



Map of southwestern Asia Minor (modern Turkey) showing the route traveled by Lucius and Marcus in this story (marked with a bold line).

A BULL FOR PLUTO



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*To Laurel,
who first inspired me to turn my hand from
historical research to writing fiction.*

BOOK I:
THE ROAD HOME

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS EARLY November, and Lucius Coelius Felix was on his way home from Pergamon, a city on the western edge of Asia Minor, to the Roman colony of Antioch-near-Pisidia, which lay nine days to the east. He had spent the last several weeks at the sanctuary of the healing god Asklepios seeking a cure for a painful abdominal ailment that was slowly sapping his strength, but to no avail. He had made the trip at the behest of the deity, who had appeared to his physician in a dream and promised to heal him at the end of his journey, or so he had thought. In the end, however, his hopes had been dashed; the god had indeed come to him, but he had rejected his pleas. Now he was on his way home to die.

First, however, he meant to stop at Hierapolis, a city renowned for its healing springs. He knew better than to expect a cure there, but he thought that the warm waters might help him to recuperate from the weeks of arduous treatment that he had endured at the hands of Asklepios's physicians. How long he would stay depended on the results.

Five days of weary travel lay between Pergamon and Hierapolis. The air was pleasantly cool and the scenery alluring, but Lucius was in no mood to enjoy the sights. He felt angry, depressed, and alone. His ill temper infected the two slaves who had made the journey with him: Marcus, his trusted personal assistant, and Eutychus, a farm hand who drove the supply wagon that accompanied Lucius's mule-drawn carriage. He had sent his pregnant wife home several weeks ago when it became clear that his treatments were going to take longer than anticipated, and now he missed her intensely. He eased the pain with liberal doses of the poppy extract that Marcus had purchased for him at Pergamon.

Marcus regretted his master's lack of interest in his surroundings, as he would have liked to see more of this comely district with its fertile valleys framed by craggy hills and its cities and towns teeming with life. It reminded him of the district around his home city. But he knew that it was hopeless to point out any of the attractions when his master's mind was so rigidly set on reaching his destination.

Fortunately, the road was smooth and well-traveled, especially the section that linked Pergamon to the inland city of Sardis. At Sardis they would join another road that ran southeast to Laodicea, where it connected to the major thoroughfare that they had followed from Apamea to the west coast. Hierapolis lay on a side road north of Laodicea.

Marcus had been surprised when his master told him that he intended to follow this route, since it meant that they would not be returning through Ephesus. His business partner Theodorus had been away when they visited the city earlier,

and Lucius had promised Theodorus's son Gallianus that he would stop and see his father on the way home. Marcus had reminded him of this promise, but Lucius had brushed away his concerns without explanation. The new route was somewhat shorter, but that was not enough to induce a man like Lucius to breach his word to his partner, especially when it would save him only a day or two of travel time. Perhaps he wanted to avoid having to answer questions about what had occurred at the sanctuary of Asklepios. Perhaps he was in a hurry to get home and see his wife. Perhaps he was just too ill to be sociable. Whatever his reasoning, he evidently had no intention of sharing it with Marcus.

Marcus had assumed that he would spend the entire trip on the front seat of the supply wagon as he had done on their journey to Pergamon, so he was taken aback when Lucius invited him to ride in the carriage with him on the morning of the third day. The ostensible reason was to be available to help him with any physical difficulties that might arise along the way, but the real reason was not hard to guess: he was lonely and hurting and did not like riding alone in a rented vehicle.

Marcus had envied his fellow slave Melita, who had been permitted to ride with her mistress on the cushioned seats of the carriage on their way to Pergamon, but he had never for a moment thought that the same chance might befall him. The closed compartment proved especially welcome when they were overtaken by a drenching rainstorm later that afternoon. The air turned notably cooler after the storm and remained so until they reached Hierapolis, but Marcus was able to keep warm under the blankets that had been provided with the carriage. Eutychus, by contrast, was miserable. Marcus felt sorry for him, but there was nothing that he could do to ease his discomfort.

As it turned out, riding in the same compartment as his master was less pleasant than Marcus had anticipated. Lucius was sullen and withdrawn, saying little and dozing through much of the trip. He took more pain medicine now than he had done in the past, though Marcus saw no clear signs that his sickness was growing worse. By the third day he began to worry that he might run out of the poppy potion before they reached their destination.

Equally disturbing was his master's sudden unconcern about where they stopped for the evening. On the outbound journey he had been wary of sleeping in country inns or hostels, but now he insisted that they stop at whatever facility lay at hand, regardless of appearance or condition. One night he even slept in the carriage, but that proved so uncomfortable that he did not repeat the effort. His host Valerius from Pergamon had given him letters of recommendation and the names of various friends and acquaintances along the road to Hierapolis who would gladly have housed him for a night, but Lucius resisted Marcus's entreaties to use them. Marcus was perplexed by this behavior until Lucius confided to him

in a moment of candor what he already suspected: he did not want to stay in any place where he might be asked about his time at Pergamon or his plans for the future. Seeing that his purpose was fixed, Marcus did his best to make him comfortable in his chosen lodgings.

On their last night before reaching Hierapolis, Lucius handed Eutychus a letter addressed to his wife Selena. He had written and sealed the letter himself, so Marcus had no idea of its contents.

"Some time tomorrow afternoon we'll reach the road that turns off to Hierapolis," he explained. "The main road continues on to Laodicea. If you keep up your pace, you should be able to reach that city before nightfall. There you will join the road that we took earlier on our way to Ephesus. Follow it in the opposite direction and you'll eventually reach Antioch. Give this letter to my wife when you get there."

"So you don't want him to come with us to Hierapolis?" interrupted Marcus, puzzled by this apparent change of plans.

"No," replied Lucius, "I don't know where we'll be staying, and I don't want to have to worry about hauling two vehicles through the city streets while we look for a place to unload. I want you two to pack everything that I might need into the carriage in the morning so that we'll be ready to separate when the time comes."

Both men nodded to show that they understood what they were to do, but Marcus suspected that there was more to his master's decision than he was telling them. Whether he would ever hear the real reason was impossible to guess.

"Eutychus," he said, turning to address the young farm hand, "you've been a good and faithful servant throughout this journey. In recognition of your service, I've directed my wife in this letter to give you a small token of my appreciation. But you have to get the letter to her first. Go directly to my house when you reach Antioch and place the letter in her hands; don't give it to anyone else. If anyone tries to take it from you, tell them that I said that anyone who interferes with you will be punished severely when I get home. If my son Gaius gives you any trouble, take the letter to my friend Publius Servius Frugi and ask him to deliver it to her. When you're done with that task, unload the wagon and put things wherever my steward tells you. Then you can go home and enjoy my heartfelt appreciation."

"Yes, sir, you can count on me, sir," answered Eutychus eagerly. Then as if realizing that he had been overly forward in his response, he lowered his eyes to the ground and began shuffling his feet in the dirt. Lucius smiled benignly, then turned and walked away.

Marcus felt sorry for his rough companion. He had never seen him so abashed, but it was easy to guess why he was behaving as he was. As far as Marcus could recall, this was the first time that Lucius had spoken directly to Eutychus in the

weeks that they had traveled together. The contrast with his own experience was stark. For him, conversations with the master were a daily affair. For other slaves, such interactions could be daunting.

Marcus knew better than to address his master as an equal, but incidents such as this reminded him of the awkward fact that his position placed him closer to Lucius and his aristocratic friends than to the other slaves in his household. It was challenging at times to live with a foot in each world, but it was certainly better than the alternative. He thanked the gods once again that his master had noted his abilities when he was young and arranged for him to be trained for office work. He dreaded to think what his life would have been like if he had been left to himself. Perhaps he would have ended up like this ignorant farm hand who did not know how to respond when his master spoke to him. He shuddered at the thought.

MARCUS was eager to see Hierapolis after all the strange reports that his master had received about the city. People said that it stood on top of a plateau made of snow and ice that never melted, even on the hottest days of summer, and that its streets ran with steaming water that never froze, even in the depths of winter. Some spoke of a heated river that cascaded down the frozen hillside through a series of pools that hung in mid-air above the valley. One person had insisted that the waters of this river were heated by the fires of Tartarus, and another had claimed that people traveled to the underworld through a cave that stood within the city precincts.

At first Marcus had questioned whether such a place even existed, but he had been compelled to acknowledge its reality when Valerius told them that his brother lived there. But he knew better than to believe everything that he had heard about it. He knew that the city contained natural hot springs that people found useful for treating illness, since that was why his master was going there. He could also imagine that there might be some truth to the idea that these springs drew their heat from the fires of the underworld, since he could not think of anything else that could cause hot water to bubble up from the ground. But he found it hard to believe that people could journey down to that world through a cave in the city, and he could not comprehend how steaming waters could flow over mountains of ice without melting them away. He would have to see such a thing before he could believe it.

Around midday Marcus noticed a small white smudge on the side of a long, low mountain range that crossed the road ahead of them. He wondered if this might be the city, so he fixed his eyes on it as the carriage progressed. Gradually

the white spot grew in size until he could see that it was in fact a line of snow-white cliffs, just as his master's informants had led them to expect. Soon he was able to make out a line of buildings along the upper rim of the cliffs that presumably marked the location of the city.

Lucius was napping as this scene unfolded, and Marcus debated for some time whether to wake him up or allow him to sleep. As they drew closer, however, he concluded that his master would want to know that they were nearing their destination. He also convinced himself that Lucius would want to see this peculiar place for himself, regardless of his mental state.

At first Lucius was annoyed at being awakened to gawk at one more roadside attraction. His annoyance eased, however, once he understood what Marcus was trying to tell him. His interest was genuinely piqued once he peered out of the window and saw the white cliffs ahead of them.

"Could those cliffs really be covered with snow and ice on a sunny day like this?" inquired Marcus after a few moments of silence.

"It certainly looks like it," ventured Lucius. "But it's hard to see how that could be. Look at all that dry, rocky ground around them. And there's no snow anywhere around here."

The buildings that Marcus had seen along the edge of the cliffs receded from view as they drew closer to the ridge, leading Marcus to conclude that the city was located farther from the rim than he had initially thought. The milky bluffs likewise disappeared as the road curled to the left, away from the city. Soon they reached an intersection from which a well-worn road turned up the hill. Here Lucius signaled for the driver to stop so that they could bid farewell to Eutychus.

Speaking through the window of the carriage, Lucius reminded Eutychus once again of the vital importance of delivering the letter that he had written to Selena as soon as he reached Antioch. Marcus climbed out and gave the young man an awkward hug while voicing hope that he might visit him on the farm one day. Eutychus clasped Marcus to his chest and told him how much he would miss him. Then he climbed back onto the seat of the wagon and urged the mules forward. Marcus felt a pang of loss as the back of the wagon receded into the distance. From now on, he would be his master's only company.

The road that ran up to Hierapolis was steep enough to pose a challenge for the mules after a long day in the harness, so the driver took it slowly so as to avoid wearing them out. As they neared the top of the plateau, they stumbled upon a huge cemetery that dwarfed any that Marcus had ever seen, even at a major city as Ephesus. The two men stared in silent wonder at the immense city of the dead.

"Look at all those tombs," said Marcus at last. "There must be thousands of them! Hierapolis isn't that big a city, is it?"

"No," replied Lucius grimly. "I heard about this place while I was at the Asklepion. Apparently many of these tombs contain the remains of travelers who came here for healing and did not find it. I expect that I will be joining them soon."

"You shouldn't speak that way, master," cautioned Marcus. "The lemures might hear you."

He balled both fists into a fig sign and waved them around the compartment to avert any dark spirits that might be lurking around to hear Lucius's words.

"Lemures or no, it makes no difference to me," replied Lucius as he stared pensively out of the window. "I came here to die, and die I will. Nothing that I say or do will make any difference. It's only a matter of time."

"What do you mean?" asked Marcus, startled by his master's words. "I thought that you were stopping at Hierapolis to see if the healing springs could make you feel better before we make our way home. That's what they recommended at the Asklepion."

"There's no hope for me in Hierapolis," replied Lucius calmly. "If the mighty Asklepios—some 'Savior' he turned out to be!—if the mighty Asklepios and his physicians could not restore me to health, why should I expect anything different here? The mistress of death has her shears in her hand to snip the thread of my life, and the waters of Hierapolis can do nothing to stop her. All that they can do is soothe my pain. But that's something, at least. That's why I came here—to ease my suffering until my hour comes. When it does, this is as good a place as any to die."

Marcus was stunned; this wasn't what his master had told Valerius when they left Pergamon.

"But what about Selena?" he objected, throwing caution to the wind. "Didn't you invite her to join you here and then return home with you? And what about your baby? Don't you want to live long enough to see it born? Are you really ready to leave your business, your household, and your family's reputation in the hands of Gaius?"

"It doesn't matter what I want or what I'm ready to do," answered Lucius gloomily. "There's nothing that I can do about it. Gaius will take over my household one day, whether he's ready or not. I regret that I did not do more to prepare him for this eventuality, but it's too late to worry about that now. He'll have my friend Servius to help him, if he's wise enough to make use of the old man's experience. And if he's not...well, it's out of my hands. He'll have to learn the hard way."

