber. "Have a seat, Centurion," he said, as he pointed to a chair across the desk from his own. "I'll detain you only a moment." His round face lighted with an unctuous smile as he sat down heavily. "You'll soon be leaving Jerusalem, no doubt?"

"Yes, Excellency. I was on my way, in fact, when your aide overtook me."

"It occurred to me, though I haven't seen her since we three were here two days ago, that Lady Claudia might like to ride with you as far as Caesarea. She is weary of Jerusalem, I know, but I'll not be able to leave here for several days. And at Caesarea you two could enjoy one another's company until your ship sails for Rome." 342

"But I'm not going to Caesarea, Excellency. I'm going to accompany Centurion Cornelius down into Galilee, and from there I'll cross to Ptolemais and get a vessel for Rome."

"Oh. Well, then, yes." Pilate's honeyed smile vanished, and he licked his lips. "I thought you two would welcome an opportunity...." But he did not pursue the thought further. He leaned forward, elbows on desk. "Centurion, this 'matter of utmost concern' that takes you to Rome, I wonder if...."

"You read the Prefect's message," Longinus said, when the Procurator paused. "And of course, Excellency, I've had no further communication from him."

"The Prefect must be calling you to Rome to discuss the situation out here, Longinus. It would hardly be anything in Rome that he's concerned about, because you wouldn't be familiar with affairs there. I've been trying to think what it could be that commands his attention here." Pilate's expression was grim now, his shallow suavity gone. "It must be that he's dissatisfied with my governing, or even"—he swallowed, and his face was somber—"that he's planning to remove me as Procurator and extend Herod's domain to include Judaea, with that incompetent weasel as king over the entire realm his father ruled." He paused, his expression questioning. "Herodias' scheming, I'll wager."

"I can't say, Excellency"—Longinus shook his head—"what the Prefect may be planning for any of us."

"Us? By all the gods, Longinus, I hadn't thought that his plans might concern you, too!" His expression suddenly brightened. "Why, that's it, great Jupiter, that would solve the dilemma!"

"But, Excellency, I don't...."

"I beg you then, Centurion, in your report to the Prefect to deal charitably...."

"But, what....?" 343

"Petition him to transfer me, with comparable position and emoluments, to some other post, Gaul, Spain, Alexandria maybe, even Rome, and name you Procurator of Judaea, Longinus." The unctuous smile, patently contrived, momentarily relieved his grimness. "And then, though the Prefect and the Emperor might not permit Lady Claudia to go with me to a new post, particularly if it should be at Rome or near the capital, I'm sure they would permit her to divorce me and marry you."

"But the day the Galilean died"—the discipline of long training kept Longinus' tone level, even though his fist ached to be smashed against the stupidly grinning round face—"you appeared to be most anxious to retain your post here."

The mere mention of the Galilean made violence unnecessary; the Procurator's mask of laughter was instantly ripped away, and the terror beneath it now lay exposed. "Yes, Centurion," he began, "but since then I ... I...." He threw out both hands as if in desperation. "I've had no peace! It's these insufferable Jews, Centurion. And the arrogant, demanding, conniving High Priest, may the great Pluto grill him to cinders! I must get away from these Jews before they drive me mad, Longinus." He stood up and glanced toward the window, then shuddered and quickly turned away. "That Galilean, the one you crucified...."

"The one you condemned to the cross, Excellency."

"Yes, the one *I* condemned." Pilate seemed suddenly very weary. "I thought I'd purchase immunity by involving you. But I was thinking of the High Priest on the one hand and the Prefect on the other. I never thought of *him*. And now, now I can't get away from him. I can't sleep, Centurion. He's always there between me and sleep, his calm face confronting me, his dark eyes studying me. It's as though *he* were trying *me*! I ... I can't get away from him, Longinus. He'll haunt me as long as I remain in this abominable province." He leaned on the desk with fists clenched. "Nor will they let him lie in his tomb and be forgotten. Have you heard the foolish rumor"—his eyes narrowed as he hesitated, and then he leaned nearer the centurion—"that the Galilean has walked from his tomb and is on his way to Galilee?"

"Yes, Excellency, Cornelius told me the man had disappeared under the noses of his guardsmen." 344

"So he told me. But of course the guards were asleep. And since Cornelius reported the man's disappearance, I've been told some of the guards were bribed by Caiaphas—Pluto take him—to say that they permitted certain of his followers to steal the body to make it appear that he had come to life, as they claimed he would." He shook his forefinger to emphasize his venom. "That arrogant Jew never relents in his efforts to embarrass me and undermine my administration of Judaea's government."