Lucius turned and stared silently at the sea of tombs that covered the dusty ground on both sides of the carriage. Marcus knew that this signaled his wish to end the conversation, so he said no more. He felt as if there had to be something that he could say to change his master's mind, but he could not think what it might be. He knew that Lucius was dying, but he had always assumed that he would want

to end his days in the comfort of his own home, not in an unknown city far from family and friends. He could not imagine what had led him to this plan.

As he peered around at the tombs, he thought about the many people who had come here as a last resort in hopes of finding healing. Some of them must have been quite wealthy, to judge from the size of their monuments. Yet they had all died far from home, whether alone or in the company of a few friends or family members. Perhaps, then, such a fate was not as strange or unthinkable as he supposed. But it wasn't the way that anyone would choose to die. He wondered whether any of the dead had inscribed their feelings of disappointment on the faces of their tombs. He made a mental note to return here once they were settled in the city and find out.

The ridge narrowed as they approached the city gate. Suddenly Marcus noticed a splotch of white on their right at the edge of the plateau. He pointed it out to Lucius, who knocked on the roof to signal the driver to stop. The white patch had disappeared by the time the carriage came to a halt.

"Let's go and see what that white stuff is," said Lucius. "I don't know if I can reach it, but if I can't, you can walk down and tell me what you see."

Marcus was happy to have something to distract him from his somber reflections. They hobbled slowly through the cemetery toward the edge of the cliff with Lucius clinging tightly to his arm, his legs weak from sitting for so long.

A magnificent panorama opened before them as they reached the rim. Far below, a fertile valley stretched out to their left and right, framed on all sides by low brown mountains. Directly below their feet stood a wall of cliffs. To their right, the cliffs were made of ordinary stone. To their left, the cliffs looked for all the world as if they were coated with snow or ice. Along the upper edge of one of these cliffs ran a string of blue-green dots that reminded Marcus of the aquamarine jewelry that wealthy women sometimes wore in their ears and around their necks. Could these be the hanging pools about which they had been told? The whole scene looked unearthly.

A deep sense of awe came over Marcus as he stood staring at the landscape before them. He felt as if they had stumbled into some fantastic realm of legend that had irrupted suddenly into the world of humans. He half-expected to find the city of Hierapolis populated by beings composed of spirit, not flesh and bone.

Lucius, too, was gazing with rapt attention at the scene before them. The two men stood side by side in silence for some time. At last Lucius broke the spell.

"Marcus, climb down there and see what that white stuff is," he said, pointing to the area directly below them, which was shrouded in white. "It's not far, and the wall isn't too steep as long as you watch where you're going. But it's too much for me. I'll sit here and rest while you're gone."

Marcus settled his master onto a soft patch of ground, then commenced his descent. The climb was steeper than it looked, but it did not take him long to reach the nearest section of the white material. He reached out to touch it and discovered to his immense surprise that the icy-looking substance was in fact as hard and warm as stone. Its surface, however, was not smooth like stone but rather scored with bumps and wave-like ridges. Thin strands of water trickled here and there down its surface.

Marcus knew that his master would want to know more about the water, but he was unsure if the material was sturdy enough to hold his weight. He placed one foot gingerly onto the white surface, then increased the weight when it remained firm. Soon he was treading cautiously across the rough surface.

When he at last reached one of the dribbling threads, he was surprised to find that it was warm, almost hot to the touch. The material around it was also warm. The experience left him perplexed. He knew that Hierapolis was renowned for its hot springs, but he had presumed that the heated liquid would be confined to pools and channels as at Carura, not flowing freely down a wall of rock as appeared to be the case here. He could see now how some of that water might have accumulated on ledges along the cliffs to form the blue-green pools that he could see from where he stood. He still could not guess why the stones on the cliffs were so rough and white, but at least he understood more now than he had when peering down from the ridge above.

Thinking of the ridge reminded him that he should climb back up soon or his master would begin to worry about him. He made his way carefully to the edge of the pallid field, pausing to pocket a couple of small white stones before trudging back up the hill. He found Lucius dozing on his back in the grass. As usual, he was somewhat disoriented when Marcus woke him, but he quickly perked up when Marcus began explaining what he had discovered. He was especially intrigued by the white stones that Marcus had brought back with him. He scraped off some of the white stuff with his fingernails and rubbed it between his palms, where it dissolved into a damp powder. He could not understand how such a soft material could support the weight of even a smaller man like Marcus. He promised to ask around and learn more about this odd substance after they arrived in the city.

Marcus was pleased with himself as they climbed back into the carriage for the short ride to the city gate. He had succeeded at least momentarily in diverting his master's attention from the burdens that had weighed so heavily on his mind since their departure from Pergamon. Whether this was only a brief respite or a lasting change remained to be seen. But it comforted him to know that the man whom he had known and served for so many years was still alive somewhere in that tomb-like cloud that had engulfed him for the last five days.

HIERAPOLIS had no walls, but it still had a monumental gate through which all traffic into and out of the city had to pass. As at Ephesus, the gate had three portals and was flanked by heavy stone towers. The left tower was flanked by some kind of broad walled complex, perhaps the city marketplace, while the edge of the cliffs lay nearby on the right. Vehicles were moving freely through the gate area when Lucius's carriage arrived, so there was no delay in entering the city. But it was still necessary for them to stop at the gate and inquire about a place to stay.

Until that morning, Marcus had assumed that they would be staying at the home of one of the men in Hierapolis for whom Lucius had letters of recommendation. One was a friend of Pollio, the Roman businessman with whom they had stayed in Apamea, and the other a cousin of Valerius. Marcus had even pulled out the relevant documents as he was packing for the day. But when he told Lucius what he had done, he was told in no uncertain terms that the letters would not be needed.

"Have you forgotten what I said about not staying anywhere that would require me to talk about my travels and my time at Pergamon?" he asked, clearly annoyed at Marcus's denseness. "Why would you think that I would change my mind now? I don't want anyone prying into my personal affairs and trying to make me feel better."

Marcus had tried to apologize for his misstep, but Lucius went on as if he had not heard him.

"With so many people traveling to Hierapolis for the springs, there has to be a decent inn in the city that caters to people of my station in life. Hierapolis may be a wealthy city, but there can't possibly be enough noble families to host every visitor who arrives with a letter of recommendation. I know that I'd be annoyed if strangers came knocking on my door every other day wanting a place to stay."

"I'm sure you would, sir," Marcus had replied in an effort to soothe his master's temper. Lucius was so touchy these days that almost anything could irritate him. Marcus had never seen him this way in all the years that he had known him.

"When we get there," Lucius continued, "you can ask around and see what my options are. In the meantime, put those letters away; I won't be using them."

Now that they were entering the city, the time had come to carry out his master's instructions. They stopped first at a public latrine just inside the city gate, then made their way to the stable, where the manager was sure to know where to send aristocrats who would be leaving their carriages in his care.

"There's only one place in town that's suitable for a man like your master," re-

plied the manager, a garrulous man who seemed to be genuinely interested in helping them. "It's down by the baths at the top of the cliffs—a nice little inn owned by a rich businessman who built it for his out-of-town clients. It ain't luxurious, but it's the best we got. It's close to the baths, an' they've even got their own hot spring out in the courtyard. I ain't heard too many complaints about it. But whether they got a room tonight or not is another matter. There's a big festival comin' up in a couple of days, an' they might be full. I'd advise you to get down there quick an' see. You can drive right to their door."

Marcus thanked him and asked for directions, then went back to the carriage and reported to his master what he had learned. Lucius agreed with the plan and they were soon on their way with Marcus squeezed onto the bench beside the driver to give him directions.

The main street of Hierapolis was much like every other city that Marcus had seen on their trip—a broad expanse of rutted paving stones flanked on both sides by elevated sidewalks and rows of shops running cheek-to-jowl as far as the eye could see. The shops were busy at this time of day, and Lucius's driver had to go slowly in order to avoid running over the many pedestrians who kept crossing the street at odd angles with hardly a glance at what might be coming toward them. Peering through a gateway on their left, Marcus saw that the walled compound that they had observed as they approached the city was indeed the marketplace where residents came to buy and sell their goods and services. No wonder the streets around here were so crowded!

The traffic thinned somewhat as they moved beyond the market, but the nature and quality of the scenery remained the same for several blocks. Marcus knew that the magnificent white cliffs that he had seen from the cemetery lay somewhere to their right, but the height of the buildings prevented him from seeing anything but stone walls, storefronts, and people.

The stable manager had told him to turn right immediately after the civic forum to reach the baths and the inn. The baths actually lay behind the forum near the edge of the cliffs, but the forum courtyard with its offices and temples was limited to pedestrians, so they had to go around it. Still, the inn was not hard to find. After passing the temple of Apollo, they came to a long columned portico on their left that marked the spot where they were supposed to turn. They found the inn a short distance ahead on the left, across from the baths, just as the stable manager had said.

"Your master is fortunate," answered the innkeeper when Marcus informed him of his business. "If he had arrived yesterday, I would have had to tell him that I had nothing available for him. Our city is celebrating a festival for Cybele and Apollo in a couple of days and visitors have been flocking in from all over the

region, enough to fill all of my beds. But a messenger arrived this afternoon saying that one of my regular guests would be unable to attend the festival this year, so his room is free. It's one of my better rooms, too, with a nice view over the valley. If your master wants to stay here for a few days as you stated, I think that he will find the room congenial to his tastes."

The innkeeper showed Marcus to the room, which was notably larger and nicer than the one that Lucius had occupied for so long at the Asklepion. The tasteful red and yellow architectural murals that framed the walls and the painted garlands that hung from the roofline made it seem as if one was standing in an expensive urban villa rather than an inn in a small regional center. The designer clearly knew what would appeal to an aristocratic clientele. The furniture was a bit sparse but tasteful—a heavily cushioned sleeping couch, a small writing desk made of fine dark wood with matching chair, a portable eating table with a marble top, a couple of folding chairs for guests, and a chest for storage.

"I'm sure that my master will find this room adequate," said Marcus. "I'll go and tell him."

"Just a moment," replied the innkeeper, catching Marcus's arm and smiling artfully. "You've not yet seen the room's best feature."

The innkeeper led him through a door at the end of the room that opened onto a small balcony that gave an unobstructed view over the edge of the cliffs to the green valley below. Marcus was so startled by the sight that he instinctively grabbed the railing with both hands to keep from falling off.

"Lots of people have that reaction when they first step out here," chuckled the innkeeper. "Be sure to lock the balcony door at night if your master ever wanders in his sleep. You wouldn't want him tumbling over the side on a dark night! Or maybe you would—I won't ask about that."

The innkeeper winked and grinned at his own scandalous intimation. Marcus had been trying to figure out if the man was a slave or a hired worker; he spoke and dressed well enough that he could have been either. But he wondered no longer. No freeborn man would even hint to a slave that he might take pleasure in his master's death. Aristocrats in particular liked to believe that their slaves loved them and that they would weep piteously at their demise, and most slaves were willing to oblige this expectation, whether out of expedience or genuine affection. Only a slave—or perhaps a freedman—would dare to suggest that a slave's real feelings might lie elsewhere.

Marcus ignored the man's comment and turned to look out at the scenery. The view was indeed magnificent. The inn was situated far enough from the rim to prevent him from peering directly down at the whitened sides of the cliffs, but a narrow line of the milky substance was visible along the lip of the plateau, con-

trasting sharply with the valley below. People were scattered here and there along the white line, apparently taking in the view. Now and then one of them appeared to vanish over the edge.

"Where are those people going when they disappear like that?" he asked the innkeeper, pointing toward the spot where he had observed it happeninghe anomalously.

"Like what?" queried the man, unsure what he meant.

"I've seen several people who were standing on the edge of the cliff suddenly vanish from sight," Marcus explained. "I'm guessing that they must be stepping out onto something below the rim and not jumping to their deaths. What's down there?"

"Oh, I see," observed the innkeeper, peering in the direction that Marcus was pointing. "You've not yet been down to see the cliffs?"

"No, we just got here," said Marcus. "We only saw them from a distance."

"Well, you'll want to get down there as soon as you can," the man replied. "You won't find anything like it elsewhere. There are several paths that lead down from the rim to pools of warm water that literally hang from the sides of the cliffs. People go there to play around and take in the views. The pools are too shallow to do more than get your shins wet, but they're still quite a sight. To experience the healing qualities of the waters, you have to go to one of the bigger pools here in the city. We have a pool in our courtyard that's filled with the same waters that they use in the baths. It's only open to our guests, so it's never crowded. Your master will find it a pleasant place to relax. But if he wants treatments, he'll have to go to one of the baths. They have some good physicians there who can help him with whatever ails him. People who know about such things say that they're as good as you'll find anywhere."

Marcus had anticipated that the innkeeper might inquire about his master's health, since that was what brought many visitors to Hierapolis. He also knew that innkeepers were invariably nosy about their guests. But his master had made it clear that he did not want anyone prying into his business, so he had a response ready in case he should be asked.

"No, he won't be consulting any physicians while he's here," he replied. "He picked up some kind of stomach sickness while we were traveling, but he already has medicine for it. He expects that it will go away with rest. That's why we came here—that, and to see for ourselves the odd sights that you described to me. We're on our way home to Antioch-near-Pisidia from Ephesus, where my master had some business. A friend of his in Apamea suggested that your city was worth a side-trip, and he decided to take the man at his word. He's getting old and the trip has worn him down. He could use a few days of rest before returning to his business."

"I see," said the innkeeper thoughtfully. "You've come a long way, and you have a long way yet to go. I've had many guests come here for the same reason. He certainly won't regret the detour. I will make sure that he has everything that he needs for a restful visit."

"On behalf of my master, I thank you," replied Marcus. "My master is a good man who knows how to express his appreciation to those who treat him well." Marcus had learned during the course of their travels that such hints of a future reward could be effective in motivating a man like this innkeeper to take special care of his master, and he suspected that he would need all of the help that he could get.

"But enough talking," said Marcus in a businesslike tone. "Right now I need to go and retrieve my master and help him get settled into his room. He's going to be wondering what's taken me so long."

"I understand," the man replied with a helpful smile. "Let me know if you need any assistance. I can send one of my boys to help."

"That would be good," replied Marcus. "We do have a lot to unload." Marcus smiled gratefully and turned to leave. The innkeeper followed him.

Upon returning to the carriage, he found his master dozing in his seat with his head leaning against the wall. He wasn't surprised, as this had been Lucius's customary posture for much of the time that they had ridden together. Marcus shook his shoulder to awaken him, then gave him a brief summary of what he had learned. He seemed to have no idea of how long Marcus had been gone, nor did he seem irritated by the delay. In fact, he seemed more affirming than he had been lately, whether because he was feeling better or because he was happy to reach his destination.

Marcus gave instructions to the driver and the two young men who had been sent to assist him with the supplies, then guided his master up to his chamber. From what he could see, the inn would be pleasant enough, but it did have one major drawback: Lucius's room was on the top floor, so he would have to climb a set of stairs every time he went in or out. He was still capable of making such an ascent now—with Marcus's assistance, of course—but Marcus could anticipate a time when that might not be possible, especially if he was serious about dying here. Marcus was not convinced that he would follow through on this intention, especially after Selena arrived, but the difficulty would have to be addressed at some point if he decided to stay here for an extended period. He made a mental note to speak with the innkeeper about moving to a lower level once a room became available.

Lucius seemed pleased with the room, especially the view from the balcony, though he said little to Marcus on the subject. His mind was fixed as usual on getting to the baths after a long day on the road. Marcus pointed out that it was rather

late in the day for such a venture and suggested that he go down to the hot pool in the inn's courtyard instead. Lucius resisted at first, but when Marcus pointed out that the sun-god was nearing the end of his journey, he acceded to the proposal.

Marcus had already removed his master's toga, so there was little for them to do but make their way back down the stairs to the courtyard. Marcus was impressed by what he saw there. Around the perimeter, a series of doorways opened onto a rectangular colonnade whose walls were decorated with peaceful garden scenes. The center was occupied by a flower garden at one end and a pool at the other. The pool was rather small—not more than a dozen people could have sat comfortably in it at one time—but handsome, with flowering bushes on three sides and a stone platform on the fourth. Several chairs were arranged randomly beside the pool. The pool itself was lined with large dark stones of the same material as the platform.

A single guest was lounging in a chair beside the pool when they arrived. There was no way to ascertain his status since he was wearing only a tunic, but Marcus figured that he had to be an aristocrat to be staying at this inn. He greeted Lucius pleasantly as a fellow traveler but received only a muffled grunt in return. Marcus felt embarrassed for his master—what if this man should turn out to be important?—but there was nothing that he could do about it. Lucius had behaved this way at all of their stops since leaving Pergamon; it seemed to be his way of discouraging questions. Most of the time it succeeded.

Marcus knelt and examined the water. It had a brown tinge, but not enough to obscure the stony sides of the pool. A narrow ledge ran around the perimeter, providing a place for the guests to sit. The temperature was warm but not overly hot.

"It's quite safe," called the other guest to Marcus. "In fact, it's more than safe—it's positively good for you. Lots of healthy stuff in it. I soak in it whenever I come here and I always feel better when I leave."

"Thank you for the information," replied Marcus politely. He turned back to his master and began helping him to remove his tunic.

"I don't know if you can see it, but there's a bench along all four sides where you can sit," the man added. "But be careful getting in—the sides are a bit slippery."

Marcus thanked him again as he helped his master climb down the steps and into the water. Lucius was silent.

"How is it, sir?" asked Marcus as his master relaxed onto the stone bench.

"Good," answered Lucius after a moment's hesitation. "Very good."

"I'm happy to hear it," said Marcus. "Now if you don't mind, I'll leave you here to enjoy the waters while I tend to the unpacking. I won't be long."

Lucius nodded his assent and Marcus returned quickly to the room. By now the bulk of Lucius's baggage had been carried upstairs, though some still remained.

The process was taking longer than usual because every chest, basket, or pot that Lucius had not sent home to Antioch with Selena or Eutychus had to be removed from the carriage so that the driver could return home to Pergamon.

Marcus had been looking forward to settling down in one place after spending five days and nights on the road. He had grown weary of the constant bumping and jarring that came with riding all day inside a carriage, even one designed for an aristocrat. He had no idea how his master meant to get home to Antioch; perhaps he had told Selena to bring his carriage when she came. Whatever his plan, there was no reason to worry about it now. Considering how long it would take for Eutychus to reach Antioch and Selena to pack, it would be at least two or three market cycles before she arrived. Marcus prayed that she would hurry, as her presence would surely lift his master's spirits. It was hard to be around him when he was so glum.

When he had been working for a half hour or so, Marcus began to feel nervous about being away from his master for so long, so he went down to the pool to check on him. He nearly panicked when he found him slumped in a corner with his eyes shut.

"Master!" he shouted, rushing to Lucius's side. Before he could reach him, however, the man who had been there when they arrived waved him back.

"Sssh!" he hissed. "He's only dozing. I've been watching him while you were away, and he was snoring until you called his name."

Marcus hesitated, unsure what to do. A moment later, however, a low snore assured him that his master was indeed all right. The other man looked up at him and smiled.

"See, there's nothing to worry about," he assured him. "He just needs a good rest, and there's no better place to get it than where he is. Go on about your business and I'll keep an eye on him for you."

Marcus stared at his master for a few moments before replying.

"Thank you, sir," he said at last. "He's been sick, and I was afraid that—that..."

"Say nothing more," said the man. "Leave him to me."

"I appreciate the offer, sir," replied Marcus, "but it would not be right for me to burden you with his care. I can finish unpacking later..."

"I told you to say nothing more," interrupted the man. "I have nothing else to do, while you do. Go, and come back when you're finished. Your master will feel better if he returns to a clean room."

Marcus knew better than to argue with his betters, so he nodded in acquiescence and hurried back up the stairs. When everything was in order, he threw some olives and nuts into a bowl and gathered up a flask of good wine, a juglet of water, and two cups. Balancing the items on a tray, he carried them down to

the courtyard for his master and the other man. He was surprised to find Lucius sitting in a chair next to the other man engaged in a lively conversation. He had wrapped himself in a towel that Marcus had brought down on his previous visit to dry him when he was done.

"And this is Marcus, my personal assistant," announced Lucius as he approached them. "Marcus, meet Attalos Adrastos from the city of Aphrodisias."

Marcus dipped his head in acknowledgment of the introduction, then held out the bowl to the two men to take what they wanted. Then he set the platter down on a chair and poured out two cups of wine, mixed them with water, and handed them to the men. Both men drained their cups.

"That's good wine," observed Attalos, inverting his cup to catch the final drops.

"It certainly is," agreed Lucius. "There's nothing like a good cup of wine to warm you up on a cool evening. I was starting to get chilled sitting here in a wet loincloth."

Marcus took their cups and refilled them while the men resumed their conversation.

"What's this I hear about a festival in a couple of days?" asked Lucius.

"That's what brought me here," explained Attalos. "Every year at this time the city fathers hold a festival for Cybele and Apollo to give thanks for the harvest. They also make offerings to Pluto in hopes of averting his death-dealing presence from the city during the coming winter. It's the only place I know where all three levels of the universe—Mother Earth around us, the All-Seeing Sun above, and the realm of the dead below—are addressed in a combined expression of worship."

"To Pluto, eh?" interjected Lucius when Attalos paused. "I've heard that there is an entrance to the underworld right here in Hierapolis. Could that possibly be true?"

"It is," replied Attalos. "I know it's a bit hard to believe, but you can see it yourself if you attend the festival. It's part of a temple complex dedicated to the ruler of the dead. The priests of Cybele lead sacrificial animals to the mouth of the cave as offerings to Pluto and the god himself takes their breath away without the touch of human hands. It's quite a spectacle."

"I guess I'll have to see it for myself, as you say," observed Lucius.

"Speaking of spectacle," Attalos added, "have you ever seen the wandering priests of Cybele—those half-men who dance themselves into a frenzy to celebrate the Great Mother?"

"I've only heard about them," replied Lucius. "I don't think they travel as far east as Antioch—at least I've never seen them there. But if what I've heard is true, I'm not sure that I want to see them. I've been told that they get so enthused that some of them actually castrate themselves in public. Is that true?"

"I know it sounds incredible," answered Attalos with a grim smile, "but I've seen it with my own eyes. It's gruesome, to be sure, but their aim is laudable—they're offering their manhood to the goddess and committing themselves to serve her for the rest of their lives."

"I guess they're not good for anything else at that point," chuckled Lucius. "They're certainly not going to leave any posterity."

"That's for sure," agreed Attalos. "Anyway, they'll be here for the festival and you can judge for yourself. When you see them go down into the cave of Pluto and come back alive, you might feel more respect for them."

"I doubt it," replied Lucius. "I just can't comprehend why anyone would think that they have to cut off a part of their prick to show their devotion to their god. I've been around some Jews recently, and they do something similar, though they only cut off the tip. Mostly they do it to babies, but they do it to grown men, too, if they want to join them. I don't understand it."

"Nor do I," echoed Attalos. "You know how eccentric those Jews are about sex—they condemn a man for doing it with anyone except his wife, even his own slave. From what I've seen, though, they don't seem to have any trouble producing more little Jewlings. I guess that's what happens when you pour all your seed into a single field!"

The two men laughed heartily. In the past Marcus would have joined them even if he didn't find the joke funny. But now that he knew that Jewish blood ran through his veins, such humor only annoyed him. He hadn't thought much about that startling discovery since leaving Valerius's house, but now and then he could feel it hovering in the back of his mind like some ghostly shade. One day he would have to confront that ethereal presence and either slay it or embrace it. One day—but not now.

By the time darkness fell, Lucius and Attalos were conversing like old friends. Marcus found this amusing, since he was beginning to suspect that Attalos was not the aristocrat that he had taken him to be. Still, he was happy to see his master engaging with anyone in a manner that resembled normality. He had almost given up hope of seeing him freed from the mental shackles that had bound him since his rejection at the Asklepion. He felt a glimmer of hope that he might one day look back on this moment as a turning point, but it was just as likely that it was only be a momentary diversion, a flicker of light in the darkness. All that he could do for now was to encourage the relationship and see where it led. Only the gods knew if his efforts would bear fruit.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEXT MORNING Attalos took Lucius down to see the cliffs. He had wanted to give him a tour of the entire city, but Lucius explained that his health would not allow him to engage in so much physical exertion at one time. Marcus was unsure how much his master had told his friend about his illness, but he knew that he should keep quiet and say nothing that might compromise any secrets that his master might be guarding. Attalos would learn about his condition soon enough when he saw Lucius enduring one of his bouts of sickness.

The morning was cool, so Attalos wore a long Greek cloak over his tunic. Marcus had suspected that he was not a Roman citizen, and his lack of a toga proved it. But his tunic was made of fine linen and dyed a deep red color that Marcus knew was expensive, and the clasp on his woolen cloak appeared to be made of gold. The man clearly had money, whatever his social status.

When they reached the top of the cliffs, Marcus momentarily lost his composure. “By the gods!” he exclaimed excitedly. “Isn’t that amazing?” He waved his hand across the expanse of cliff below them. “The entire cliff-side is coated with that white material! And over there—those blue pools!” He pointed to his right. “It really does look like they’re hanging in midair. It’s just as we were told.”

Marcus turned to look at his master and was surprised to see an expression of censure rather than the shared ecstasy that he had expected. Suddenly he realized that in his excitement he had violated one of the cardinal rules of commerce between slaves and their masters. He might get away with speaking so informally to his master when they were alone, but he should never speak first when one of his master’s friends was present. To do so implied that he and his master were on familiar terms, an equation that brought dishonor to his master.

Marcus felt ashamed of his carelessness. His face flushed hot with embarrassment. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said with drooping head and lowered voice. “I spoke out of turn. Please forgive me.”

“I forgive you,” declared Lucius. “You were simply overwhelmed by the moment. I know you meant no disrespect to me or my guest.” Lucius turned and looked at Attalos, who nodded his assent. Marcus noticed that he seemed embarrassed by Lucius’s solicitude.

“This is indeed a magnificent view,” echoed Lucius, his face turned toward Attalos. “Can you explain to me what we’re seeing?”

“Certainly,” replied Attalos. “That fertile valley out there is watered by the Lykos River, which flows westward from here to join the Maeander. You traveled through the valley of the Maeander as you ventured toward Ephesus.”