"But, Excellency, the body *wasn't stolen*. Cornelius assured me they were all wide-awake. And there was that heavy stone sealing the mouth...."

"By great Jupiter, Longinus"—Pilate sank to his chair, and his eyes were incredulous—"surely you don't believe he had supernatural power to restore himself to life and roll back the stone?" He sat back; his eyes were fixed unseeing, it seemed, on the wall beyond and above the centurion's head. "He said that his kingdom was not of this world. He said that were he to command it, a host of his followers"—he paused, and his eyes, intent and fearful,

sought the centurion's—"unearthly followers, Longinus, spirits, demons...." Quickly he leaned forward. "Could he have been in a trance after all? Could you have failed to take his life?"

"He was dead, Procurator; I assure you he was dead when we put him in the tomb." Longinus leaned nearer his questioner. "But we didn't *take* his life. When he was ready to die, he *surrendered* it."

"Centurion, do you realize what you're saying?" A sickly smile played at the corners of his mouth, and his usually florid face was the shade of ashes. He braced his hands, palms down, on the desk's gleaming surface. "By great Jupiter, Longinus, do you believe the Galilean really did return to life, that he's *alive now*?"

"Excellency"—Longinus looked the Procurator straight in the eyes—"what other explanation could I offer?"

Pilate opened his mouth, but no answer came. Instead, with the tip of his thick tongue he circled his dry lips, and a heavy sigh stirred his ponderous frame. "I should have had the courage to resist the High Priest and release the man," he observed, more to himself than to the centurion across the desk from him. "But I condemned him. Then I tried to cleanse these hands"—he turned them over and, palms up, studied them—"of his guiltless blood. I *could* have freed him." He glanced toward the window but quickly turned back to face Longinus. "Centurion, do you suppose"—perspiration was beading on the Procurator's plainly frightened face—"he will be coming back soon from Galilee ... to Jerusalem, the Temple, to *Antonia*? By great Jupiter, Longinus"—he did not pause for the centurion's reply—"help me escape him! Urge the Prefect to transfer me, send me to some post across the world from this frightful Judaea, to Gaul, Germania, even, by the gods, to Britannia!" His eyes were wild, his hands on the desk were shaking, and he clenched them into white-knuckled fists. "Tell him to give you Claudia; she's been yours anyway all along." He attempted a feeble smile. "But I ... I mustn't keep you. Centurion Cornelius will be awaiting you, Longinus. Go, and the gods give you good winds." His voice had calmed. "And I beg you, Centurion, say a good word to the Prefect."

Longinus nodded and quietly left the chamber. As the door closed gently behind him, Pilate sat motionless, frozen in his chair. But some moments later, hearing the commotion in the courtyard below, he went to the window and watched the century, with Cornelius and Longinus leading the column and the pack animals at the rear, until it disappeared around the bend of the narrow street. Then as he raised his eyes from the cobblestones to the huddled houses beyond the Damascus Gate, a sudden sharp glint of sunshine was reflected to them from a white-painted titulus board nailed to a heavy timber thrusting upward from a forlorn scarred mound on the other side of the city wall.

"No! No!" Pilate whirled about hands before his eyes as though the flash of sunlight had blinded him. "Flavius! Flavius!"

The startled attendant rushed in. "Yes, Excellency?" he asked.

"Go find the commander of Antonia and tell him I want every cross upright out there on the Hill of the Skull pulled down, and by great Jupiter, I want it done now!" Breathing heavily, Pilate sat again at his desk. "Wait. Before you go, draw those draperies. I'm sick of the sight." Flavius went to the window and busied himself with the curtains, but when he had pulled one, he discovered that he could not draw the other all the way until the bronze stand and wine-colored vase on it had been moved. Quickly he shifted them to the western window a few paces away and almost directly behind the Procurator.

As he did so he saw that the sun shining through the vase shot straight outward from the delicate glass a band of red light that crossed the floor, climbed the back of Pilate's chair, and went obliquely over his shoulder to split evenly the polished surface of the desk. Flavius turned back to the first window and pulled the curtains together, so that not even a sliver of sunshine came through. Then he came around in front of the Procurator. But Pilate said nothing, and Flavius withdrew quietly, closing the door behind him.

The Procurator leaned back in his chair; his arms were folded across his middle, and his eyes appeared fixed upon a spot above the door. But Pilate was not seeing the ornate panels; his eyes were being held instead in the calm and untroubled gaze of another pair of eyes....

Suddenly he shook his head, vigorously, as though to rid himself of this haunting vision. "What's this?" he said aloud. "The man's dead. Of course the guards dozed. Gods-come-to-earth, spirits, demons. Woman dreaming. Jewish fanaticism. Bah! Cornelius and Longinus wished to confuse and frighten me."