"Yes, we did," agreed Lucius. "My friend in Apamea explained to me how important the river was to the cities along its banks and showed me some coins on which the river was depicted as a god. My city is also located on a river, but it's really more of a stream that brings water down from the mountains. We have no broad river valleys such as you have here."

"I've not been to your region," Attalos responded, "but I've heard that the terrain becomes more mountainous as one goes eastward. The Lykos valley is just as important to this region as the Maeander is to the lands through which it flows. My city is located about two days' journey in that direction"—he pointed to his left—"in an area that's more like your own: a narrow valley surrounded by low mountains. Perhaps you would consider visiting it on your way home. It's only a day out of your way, and it's well worth your time. Our sculptors are famous throughout the region, and they've nearly finished carving a shrine to the emperors that will be one of the architectural wonders of the world."

"We'll see," said Lucius noncommittally. "We can talk about that later. I don't know my plans right now. But what I really want to hear about are these cliffs. What can you tell me about them?"

"Ah, the cliffs," Attalos echoed. "Yes, everyone wants to know about the cliffs and the springs. That's why people come here, right? I'll tell you what I know. The people who live here say that Apollo created the cliffs when he founded the city, but there are varying stories of how it happened. The springs are said to bubble up from the underworld, where they are heated by the fires of Tartarus. That's another reason why Pluto is included in their annual festival. If you believe those kinds of stories, you need no further explanation from me."

"But you don't believe them?" probed Lucius.

"I'm not saying that they're untrue," replied Attalos cagily. "But I think there are other forces at work here besides the influence of the gods. Have you ever noticed how water pipes can get clogged with hard, stone-like material that grows out from the walls toward the center of the pipe?"

"Certainly," said Lucius. "It's quite common in my city. You see it whenever a pipe breaks open by accident or has to be removed for new construction."

"That's right," affirmed Attalos. "Well, I've heard that the same thing happens here—that the cliffs were formed from water depositing a similar substance onto the cliffs as it flows down to the river. They're made of travertine, you know."

"No, I didn't know," answered Lucius with a look of surprise. "Marcus climbed down and touched it yesterday as we were coming in, but he couldn't tell what it was. We thought that it was some kind of frozen water until he came back and told me that it felt like stone and that the water flowing over it was warm, not cold. But all the travertine that I've ever seen had a smooth surface, similar to marble—it

wasn't rough like these cliffs. And I thought that travertine was always mined from underground."

"Normally it is," observed Attalos. "But it's also extracted from the sides of cliffs on occasion. The stone here, however, is too soft and rough for mining, as you noted. I think this is because it was formed rather recently and hasn't had time to harden. If you were to visit the area over many years as I have, you could actually see the stone growing and hardening as the water flows over it, just as it does in your pipes. That's what you felt on the benches in the pool yesterday—that slimy coating. It's soft now, but one day it will harden into stone."

"Really?" asked Lucius, looking still more surprised. "I didn't know that stones could form out of water. It seems to me that flowing water wears away stones; it doesn't build them up."

"That's true if you're talking about the water in a stream, or a sudden torrent after a rainstorm," explained Attalos. "But the water in hot springs is different. It carries some kind of sediment that settles out as it passes over stony surfaces, like the lees that collect in the bottom of your wine cup. Over time, that sediment hardens into stone. I've heard people say that it's this sedimentary material that gives the water its healing properties, but I'll leave that question to the physicians. Still, I can see how it might help to settle harmful toxins out of the body's fluids so that they can be expelled, whether through the ordinary channels or through procedures like blood-letting. But that's just my own guess as to how it might work."

"That's an interesting theory," observed Lucius. "Are you saying then that one needs to drink it in order to experience its beneficial effects?"

"I know people who swear by that method and force gallons of the stuff down their throats when they're here," Attalos replied. "But I'm not sure that it's necessary. I've known other people who were helped just by sitting in it for long periods of time. Perhaps it can also enter the body through the pores or the body's other orifices. You could try both methods and see what happens."

Lucius paused for a moment, and Marcus guessed from his hesitant expression that he was weighing how to respond. Had Attalos figured out that he had come to Hierapolis for more than just a few days' rest, or was he merely making general observations about the healing powers of the waters? Marcus hoped that his master would confide in his new friend; it would be good for him to have a trustworthy confidant with whom he could share his troubles. He was disappointed but not surprised when Lucius changed the subject.

"How do you know all these things?" asked Lucius. "You speak like someone who has lived here his entire life, yet you tell me that you're from Aphrodisias. You mentioned yesterday that you come here often, and you said a few moments ago that you've been doing so for years. What is it that brings you to Hierapolis

besides the festival? People don't often travel for two days in each direction unless they have a good reason."

Now it was Attalos's turn to hesitate. He peered down at the cliffs for several moments before replying.

"I think you presumed from my presence at the inn that I was a landed aristocrat like yourself," he began at last. "I'm not. I own and manage a sculptor's workshop in Aphrodisias. It's the largest and best-known shop in town—many of the leading citizens come to me when they want to erect honorific statues, whether of gods or men. My sculptors carved a number of the statues for the sanctuary of the emperors that I mentioned earlier, and we're currently doing an image of the divine Nero for the same building. We also make funerary monuments for wealthy aristocrats. I get orders not only from my own city but from all over Anatolia and beyond. I've even received commissions from Rome, including a couple of senators. That's what brings me most often to Hierapolis. You saw the ornate marble tombs that fill the cemetery in front of the city gates; many of them were carved in my shop. My father took orders here before me, and his father before him. So I've been coming to Hierapolis since I was a child."

He paused and glanced at Lucius as if to gauge his response, but his expression was inscrutable. Even Marcus could not make out what he was feeling. Was it anger? Pride? Disgust? Or could it be sympathy, or even amusement?

"I didn't mean to give you a false impression of who I was," he added apologetically, turning his eyes toward the cliffs below. "I knew that the truth would come out if we spent any time together. But I was enjoying the experience of being treated like an equal by a notable aristocrat, and I didn't want it to end. Most men of your class treat me like a lowly craftsman, even though I've never carved a statue in my life. I'm a manager, not a manual laborer, and my ancestors were all free citizens, not slave workmen. My family's business has made me rich enough to live in a house that any aristocrat would envy, and I've been able to give my children the best of everything, including good educations. My hope is that one day people will forget the lowly source of their income and accept them as the ladies and gentlemen that they are. In the meantime, I have to put up with being everybody's client and nobody's friend."

Lucius stared at Attalos for a moment, then placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled.

"I think I understand," he began. "My grandfather came from a family of hard-working farmers in Italy. He enlisted in Augustus's army as a young man and served his twenty years, rising to the rank of centurion along the way. He was mustered out of the army just as Augustus was founding a series of new colonies to control some rebels who lived in the mountains near Pisidia, and he was given a

large tract of land as one of the original citizens of Colonia Caesareia Antiocheia, known more commonly as Antioch-near-Pisidia. It was through his good fortune and hard work, and the efforts of my father after him, that I gained my present station. With my history, I know what it's like to be given the cold shoulder by men who can trace their ancestry back to the aristocrats of ancient Rome. And I, too, long to see my children gain full acceptance among the upper ranks of men."

Marcus was relieved; this was the first time since their departure from Pergamon that Lucius had extended a hand of friendship to another person. He was surprised at his master's choice of companions, but he had no reason to complain. Anything that lifted Lucius out of his melancholy mood was welcome.

"Perhaps, then, you do understand," replied Attalos, returning Lucius's smile. "I'm humbled and gratified that you would entrust me with this information. It takes a truly noble spirit to do such a thing."

"Oh, I'm not as noble as you think," answered Lucius, dropping his arm to his side and averting his eyes. "If we spend much time together, you'll learn that I've been no more honest with you than you have with me. And my dishonesty is the greater because it was done with the intent to deceive."

Marcus held his breath. Was he really going to tell him the whole story?

"I didn't come here just to see the sights or to take a few days' rest from my journey," Lucius said slowly. "Like so many before me, I came here to die."

Lucius paused for a moment to gauge Attalos's response, but the other man showed no reaction other than a slight arching of the eyebrows. His gaze, however, was intent. He wanted to know more, but Marcus could see that he was hesitant to pry into the affairs of one whom he still regarded as his superior.

"Let's sit down and I'll tell you about it," Lucius continued, breaking the silence. "This old body gets weary if I stand for a long time."

Marcus looked around for a place where the two men could sit without soiling their clothes. To his right he saw two low stones facing one another a short distance from the edge of the cliff. He pointed them out to Lucius, who agreed that they would be suitable. Together he and Attalos helped Lucius to waddle over to the spot.

When they were seated, Lucius proceeded to give his new friend a summary of his experience over the last few months, including his visit to the Asklepion and its outcome. His account was selective, but still honest and accurate.

"So you see," he concluded, "I have no illusion that the waters here will cure me. All I ask is that they ease my pain during this final stage of my journey. If they do more for me, I will of course be happy to accept it, but I have no expectations in that direction. I truly expect to end my life here."

"But why here?" probed Attalos. "Why not go back to Antioch and die in the

arms of your wife, surrounded by your friends?”

“I’ve asked myself the same question many times,” replied Lucius. “That’s certainly the course that most people would take. As I’ve thought about it, however, I’ve become convinced that this way is better for everyone. From what the physicians told me at Pergamon, I anticipate that my death will be an ugly affair. My young wife is pregnant with our first child, and I’m afraid that the anxiety and stress of caring for me might cause her to lose the baby. That child, if it’s a boy, will be my heir if anything should happen to my older son, which is not beyond possibility given his penchant for overindulging and making bad choices. My family needs that child.”

Marcus felt unexpectedly confused. Lucius had told him—or at least he thought that he had told him—that the letter that he had sent to Selena included an invitation for her to join him in Hierapolis. Now he was speaking as if he would never see her again. Had he been mistaken about the letter?

“As for my other son,” he continued, “I can see now that I’ve done a poor job of preparing him to take over my household and my businesses when I’m gone. While I’m away, he’s under the supervision of one of my friends who has demonstrated by his own family that he knows how to raise a capable son. The longer my boy Gaius is in his care, the more likely it is that he will be ready to take over when I die. If I return home, on the other hand, it will be up to me to train him, and I’m not sure that I’m capable of doing that in my present condition. At some point I would have to give him full charge over my affairs, and I can’t stand the thought of having to watch him make a mess of everything and being unable to do anything about it. I’d rather not be there at all.”

Attalos, looking grave, nodded his understanding but said nothing.

“Finally,” he concluded, “I don’t want people remembering me as an invalid crying out in pain and wallowing in his own shit, or out of his mind from taking medications intended to dull the pain. It might sound vain, but I want people to remember me the way I was when I left, or better yet, in the full strength of my manhood. I want them to mourn my death as a loss to the community, not as a mercy of the gods to a man who had outlived his usefulness.”

Lucius lowered his eyes when he was done. Attalos turned and stared silently into the distance. Marcus stood beside them, mulling over his master’s words. If Lucius had not made the acquaintance of this stranger, Marcus might never have known why he had decided to end his days so far from friends and family. He had credited it to the melancholic effects of his master’s sickness, which Theodotus had told him to anticipate when they were at the Asklepon. Now he could see that there was more to it than this. Lucius had given the matter thoughtful consideration, and his plan made a certain amount of sense when viewed in the way that he had framed it.

Yet Marcus still felt that something was awry in his master's thinking. He could not escape the feeling that there was something cowardly in his approach, something vain and unmanly. Surely it was not good for him to die alone in a strange place when he could so easily return home and spend his final days under the care of a loving wife and family. And it surely could not be right that a man of his status and accomplishments should pass away unmourned and be buried so far from his native city. Still, who was he to question his master's judgment? What could a slave do when his master's mind was set on a course of action, however foolish? He felt utterly helpless.

"I can see that you've thought a great deal about your situation," said Attalos at last, "and you certainly know more about what is best for you than I do. But I wonder what your family thinks about your plan. Have you told them of your intentions?"

"No," answered Lucius frankly. "And I don't intend to. They would try to change my mind and drag me home if they knew what I was thinking. Marcus can deliver the news to them when I'm gone."

So he had not told Selena of his intentions! What then had he written to her? Had he invited her here at all? Marcus no longer knew what to think.

Attalos was apparently thinking along similar lines. "And what about your wife?" he inquired. "You told me last night that she was young and beautiful and seemed to truly love you, and now you tell me that she's carrying your child. What will she think when she learns that you spent your final days so far from home knowing that you were going to die and never even wrote to tell her goodbye? What will she tell her child about such a father?"

Lucius stared silently at the ground. Marcus waited with bated breath to hear how he would respond.

"Remember," Attalos continued after a few moments, "you don't know how much time the Fates have allotted to you or when your end will come. I see a lot of sick men in my business, and I've known some who lived for months or even years after the physicians had given up on them. What if your child is born while you're sitting here waiting to die? Do you really want to risk missing such a momentous event in the history of your family? And what will happen after it's born? Will your older son acknowledge it, or will he cast it out as a potential rival? I've certainly known that to happen. If nothing else, your child needs your protection."

Lucius's face twisted into a grimace as Attalos was speaking. Marcus half-expected him to lash out in anger at the man's interference and tell him to leave him alone. But he did not. Instead, he buried his face in his hands and wept.