... Even if he did walk from the tomb, he can cross no seas to haunt me with pitying sad eyes. In Gaul or Germania, anywhere but in this despicable land, I'll be free of him. I'll have escaped him. By great Jupiter, I, afraid of a Galilean carpenter. Imagine, I, a Roman soldier, I, by the gods, Procurator of Judaea....

"I'll have an end to this foolishness, this child's business," he said loudly. He sat up straight. "The other day I washed my hands of that man's death. Today, this moment, I wash them of *him*, his circlet of thorns, his slashed back, his searching eyes, his blood, by the gods of Rome. I'm free of him, do you hear?"

... And I'm not afraid to look through that window at his hill of death....

"Flavius!" he shouted. "Come draw aside the draperies. I want to see outside."

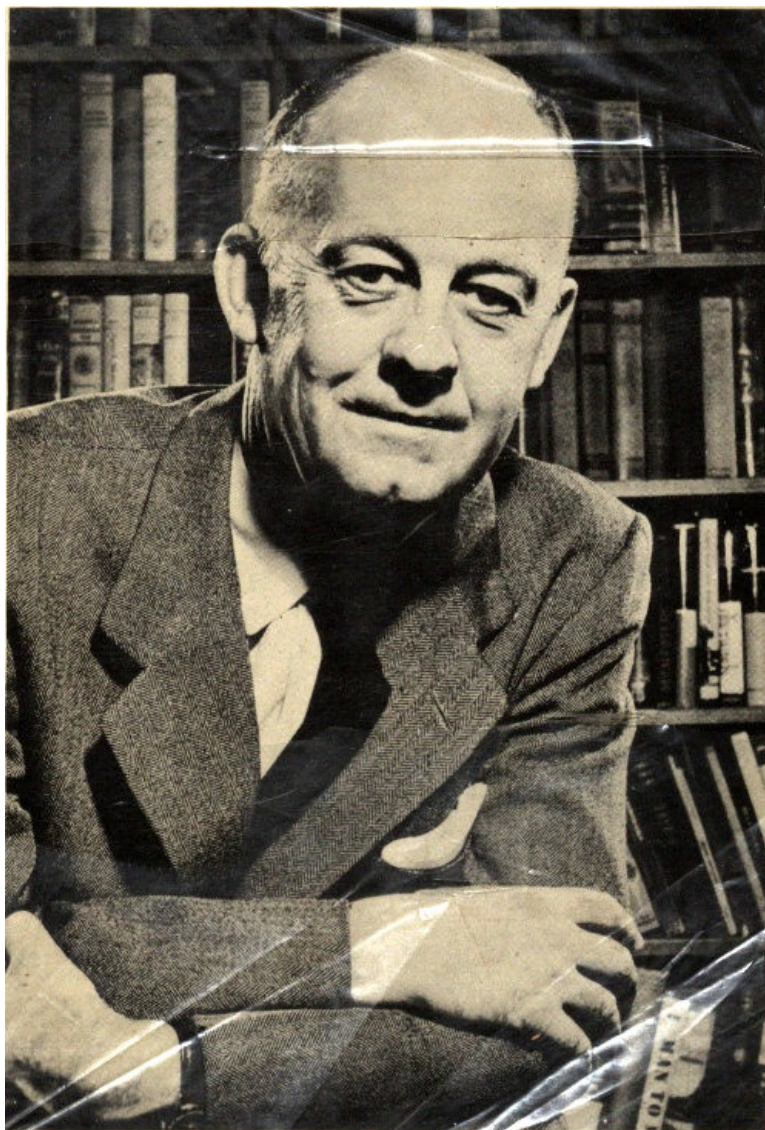
He lifted his hands to the desk and, leaning forward, began to rise.

... By great Jupiter, I'll go look out the window now. I've purged myself of the Galilean; I've washed my hands of that man....

He glanced downward.

Flavius, entering the chamber in response to Pilate's summons, halted abruptly. Procurator Pontius Pilate, ruler of Judaea, his eyes wide with terror, stood rigid in his tracks, staring at his hands.

From wrists to fingertips, in the fiery beam from the window, they flamed a gory crimson.



Ever since the publication of his best-selling novels, *Bold Galilean* and *The Tree of Judas*, the name of LeGette Blythe has been synonymous with the finest in historical fiction. *HEAR ME, PILATE!* demonstrates once again his amazing ability to recreate scenes from the past with drama and authenticity. Mr. Blythe is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is married, and has three children.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HEAR ME, PILATE! ***

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