Marcus was shocked by his reaction. The only other time that he had seen his master like this was at the Asklepiion when the god had proved unwilling to heal

him. He froze in place, uncertain what to do. Had they been alone, he might have laid a comforting hand onto his shoulder until his weeping subsided. But after his earlier misstep, he feared that Lucius might think that he was being too forward in front of his friend, so he held back. Attalos stared at him benevolently for a few moments, then turned his gaze toward the valley.

The weeping did not continue for long. Lucius raised the hem of his toga to his face to wipe his eyes and nose, then sat quietly with his head bowed for a while longer. Finally he spoke.

"My friend, you've pricked me in a weak spot," he began. "But I don't hold it against you; the wounds of a friend heal quickly, and you've spoken with my best interest at heart."

Attalos smiled and placed a hand on Lucius's knee.

"I honestly had not thought clearly about some of the points that you raised," Lucius continued, "and I'm grateful to you for raising them, even if you did frame them in rather stark terms. I don't know if your arguments outweigh my own, but I promise to think about them."

"That's all that a friend can ask," replied Attalos, patting Lucius's knee. "Let's leave it there."

Lucius laid his hand over that of Attalos and squeezed it. The two men sat together, hand on hand, staring into the distant valley. At last Attalos broke the silence.

"I'm getting chilly sitting here," he announced in a casual voice. "Those pools down there are quite warm. Why don't we stroll down to one of them and dip our legs in? Ever since childhood I've enjoyed sitting there on the side of a pool and warming my feet while imagining what was happening in the valley below. What do you say? There's a fairly smooth path leading down to the one closest to us, and Marcus and I can support you if your legs feel unstable."

"That sounds like a good idea to me," said Lucius with a smile. "I fear that my ass is starting to freeze to this rock. Marcus, help me up."

Marcus bent down and seized one of Lucius's arms while Attalos took the other. Together they lifted him into a standing position, then held him for a moment while his legs adjusted to the weight. He placed a hand on his abdomen and grimaced briefly, then brightened.

"Lead on!" he said in a cheerful voice like that of a child embarking on an adventure. Marcus felt relieved as they made their way down toward the pool. The darkness had lifted for the time being, but he doubted that it would stay away for long. Still, the healing waters might do his master some good, and he might even get a chance to enjoy them himself.

ATTALOS served as Lucius's guide and companion for the rest of that day and the next one, which was the day before the festival. Attalos had brought no servants with him from Aphrodisias, so Marcus ended up tending to both men. He did not mind the extra work, but he did think it rather odd that a man of Attalos's self-described wealth would travel alone. Lucius, too, noticed the disparity and asked him about it as they were going to the baths that afternoon.

"I have an assistant like Marcus who normally accompanies me on business trips to help with the orders," Attalos explained, "and often I'll bring one of my sculptors with me as well to answer technical questions about what can and cannot be carved onto a monument and how long the work might take. But my assistant came down with some kind of illness a few days before I was scheduled to come here—nothing serious, but enough to keep him at home—and my wife insisted that she couldn't do without a single one of her household slaves for the time I would be away. She's always complaining about not having enough help at home, and I think this was her way of making a point. As for my shop workers, they're all busy right now with jobs that have deadlines, even my humblest slaves."

"I thought about not coming," he went on, "but I've attended this festival every year since I was a boy, as my father and grandfather did before me, and I didn't think it proper to stay home simply because I would have to travel without accompaniment. My family takes this festival very seriously, as it's one of the only times when you'll find a city making public offerings to the lord of the dead. As you may know, he's the patron deity of funerary sculptors. If it weren't for him, we'd have no business."

Attalos winked as he uttered the final line. Marcus couldn't tell if he was speaking seriously or in jest, but Lucius apparently took him at his word. "I didn't realize that, but it makes sense," he said. "But how did you get here?"

"I hired a carriage," he replied. "I've got another one reserved to take me home after the festival. That's the only way to be sure of getting one at that time, since everybody wants to leave at once."

"And when will that be?" asked Lucius. "How long do we have the pleasure of your company?"

"The festival lasts three days, and I made plans to stay two days longer in case I should run into anyone who wants to talk with me about doing work for them," answered Attalos. "That often happens once people hear who I am; my shop is well-known here in Hierapolis. I didn't have any meetings lined up when I came, but I'm sure to have some before I leave."

"While we're on the subject," remarked Lucius nonchalantly, "I was thinking

that I should talk with you at some point about carving a tomb for me.”

So he's gone back to that, thought Marcus. He's still planning to die here.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he continued. “I’ve not forgotten my promise to consider what you said to me yesterday. But I’m going to die soon, whether here or in Antioch, and I’ll need a suitable monument for my ashes. The fame of Aphrodisian sculpture has reached my city—in fact, I thought about having a statue carved there earlier this year until I realized how hard it would be to supervise the work from such a distance. But if we could agree on a design before you leave, you could start working on it now and have it ready when I need it. I was already thinking that I would have Marcus investigate how one orders such a thing here in Hierapolis, and this chance meeting with you will save me the trouble.”

“I certainly wouldn’t refuse an order,” replied Attalos with a smile, “but it will be hard to talk about designs without my assistant present. Still, we could take a stroll through the cemetery and you could tell me what you like there, and then I could send you a drawing later to review. But unless you take a sudden turn for the worse, I’ll make plans to deliver it to Antioch, not Hierapolis.”

“And I’ll make sure that your devotion to Pluto is amply rewarded,” replied Lucius. “After all, he’s the god of wealth as well as the underworld.”

Both men laughed and the conversation turned to other matters. Marcus noticed that Lucius had ignored Attalos’s final stipulation and Attalos had apparently decided not to push him. What Lucius was thinking at this point was impossible to say.

Before lying down for a nap that afternoon, Lucius sent Marcus to order a litter to carry him and Attalos to the cemetery the next morning, as it was too far for him to walk. The streets were teeming by now with travelers arriving for the festival. The gate area was especially chaotic as the hordes flooding into the city collided with another stream flowing in the opposite direction toward the commercial forum where vendors were already setting up their booths and hawking their wares.

As Marcus neared the entryway to the forum, a burst of angry shouting arose a few feet to his right. Before he knew it, a melee had broken out. He couldn’t see what was going on, nor did he care to find out; he only wanted to get away so that he could continue on his journey. The street was so packed with people, however, that there was no place for him to go.

As the mob shoved him this way and that, he stumbled over something soft, then heard a female voice screaming at his feet. He glanced down and saw a young woman curled up on the street, evidently bowled over in the commotion. Several quick thrusts of his elbows opened a gap in the crowd just long enough for him to seize her by the arm and pull her to her feet. She grasped his elbow with both hands and clung to him as he shoved his way toward the curb.

At last they stumbled into a small food stand on the side of the road across from the forum, where Marcus was surprised to see a table sitting empty as if waiting for them. He led the girl to a seat and sat down across from her.

"We'd better wait here until the market guards come and put a stop to that brawl," he said.

"That sounds like a good idea," agreed the girl.

The two of them surveyed one another in a succession of awkward glances. The girl looked to be a couple of years younger than Marcus, while her plain tunic and unkempt hair revealed her to be a slave. She was no beauty—few slave girls were—but her sparkling green eyes, pointed chin, and thinly set lips give her a certain impish attractiveness. She was small and wiry, but not sickly—her ruddy cheeks suggested that she worked in a house where the slaves were well-fed. Her only adornment was a narrow leather strap that she wore around her neck, the kind that might have held an amulet or a small bauble of some sort. If there was anything on it, it lay hidden inside the neckline of her tunic.

"I'm grateful to you for rescuing me from that mob," she said, breaking the silence. "I was afraid that I was going to be crushed to death before I could get up. I've seen it happen."

"I'm sorry that I didn't notice you sooner," replied Marcus. "I didn't know you were there until I stepped on you. I hope I didn't hurt you; I pulled you up as soon as I could. I've never felt so trapped in a crowd. Were you injured?"

"I don't think so," she said, glancing quickly over the visible parts of her body. "Just a few cuts and bruises."

As she lifted her arm, Marcus noticed streaks of blood on the back where she could not see. "I'll be right back," he said, standing and peering around for a rag to wipe the blood away. His eye lighted on a small piece of cloth lying on the counter near the proprietor. He stepped over and paid the man for a bowl of olives and two cups of wine, then asked if he could borrow the cloth for a moment. The man agreed—"anything for a paying customer," he said—and Marcus hurried back to the table and swiped it over the girl's arm. The cloth was damp and the blood came off easily.

"Check again and see if there are any more scrapes that you missed," ordered Marcus. The girl did a second inspection and found a few more spots that required attention, then wiped off some of the dirt that she had picked up while sprawled on the ground.

"Thank you," said the girl. "You're very kind. My name is Miriam. What's yours?"

"I'm Marcus," he replied. "I'm visiting with my master. We're on our way from Pergamon to our home city of Antioch-near-Pisidia."

"Where's that?" she asked.

Marcus tried to explain, but he saw quickly that she had no sense of geography. Most likely she had never traveled much beyond the gates of Hierapolis.

"Never mind," said Miriam, cutting him off. "How long will you be here?"

Marcus paused for a moment before responding. He liked the girl, and he didn't want to tell her an untruth that might come back to haunt him later.

"I really don't know," he answered at last. "My master is ill, and we're hoping that the waters here will cure him. But the gods alone know what the future holds. I just do what I'm told."

"And what sort of things does he tell you to do?" asked Miriam. Her warm, almost flirtatious smile gave him a sudden urge to impress her.

"When we're traveling," he began, "I manage everything except for the animals. I organize my master's housing and meals at every place we stop; I keep track of his clothing and other personal goods; I buy whatever he needs at the market; I write his letters; I read to him when he's tired..."

"So you can read and write?" interrupted Miriam with a look of surprise.

"Certainly," replied Marcus, glowing with pride. "My master is an important man in his home city—he recently served as agoranomos—and I'm his personal assistant. I manage his account books; I sit with him in the morning when he's receiving clients and aid those whom he deems worthy; I handle all of his correspondence; I accompany him when he visits his friends; I take notes during his conversations. He's told me many times that he couldn't get along without me."

"I'm surprised that your master would delegate all of those duties to a single slave," said Miriam in a tone that suggested she was unsure whether to believe him. "I'm a nobody next to you."

"And what do you do?" inquired Marcus. "I'm assuming that you live here in Hierapolis. Where is your home, and what is your master like?"

He wanted to ask her about her master's status as well, but he held his tongue. He didn't want her to feel like he was prying, and he was afraid that he might have already gone too far in vaunting his own position. The information would come out eventually.

"Right now I'm just a lowly house slave who does whatever she's told," she began. "But I've only been in my present position for a few months. Before that I was the handmaid of a wealthy woman whose husband was a leading citizen in Philadelphia. I'm not sure which direction that is from here, but it took us a couple of days to get here."

"We passed through it on our way here from Pergamon," remarked Marcus. "It looked like a pleasant place to live."

"It was," replied Miriam. "I spent my whole life there until last spring. I miss the city and my friends there very much. But I don't miss my master."

"Why not?" queried Marcus, though he could guess the answer. Half of the slaves that he knew hated their masters, and some of their masters were so unreasonable and harsh as to arouse animosity in even the best of slaves. But he also knew many slaves who had brought suffering upon their own heads by their lazy or insolent behavior. If only they would dedicate themselves to pleasing their masters or mistresses at all times, things would surely go better for them. Did not his own experience show the validity of this conviction?

"I—I don't want to talk about it right now," Miriam stammered, glancing around as if seeking a means of escape. "I need to get to the market and go home. The cook will be waiting on me."

"Just tell her what happened," replied Marcus soothingly. "If she's at all reasonable, she will understand. You can show her your scrapes if she doesn't believe you."

"Perhaps," she replied. "But if I don't get back soon with the things that she needs for tonight's dinner, she'll blame me when the master complains about his meal being late. I don't want him hearing any bad reports about me. He was kind enough to take me in when I needed a home, and I don't want to disappoint him."

"So he didn't buy you directly from your previous master?" asked Marcus, sensing a story.

"I said that I don't want to talk about it," huffed Miriam as she rose suddenly from her seat. "I have to go."

"Hold on," said Marcus, standing and seizing her arm. "You didn't tell me where you live. If I'm going to be staying in your city, it would be nice to see you again. I don't know anyone here, and I'm feeling lonely. It would be good to have a friend."

Miriam hesitated. "I promise that I won't ask about your past," added Marcus gently. "You can tell me about it when you're ready, or not at all; it's up to you."

Miriam stared at him for a moment, then relented. "What do you know about the layout of the city?" she asked.

"Not much," answered Marcus, feeling relieved. "I know the buildings on the main street as far as the civic forum, and I know how to get to the baths above the cliffs—my master is staying at an inn over in that area. That's all I know. But I'm good with directions."

"We'll see about that," replied Miriam with a sly grin. "Our house lies beyond the forum on the uphill side of the street, and you have to make several turns to get there. For someone who doesn't know the city, it's not easy to find."

"I'll do my best," smiled Marcus, "and I can always ask for directions if I get lost."

"You could certainly do that if you can find your way to our neighborhood," answered Miriam. "Everyone there knows my master; he's an important man in our community. His name is Chrysippus Valerius Antias."

Marcus stared at her, his mouth agape. "Could you say that name again?" he asked after a pause.

"I said his name is Chrysippus Valerius Antias," she answered. "Why do you ask? Do you know the name?"

"You won't believe this," began Marcus, "but I think that your master is the brother of a man with whom we stayed in Pergamon! Does he have a brother named Demetrius?"

Miriam pursed her brow for a moment before answering. "I think he does," she replied at last. "I know that he has a brother in Pergamon, but I've not been in the house long enough to know much about his family. But if his name is Valerius Antias, they have to be related, don't they?"

Thoughts flooded into Marcus's mind so fast that he had trouble thinking clearly for a moment. What was the likelihood that this young woman whom he had met by chance in the street would turn out to be a slave in the home of the very man with whom he had thought they would be staying in Hierapolis? And she was such an interesting girl, too; surely some god must have caused their paths to cross. Already he liked Miriam more than any girl that he had met on their journey, and he might have been living in the same house with her if his master had not insisted on taking a room at the inn. That door was closed for now, however, unless he were to change his mind about avoiding contact with anyone who might ask too many questions about his travels. Perhaps his friendship with Attalos would motivate Lucius to seek out similar companions once Attalos left for home. If so, it would be quite natural for Marcus to suggest that they visit the home of Chrysippus Valerius Antias. He would certainly enjoy spending more time with this intriguing young woman.

"Demetrius Valerius Antias was the last man we saw when we left Pergamon," explained Marcus. "Before we left, he gave my master a letter recommending him to his brother in Hierapolis, who appears to be your master. He insisted that we stay at your house while we were in Hierapolis, and I thought that was where we were going until my master told me that he had decided to stay at the inn."

"What an odd coincidence!" exclaimed Miriam, her eyes glistening with excitement. "It sounds like we were destined to meet. Now I'll have to give you directions to our house so that your master can find his way there when he comes to visit."

Marcus was silent for a moment, wondering how much he should tell her. Knowing that anything he said would be sure to reach the ears of her master, he decided to err on the side of caution.

"That would be good," he said at last. "But I have a better idea. I was on my way to the stable to reserve a litter for my master, and I was planning to stop by

the market on my way back to pick up a few things that he needs. What if I were to meet you there when we're both done and follow you home so that I can be sure not to get lost?"

"That sounds good to me," replied Miriam, "but I doubt that we'd be able to find each other with so many people milling about. What if we meet back here?"

"Let's do that," agreed Marcus. "But the crowds will surely be worse by then. Are you certain that you can make it back across the street on your own?"

"Just because I lost my footing once doesn't mean I'm helpless," teased Miriam. "I might not be big, but I'm feisty." She raised her fists like a boxer and made a few playful jabs toward him. They shared a laugh, then walked together toward the doorway.

When they reached the street, Marcus paused and scanned the mass of bodies. He wondered if even he could make it to the other side of the busy street without getting roughed up in the process. He certainly could not allow Miriam to attempt the crossing on her own.

"Miriam, let me help you..." he began, turning to look down at her. To his surprise, the space beside him was empty. He glanced back at the table where they had been sitting in case she had gone to retrieve something, but she was nowhere to be seen. A sudden wave of panic swept over him; she must be out there in the street! He scanned the crowd in an effort to find her, but he was too short to see very far. Thinking fast, he seized a chair from a nearby table and stood on it. Still he saw no sign of her. He was just about to dive into the crowd and scour the pavement for her when his eye caught a hand waving from across the street. There, standing on the base of one of the pillars that framed the covered sidewalk, was Miriam! A broad grin filled her face as she waved to show him that she had made it.

For a moment he stood and stared at her, dumbfounded. Then he smiled and waved back at her. She raised both arms in a gesture of victory before disappearing into the crowd.

Marcus went on with his duties, but his thoughts kept returning to Miriam. He felt a momentary thrill when he found her waiting for him at the food stand as they had agreed. They jested briefly about her adroitness in crossing the busy street and his misplaced fears for her safety before joining the flow of pedestrians heading from the gate toward the center of the city. They chatted all the way to her house.

Marcus was so intent on Miriam's presence that he paid little attention to where they were going, even when she made a point of highlighting the various turns that were required to reach their destination. He felt like a fool when she asked him to repeat the directions back to her as they were standing in front of the door.

"I guess we'll just have to meet somewhere tomorrow and go over it all again," observed Marcus with an impish smile.

"I guess we will," echoed Miriam, mimicking his expression.

"It might take more than one try," said Marcus teasingly. "I'm a slow learner."

"You're not!" she laughed. "You said earlier that you were good with directions." Her face lit up as she spoke. Marcus had never seen such a winsome smile.

"Not when I'm distracted," he replied coyly.

"Then I'll try not to distract you next time," she replied.

The two of them bantered back and forth for a few moments more until Miriam insisted that she had to go in before the cook decided to flay her alive and serve her carcass for dinner. They made plans to meet on the following day at the same time and place. Miriam warned him that she might not be able to go out at that time, but Marcus assured her that her mistress would allow it if she simply told the truth: she had met a slave who belonged to a friend of her master's brother and she was going to show him the way to the house so that he could pay her master a visit. Miriam was less certain about this strategy, but she agreed to try it if no better ideas came to mind.

Marcus whistled all the way back to the inn. It was not difficult to find his way; all that he had to do was keep the mountains at his back and the valley in front of him until he crossed the main street, then turn toward the setting sun and continue until he passed the forum and arrived at the inn.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs that led up to Lucius's room, he thought that he heard his master's voice calling out to him. Anxious, he dashed up the steps two at a time and threw open the door. What he saw appalled him. Lucius lay in the middle of the floor clutching his abdomen with both hands and groaning as if in agony. Beside him sat a chamber pot filled with liquid excrement. A quick survey of the scene suggested that he had been struck by an attack of abdominal pain while emptying his bowels, leaving him unable to rise on his own.

"Master!" shouted Marcus as he rushed into the room. "Here I am! I'm sorry that I wasn't here to help you—I got tied up in the crowd. But I'm here now."

Lucius gave an inarticulate reply. Marcus rushed to the small chest where he kept his master's medicine and pulled out a vial of poppy extract, then knelt beside him and pressed the bottle to his lips. Lucius brushed it away at first, but he took some after Marcus explained what it was. Then Marcus began vigorously massaging his shoulders and neck. He had learned from experience that it was easier to move him after his body was relaxed and his mind distracted than to lift him immediately into bed.

For a while Lucius continued to clutch his abdomen, but at last his hands fell to the floor beside him. Marcus knew that he had only a short time to act before his

master fell into a deep sleep and became impossible to move. He hauled him into a sitting position, then slung an arm under each of his shoulders and raised him to his feet while simultaneously coaxing him to support his weight. Lucius was slow to comprehend what he wanted, but Marcus finally succeeded in shuffling him across the room to his bed, where he quickly fell into a deep sleep.

Marcus walked out to the balcony and peered into the gathering darkness. Part of him felt guilty at having been away for so long while another part countered that he was only following orders and had no way of knowing that his master would suffer such an attack while he was gone. It had been nearly a week since Lucius had experienced anything like this, and he had said nothing that day that might have suggested that an attack was imminent—nothing more than the usual complaints about belly-aches and weariness that were by now a normal part of their routine.

He wondered if there was anything that he could do in the days ahead to limit the likelihood of such an incident recurring. It was impossible for him to stay by his master's side every moment on the chance that he might suffer another bout of crippling pain. He had to go out now and then to do things like buying food and arranging transportation for his master. But he could curtail any absences that were not absolutely vital. That included the meeting that he had scheduled with Miriam on the following day.

The realization that he might not see Miriam again for a while saddened him, but there was little that he could do about it; his master's needs had to come first. Miriam would of course understand once she heard, but he would have to figure out a way to inform her about his situation. Perhaps he could find someone to deliver a note to her in the morning. He wondered how he could do that when he could not remember how to get to her house, but he would think of something. He would not allow her to believe that he had simply abandoned her.

CHAPTER 3

LUCIUS FELT BETTER the next morning, but he was ravenous from having missed his evening meal. As usual he complained about having to eat the same bland food every morning, and as usual Marcus was ready with his reply. “Eating properly might not cure you,” he observed, “but eating badly will definitely make things worse.” Lucius frowned and snorted, then let the subject drop.

While his master was eating, Marcus told him about the events of the previous evening. Lucius was annoyed at first, but his attitude softened as he listened to Marcus’s report.

“I can understand your interest in the girl,” he remarked when Marcus was done. “I’ve always said that slaves need a chance to enjoy themselves, too, especially healthy young men like you. But I can’t have you going off and leaving me unattended so that you can see her.”

“That wasn’t my intention, sir,” replied Marcus. “Last night was an accident. I would never leave you here alone without your permission. Guarding your health is my highest concern.”

“I know it is, Marcus, and I appreciate that,” answered Lucius approvingly. “But I need some time to consider the situation. Perhaps you could go out when Attalos is with me, or I could hire one of the innkeeper’s boys to sit with me for a while. Let me think on it.”

Marcus had hoped to tell him about his plans to visit Miriam that evening, but he knew that when his master said, “Let me think on it,” the conversation was over. He was thus surprised when he returned to the subject as Marcus was removing the remains of the meal.

“You said that that girl belongs to Valerius’s brother—is that right?” He knitted his brows as if pondering a weighty matter.

“It is, sir,” replied Marcus curtly.

“And you met the man?” probed Lucius.

“No, sir,” answered Marcus. “I only walked her to the door. Miriam wanted to tell him about your connection to his brother, but I wouldn’t allow it since you had told me that you didn’t want him to know that you were in town. I didn’t put it that way to her—I just told her that I didn’t know your plans and that I was not authorized to speak for you at the moment. I hope I didn’t act wrongly. I did the best that I could in an awkward situation.”

“Well, you did put me in a bind,” said Lucius, his face somber. “She’s a woman, and women can’t keep their mouths shut. She’s sure to let slip that I’m here, and then I’ll have to pay him a visit or he will think ill of me. I wish you hadn’t met that girl, or at least that you hadn’t mentioned my name.”

"I understand, sir," said Marcus sheepishly. "I didn't mean to cause you any trouble."

"I know you didn't," observed Lucius, "and I don't hold it against you. It's just awkward, that's all. Now finish cleaning up while I take a rest before our visit to the cemetery."

The litters arrived as scheduled, and soon Marcus was clearing a path for Lucius and Attalos through the city streets. He did not like this job—it was not in his nature to push people out of the way when they were simply going about their business—but he could do it if necessary. Fortunately, it was early enough that the streets were not overly crowded, and they were able to make their way to the gate without much interference.

At the cemetery, Lucius and Attalos spent a couple of hours wandering among the tombs and observing the various designs. The tombs came in all shapes and sizes—some were little more than undecorated stone boxes while others were huge vertical slabs carved with ornate patterns and images of the dead that reflected the owner's status. Still others were mounds of earth in the shape of a barrow or dome, a style that Marcus had never seen before. A few were ensconced in marble-clad sepulchres that resembled miniature houses or temples. Most were marked with inscriptions, some rather long, but some contained no visible markings.

Lucius had to stop often and rest, but the tombs were close enough together that they could sit on the edge of one and study the carvings on several others without getting up. Marcus took notes onto his wax tablets as best he could, but he was no artist, and Attalos frequently had to take the stylus from his hand to improve on one of his drawings or record some feature that Lucius especially liked. By the time they were done, Marcus had several tablets full of material for his master to examine.

The litter-bearers lounged under a nearby tree while Lucius and Attalos were pursuing their investigation, and they were ready to carry the men back to the inn as soon as they were done. The road leading into the city was quite congested by now, and Marcus occasionally had to resort to brute force to open a path through the crowd. In the gate area, where the congestion was especially bad, he was aided by the two front litter-bearers who added their voices to his in an effort to be heard above the cacophony of people and animals striving to enter the city. Marcus was exhausted by the time they reached the inn.

That afternoon Lucius and Attalos relaxed at the baths. Marcus had not had a moment all day to consider how best to get a message to Miriam, and the question lay heavily on his mind as he attended to the two men during their peregrinations through the facility. As he lowered his master into the warm, murky waters for the third time, Lucius turned his head toward him and spoke.

"Marcus, I think I'll be safe here for a while," he said. "Attalos is with me, and there are plenty of other men who can assist me if I should need help getting around. This is as good a time as any for you to go and see if you can find that lady friend of yours."

"Really?" asked Marcus, hardly believing his luck. "I can go now?"

Lucius nodded and smiled. "Don't be gone for more than an hour, though," he added. "I ought to be well baked by then."

"Yes, sir!" replied Marcus with a broad grin. He laid Lucius's towel gently onto the marble floor beside his head, then rushed toward the exit.

Once outside, he stood for a long moment considering how he might find his way to Miriam's house. He knew that he needed to walk up to the main street and turn right, and he thought that he might recognize the corner where they had made their first turn. After that, however, everything was a jumble. He could ask around in hopes of finding someone who knew where her master lived, but he was not at all sure that the man was as well-known as some of their other hosts had been, and he feared that the effort would prove fruitless.

After careful deliberation, he decided that his best option was to go as far as his memory would carry him and then start looking for someone to guide him. Miriam had said that her master was highly regarded in his own community, so it seemed reasonable to think that he might find someone who could help him once he was closer to the man's house.

He soon discovered that he had been right in thinking that he would recognize the first turn. As he approached the corner, he recalled how Miriam had pointed out that the road lined up precisely with one of the peaks on the low ridge that ran behind the city. The street climbed gradually at first, but it grew markedly steeper as it approached the base of the hill. He didn't remember making such a steep ascent, so he turned onto a street to his right before reaching that point.

The latter road led him into a residential district where he discovered to his dismay that all of the buildings looked alike, or enough alike that there was little to distinguish one from another. He had seen similar neighborhoods in every city that they had visited, and now they blurred together in his mind. He wandered past three or four intersections looking for something familiar, but nothing pricked his memory. Then he saw it—a piece of graffiti on the wall of one of the houses that had made him smile the first time he passed it. It read, "Floronius screwed six women here, too few for such a stallion." His attention had been so riveted on Miriam at the time that he had failed to notice that the building was a brothel until his eye lighted on the message. The scantily clad women who had lingered outside its door yesterday were there again today, but he had no time to dally.

As he continued down the street, another familiar sight caught his eye—a small corner fountain where he and Miriam had paused for a drink. He recognized it by the carved Gorgon's head whose mouth served as the conduit for the water that dribbled into the rectangular basin. He recalled feeling unnerved by the frightful face and wondering if it had been put there to keep children from playing in the water. Whatever its purpose, he was glad that the builders had selected such a memorable image.

Staring at the fountain, he thought that he remembered turning left after stopping for a drink, so he walked in that direction. He followed this new road through a couple of intersections until it began to climb. He still did not recall making any ascents with Miriam, so he figured that he ought to turn. But which way? He was baffled—nothing around him looked familiar. He spun slowly around in a circle in the middle of the road looking for something that might indicate the proper direction. As he completed his second turn, an old woman who had been watching him from a nearby doorway called out to him.

"What's the matter, young man?" she inquired in a thin, croaking voice. "You look lost. Can I help you find something?"

Marcus turned to see where the voice was coming from. The woman waved to catch his eye. He walked over to her and gave her a warm smile.

"Yes, mother, I hope you can," he replied. "I was here yesterday with a young slave girl who lives in this area, but now I can't find her house. Her name is Miriam, and she belongs to a man named Chrysippus Valerius Antius. She said that he was well-known in his neighborhood. Do you know where he lives?"

"Ah, a young man in love," teased the woman. Marcus blushed as if to confirm her suspicion. The woman smiled. "Yep, I know Miriam. She's a sweet girl—she brings me tidbits from her master's table now an' then as she passes by my corner. My master's a stingy brute who says that a slave who's too old an' sick to work shouldn't need much to eat. If not for her, I'd probably starve."

"I'm happy to hear that she's been helping you," replied Marcus. "That sounds like the Miriam that I know. Can you tell me how to get to her house?"

"Is she expectin' you?" asked the woman, turning suddenly suspicious. "I wouldn't want to go helpin' any young man that she's tryin' to avoid."

Marcus told her quickly about their plans to meet later that day and his inability to appear at the time that they had scheduled. When he was done, the woman nodded her approval.

"You sound like a well-bred young man," she observed. "An' obedient, too. I can see why the girl might like you. I wish I was still young like her. All the boys liked me back then. They used to come..."

Marcus interrupted her. "I'm sure that you were quite the beauty in your day,"

he said, “and I’d be happy to hear about it some other day. But right now I don’t have much time. Can you direct me to Miriam’s house?”

“I can point you in the right direction,” said the woman with a hint of irritation. “But I can’t tell you the exact house, as I’ve never been there myself. Go up to that next street”—she pointed to Marcus’s right—“an’ turn left. She told me that she lives a little ways up that road. I’m sure you can find someone up there that knows the house.”

Marcus thanked her and dropped a couple of coins into her hand, then rushed off in the direction that she had pointed. At the corner he found a young boy who was willing to guide him to the house in exchange for another small coin. Soon he was knocking on the door.

“I’d like to see a girl named Miriam,” he said when the porter appeared and asked his business.

“Miriam’s busy,” answered the man gruffly. He was a bear of a man, more than six feet tall and barrel-chested. He looked as if he might have been a wrestler or even a gladiator before the years caught up with him. He was exactly the kind of intimidating figure that many aristocrats liked to have guarding their doors. Marcus could tell immediately that it would be a mistake to trifle with him.

“Can you please ask her to come to the door for a moment?” pleaded Marcus. “I was supposed to meet her this evening and I need to tell her that I can’t make it.” He held out a coin and the man took it.

“I’ll give her a message if you like,” replied the porter. “But slaves in this household aren’t allowed to have visitors when they’re workin’”

Marcus held out another coin. “Couldn’t you bring her out long enough for me to tell her what’s happened and make other plans? I’ll be quick; no one will know.”

The man took the coin and stared blankly at it for a moment as if seeking an answer from the face of the emperor on its side. “I dunno; I’m not supposed to let anybody in without...”

“But I’m not asking to come in,” interrupted Marcus. “We’ll stay right here in front of the door. You can stand guard if you like. I just need to see her for a moment.” Marcus pulled a third coin from his pouch and laid it in the man’s palm. He had never paid so dearly for a girl, even at the brothel.

The man peered at his hand, then back at Marcus. “You must really like that girl,” he remarked. “Gimme a moment an’ I’ll see if I can sneak her out.”

The man closed the door. Marcus waited and waited. After a while he began to wonder if the man had played him for a fool, taking his money and then hiding behind the door until he left. He grew impatient; he would have to leave soon or he would miss the deadline that his master had set for him. He was about to knock again when the door opened and the porter stepped into the doorway and placed

his meaty hands against the doorframes, blocking the entryway. Marcus knew better than to challenge him, but he could not leave without either seeing Miriam or getting his money back. Just as he was opening his mouth to speak, Miriam squeezed out under the big man's arm.

"Here she is," said the porter in a low voice. "I'm takin' a big risk here, so you'd better keep it short like you said you would. I'm gonna shut the door so nobody gets suspicious. I'll open it again when your time is up."

Marcus nodded and the door closed behind Miriam. Now that he was with her, he felt as if his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. All that he could do was stand and admire her. Miriam observed his awkwardness and rescued him by speaking first.

"What a surprise!" she exclaimed. "I didn't expect to see you until later."

"That's why I came," replied Marcus, his wits slowly returning. "I can't meet you as we planned, and I didn't want you thinking that I had abandoned you." He gave her a brief summary of all that had transpired since their last visit.

"It's very thoughtful of you to come and tell me this," said Miriam with a smile. "As I said when you rescued me, you're a gentleman in slave's clothing."

Marcus blushed at the compliment. "I'm not as good as you think," he parried, "but I certainly don't mind you thinking well of me. I—I think well of you also."

Marcus winced at his own awkwardness. He had always been uncomfortable talking with girls whom he liked. He knew how to get them into bed, but he knew little about what it took to win one of them as a lover. In fact, he had rarely known anyone who interested him in that way. But Miriam was different. He could not have said what it was that attracted him to her, but it was there, and he meant to pursue it.

"So how did you find your way here?" asked Miriam, ignoring his hesitation. "You told me that you had a good memory for directions, but I didn't think that you were paying much attention when we came here earlier."

Marcus explained how he had remembered various landmarks and how he had gotten help from an old woman and a young boy.

"That must have been Damaris," observed Miriam. "She's a good old woman, but her master treats her badly. I bring her food and she tells me stories about when she was young. I don't think she has anybody else who will listen to her."

"She started to do the same with me, but I had to cut her off," replied Marcus. "I was searching for your house and I didn't have time for anything else. But I'd be happy to go with you some time and talk with her if you enjoy her presence so much."

"That would be nice," said Miriam. "But I don't know how we could arrange it, since I don't often know in advance when I'll be leaving the house."

Marcus's face fell. "Does that mean that we can't make plans to see one another now and then? How were you going to do it this afternoon?"

"I wasn't sure," replied Miriam. "The cook always needs something from the market when she's making dinner, and I had thought that I might linger around the kitchen when she was working and see if there was anything that I could get for her. But there's no need for that now."

"What about tonight?" probed Marcus, unwilling to let the idea die. "Could you slip out after your work is done? I might be able to persuade my master to let me go out when he goes to bed, after I've tended to all of his needs. He normally sleeps quite soundly through the first part of the night. I could come and get you so you wouldn't have to go out alone."

"I don't think tonight would work," said Miriam after a moment's thought. "Even if I were able to get out, I don't see how I could let you know. But tomorrow night might be possible. Since you stayed with my master's brother in Pergamon, you probably know that their family is Jewish and that Jews rest on the Sabbath. The Sabbath begins at sunset tomorrow, and none of us is allowed to do any work until sunset the following day. As a result, we have that time to ourselves. It's not unusual for some of us to go out for a walk after dinner, though we normally travel in a group for safety's sake. But if you were able to come and get me, that should suffice. I've known other girls to do it."

"I'll talk with my master and see if I can arrange it," said Marcus eagerly. "We'll be spending tomorrow at the festival, and his friend Attalos will be with us. I'm sure that I can find some time when I can get away and tell you what he says, even if I have to leave a message with that wretched doorkeeper."

"Oh, he's not so bad once you get to know him," explained Miriam. "And he's great company when we're out on the street. No one bothers us when he's around."

"Then it's settled," said Marcus in a resolute tone. "I'll get a message to you tomorrow, and if all goes well, I'll meet you here in the evening after my master is in bed. Now I need to go. He told me to be back in an hour, and I'm sure it's been longer than that already."

The door opened as he uttered these words. The timing was so precise that he wondered if the porter had been listening to their conversation. It mattered little; they weren't plotting anything that her master would disapprove, at least as far as he knew. But he did regret his last disparaging remark about the man. He hoped that it would not come back to haunt him.

"Until tomorrow," Miriam replied, reaching out and giving his hand a quick squeeze before turning and darting inside. Marcus savored her touch all the way back to the inn.

THE next day marked the beginning of the festival. Attalos had told Lucius a little about it while they were at the baths, but he insisted that it would be easier to explain things as they transpired. There would of course be the usual panoply of processions, prayers, and sacrifices, but Attalos had also hinted about some unusual activities associated with the temple of Pluto and the priests of Cybele. Lucius had prodded his friend for more information, but Attalos had merely smiled enigmatically. "You'll see soon enough," he had assured him. "Be patient."

Now that time had come. Lucius arose early as always to pay tribute to his household gods, then ate a light breakfast. He would have liked to eat more, but Marcus persuaded him that it would be better to eat lightly throughout the day so as to limit the likelihood of having stomach problems on a day when the crowds would make it hard for him to reach a latrine. Marcus promised to carry an ample supply of food with them to the festival, along with some kind of vessel that could be used as a bedpan in case of emergency.

Attalos came to get them around the second hour. He had warned Lucius the previous day that they would need to leave early in order to get a seat in the bleachers that had been erected in the temple square for the leading citizens of the city and their friends. Attalos was no dignitary, but his workshop had done carvings for many of the principal families of the city, and he was as ready as anyone to take advantage of these connections. Knowing that Lucius could not stand through the entire ceremony, he had approached one of his wealthy acquaintances at the baths and explained his friend's situation. The man had agreed to hold seats for Attalos, Lucius, and Marcus, whom Attalos had described as Lucius's caretaker, as long as they arrived before all of the seats were taken. If they came too late, he could do nothing for them.

The streets around the inn were relatively empty at this hour, as there were few houses nearby and the baths were closed for the festival. The main street, by contrast, was already congested with festival-goers hoping to reach the square in time to snag a good viewing spot. The temple complex was only a few blocks away, but Lucius was hesitant to enter the throng with his unsteady gait. Seeing his anxiety, Attalos offered to take his arm so that Marcus could walk ahead of them and clear a path. Marcus knew better than to expect the crowd to part for an inexperienced crier like himself, but he could use his body to ward off anyone who got too close to his master.

The crowd moved slowly but steadily until they neared the end of the forum, where it came to a virtual halt. Marcus was too short to see over the heads of the people around him, but he knew that the temple courtyard was directly ahead of them on the right.

"What do we do now?" he asked, peering over his shoulder at Attalos.

"Over there," said Attalos, leaning forward and pointing to a narrow alley that angled off to their right. "We need to reach that passage."

Marcus nodded and began pushing and shoving in the direction that Attalos had indicated while calling out, "Make way! Make way for Lucius Coelius Felix, aristocrat!" When the people around him were slow to move, he added the word "agoranomos" to his announcement. This appeared to get their attention. Still, the bodies were packed so tightly that no one could move more than a couple of feet to get out of his way. It was some time before they entered the dank corridor, where they paused to catch their breath.

"Up there," explained Attalos, pointing down the alley, "is a special entrance for those who have permission to sit on the observation benches. Hopefully our host will have someone waiting there to vouch for us."

Marcus took Lucius's arm and followed Attalos to the gate that led to the seating area. Attalos explained to one of the guards that they were guests of Apollonios, the city treasurer, and asked if he had left any orders to admit them. The guard did not know, but he could see from their dress that they were important people, so he led Attalos into the seating area to search for his host. After a while the guard returned and signaled for Lucius and Marcus to follow him.

The guard led them across a broad courtyard that had been blocked off with wooden railings to prevent ordinary citizens from entering the area. The bleachers stood in the middle of the viewing area, flanked on either side by hordes of people. Attendants stood ready to assist any guests who had trouble climbing the bleachers. Their host was sitting close to an aisle, so they did not have to step over many people to reach the seats that he was holding for them.

Marcus had never felt so conspicuous in his life. Everyone knew that slaves were not allowed to sit with their masters in the elite section at public events except in extraordinary circumstances. He clung tightly to Lucius's arm in an effort to show that this was in fact one of those situations. Still, he felt as if every eye was staring at him as he made his way across the row with his master.

Attalos introduced Lucius to their host, a portly man who wore a dark green cloak over a beige-tinted tunic and a fresh green wreath in his well-trimmed hair.

"Forgive me for not rising to greet you," said Apollonios amiably. "I've got this terrible pain in my knees that makes it hard for me to go anywhere these days. That's why I'm not marching in today's procession. I couldn't have made it to my seat without my son's assistance."

The man gestured toward an equally plump young man beside him who nodded and smiled as his presence was acknowledged.

"I know what you mean," observed Lucius. "I, too, have trouble walking at

times. 'That's why Marcus is with me today—sometimes I need a little extra support.'

The two men gave Marcus a cursory glance, then turned back to Lucius. Marcus was relieved to know that his presence had been explained and apparently accepted.

Attalos placed Lucius between himself and their host, leaving Marcus shoulder-to-shoulder with an elderly man who clearly did not relish the idea of sitting next to a slave. The man glared at him with evident disgust and began scanning the crowd as if looking for a place to move. Unfortunately for him, the benches were so full by now that it would have been hard for a man of his age to scamper around and reach another seat. He squinted at Marcus one last time and snorted, then scooted to his right to create a gap between himself and his despised neighbor.

Marcus viewed all of this through the corner of his eye. As a slave, he was accustomed to such treatment, but as a man he still felt slighted by it. He fantasized occasionally about being a wealthy noble who could sit wherever he liked, but he knew that he could not alter the lot that the Fates had assigned to him. His only course was to ignore such men.

Marcus surveyed the scene before him while his master and Attalos chatted with their host. Three temples stood side by side at the upper end of the courtyard. The one in the center was elevated several feet above the others at the top of a broad flight of steps. All three followed the standard pattern of Greek temples: a rectangular stone chamber surrounded by a row of columns atop a stepped platform fronted by a broad staircase. A massive altar stood in the center of the square, where it apparently served all three temples. Wooden railings marked out a space some eighty to a hundred feet deep in front of the temples where the ceremony would take place. A line of armed guards stood ready to apprehend anyone who attempted to cross the barrier. The space behind the railings was crammed with observers.

Marcus turned his gaze to the occupants of the bleachers and was quickly struck by the scarcity of togas on the benches. Romans had been so omnipresent among the elites of the other cities that they had visited that their absence here was noteworthy, especially when compared with a Roman city like Antioch where togas were the norm. He wondered why Hierapolis should be so different. Perhaps it was because the city was not on one of the major trade routes and therefore had attracted fewer Roman businessmen. He knew from Attalos that Hierapolis did a thriving business in dyed goods due to the unique qualities of its waters, including a special purple dye made from the madder root that rivalled the magnificent Tyrian purple that lined the togas of senators, magistrates, and emperors. But the

wool around Laodicea was just as good or better, and the latter city was located conveniently on the main road from Ephesus to the east. Merchants who wished to buy dyed goods directly from the manufacturers rather than from Laodicean middlemen could always make a side trip up the Lykos valley to Hierapolis. There was little reason for them to live here.

Marcus wondered how a city with less Roman presence might differ from the other cities that they had visited. Attalos had told them that today's ceremonies would be unlike anything that they had experienced elsewhere, but he had turned coy when asked for an explanation. Marcus tried to imagine what he could have meant, but it was hard even to hazard a guess. Roman rituals were always the same; that was one of the hallmarks of Roman devotion to the gods. Greeks, too, liked regularity, or so he had been told. But Hierapolis was in Phrygia, and everyone knew that Phrygia was a wild and unpredictable land only a step or two removed from barbarism. What might they do in a place like this? Time alone would tell, and time was running painfully slow today. An hour or more had passed since their arrival and nothing had happened. He was growing impatient.

Marcus turned to see if his master needed any attention, but Lucius was engaged in a lively conversation and appeared to be doing well. He tried to catch what they were saying, but he was too far away and the crowd too noisy for him to catch more than a few words.

Suddenly the faint tones of music reached him over the din. Turning in the direction of the sound, he saw a faint stirring at the edge of the courtyard near the temple on the left.

"Here they come!" shouted Attalos, pointing to the spot where Marcus was looking. "It's the front of the procession."

As he spoke, a cluster of aulos players entered the square playing a lively tune on the upper registers of their double-barreled flutes. Floating above them were the piping tones of the syrinx players who strolled either behind them or among them—Marcus could not tell from this distance. The crowd hushed as the news spread that the musicians had arrived.

The opening group of players made a slow circuit around the perimeter of the empty space in front of the temples. Behind them marched a long procession of singers, dancers, and musicians playing flutes, citharas, lyres, pipes, drums, castanets, and other instruments. Their rhythms and movements were more upbeat and joyful than Marcus was accustomed to seeing in Roman processions, where stiff dignity ruled the day. He wondered if this was what Attalos had meant when he said that the rituals here were different than in other cities.

After the musicians came the city fathers in their ceremonial robes, then more musicians, then a troop of priests and temple slaves leading the various animals

that would be offered to the gods that day. Every kind of sacrificial animal was represented: bulls, oxen, sheep, goats, pigs, and a surprising number of birds in wicker cages. A cohort of singers and musicians brought up the rear.

The procession formed into a body at the base of the stairway that led to the middle of the three temples. The music continued as a detachment of priests mounted the stairs, then abruptly ceased when they reached the top. Marcus strained to make out what they were doing, but he was too far away to see or hear anything. He was thus pleased when he overheard Attalos explaining to Lucius what they were missing. He leaned in to listen.

"As always, they start with the father of the gods," he said. "That's his temple in the middle. Following the usual prayers, they'll make their way down to the altar and offer sacrifices in his honor. They'll do the same for Apollo at the temple on the right. When that's all done, they'll process to the temple on the left, which belongs to Cybele, the great mother of all. That's when it gets interesting."

A vague smile curled Attalos's lips as he uttered the final words.

"What do you mean, 'it gets interesting'?" asked Lucius. "You said yesterday that you would explain everything once we were at the festival. We're here now, and you've said nothing so far that sounds the least bit extraordinary. When are you going to tell me the rest?"

"Be patient," replied Attalos, still smiling. "Everything will become clear in time."

Lucius frowned. Marcus could see that he was growing impatient with Attalos's coyness. He, too, was beginning to feel annoyed with the man, but he knew better than to say so.

The next two hours were taken up by the rituals that Attalos had described. The sacrificial rites took longer than usual because both Zeus and Apollo were presented with a *suovetaurilia*, the combined offering of an ox, a ram, and a boar, and all of the animals had to be offered sequentially on a single altar. The crowd was attentive at first, but by the time the fire had been lit, the prayers recited, the hymns sung, the animals slaughtered, the entrails inspected, and the sacred portions wrapped in fat and laid upon the altar, their concentration had visibly waned. A low murmur of conversation and crying children buzzed around the square. Only the priest's call for silence during the act of sacrifice kept the noise in check.

Marcus gave Lucius a snack and some wine from the pack that he had brought with him, then went to search for a place where his master could relieve himself with a degree of privacy. One of the guards pointed him to a temporary latrine that had been erected beneath the bleachers. Returning to his seat, he gathered up his master and led him to the place indicated by the guard, then guided him back to his seat when he was done. By the time they found their places, the ritual was nearly finished.

The conclusion of the ceremony, like nearly everything else that had occurred so far, was fairly mundane. While the priests and their servants cleaned up around the altar, the musicians and performers formed back into a line and began a final circuit around the courtyard, followed by the city fathers and the priests. The dignitaries separated from the main body as it passed the bleachers and filed into the first two rows, filling the seats that had been reserved for them. The rest of the party left the courtyard by the same path that they had entered.

"What happens now?" asked Lucius as the final members of the procession disappeared from sight. "It can't be over, since everyone is still in their seats."

"It's time for the galli," answered Attalos tersely.

"The galli?" asked Lucius, incredulous. "I remember you said something about them performing some kind of death ritual for Pluto, but you didn't say that they would be here today. Does this city really allow those perverts to do their disgusting dances here in public, in front of women and children? My city would never allow it; they'd be turned away at the gate. How can this be?" Lucius spat in disgust.

Attalos laid a hand on his arm in an effort to soothe him. "I understand that such things might seem strange to Roman eyes," he began. "You Romans like your rituals to be orderly and sedate. But we're not in Rome; we're in Phrygia, and the people here have different customs than the Romans. The priests of Cybele have been worshipping the mother goddess in their own way since time immemorial, long before the founding of Rome. I thought that you Romans respected ancient practices."

"We do," spluttered Lucius, "but not when they contravene everything that's decent. Human sacrifice is ancient, too, but that doesn't make it right."

"I agree," answered Attalos. "But look, here they come! You can judge for yourself whether they are as indecent as you say."

A clatter of cymbals and drums arose from the spot where the earlier procession had left the courtyard. Soon the percussion was joined by a cacophony of flutes and horns playing shrill, discordant music. All eyes turned toward the source of the sound. Cries of "There they come!" and "Look there!" erupted from the excited crowd.

Suddenly a knot of brightly colored dancers rushed into the square, leaping and gyrating to the beat of the music. Their dress mirrored the colors of the rainbow—pinks and yellows, greens and blues, reds and stately purples flashed in the midday sun. From a distance, they looked like multicolored flames flickering over the pavement. As far as Marcus could tell, there was no coordination among them—none of the choreographed steps and gestures that characterized Greek and Roman dancers. Each man seemed to be following the inspiration of his own genius.

Behind the dancers came a coterie of brightly arrayed musicians bobbing and swaying as far as their instruments would permit. Unlike the dancers, they marched together in a knot as they made their way toward the center of the courtyard, where the dancers slowly coalesced around them. The spectators caught the rhythm and began clapping and swaying with the music. Even some of the aristocrats joined in the merriment.

Through the corner of his eye Marcus noticed four men in identical dress entering the square with a litter on their shoulders. He could not see what was on it, but Attalos explained that it was an image of the mother goddess Cybele riding in a chariot pulled by lions. Marcus had seen smaller versions of such images before, but never one so large and never in a public procession.

The litter-bearers proceeded in a stately manner around the perimeter of the open area so that the crowd could view and admire the goddess. Shouts of acclamation arose wherever she passed. Some of the people standing along the rail reached out their hands as if to touch her, but the bearers kept her well beyond reach so as to guard her sacred presence from contamination.

Behind the goddess came a final group of musicians and dancers who accompanied the litter-bearers on their circuit around the square. The musicians paraded together as a body while the dancers flitted between them and the litter like brightly colored birds.

As the latter group drew closer to where Lucius and Marcus were sitting, Marcus noticed for the first time that some of them were twirling knives and swords as they flung their limbs around in orgiastic ecstasy. Others banged on tambourines and cymbals with little regard for the rhythms of the music. The effect was so discordant that Marcus wanted to cover his ears, but he refrained when he observed that no one else was doing so. He certainly did not want to offend the goddess by shutting out her paeans.

Eventually the procession reached the space in front of the bleachers, where they paused as if to exhibit their skills to the leading citizens of the city. Curious about his master's reaction, Marcus glanced at Lucius and was surprised to see what appeared to be a look of admiration rather than the revulsion that he had expected. Marcus smiled knowingly; it was hard not to get caught up in the spectacle.

Turning back to observe the show, Marcus noticed a streak of blood on one of the dancers' arms. He chuckled to himself; the man had gotten what he deserved for playing with deadly weapons. Peering more closely, he detected similar blotches on the arms of some of the other men. He was on the verge of laughing out loud at their clumsiness when his eye caught a sudden flick of the hand by one of the dancers who was gyrating directly in front of the bleachers. The knife slid across

the man's arm so quickly that Marcus wondered for a moment if he had imagined it. The man spun away before he could be sure, but he soon returned with a fresh rivulet of crimson oozing down his arm. Other dancers quickly followed suit. The crowds thundered.

Marcus froze as the laughter in his throat gave way to horror. Why would anyone purposely cut himself like this at a public ritual? What did it signify? Was it supposed to be some kind of offering to the goddess? How could people bear to watch this? Were they not as horrified as he was?

His musings were interrupted by the sound of Attalos's voice wafting over the din. He cocked his ear to hear what he was saying.

"They do it to demonstrate their devotion to the goddess," he was explaining to Lucius, whose face had turned suddenly ashen. "They're saying that their bodies belong fully to her. It looks dreadful, but I've been told that they don't even feel it—their minds are in such a state of ecstasy that their bodies are unaffected by the loss of blood. In fact, it seems to me that they become more animated rather than weakening the longer they dance."

"I've never seen the like of it," muttered Lucius. His tone was even, but disgust was written all over his face.

"That's nothing compared with what you'll see before they're done," said Attalos with a hint of excitement in his voice.

"What do you mean?" probed Lucius, clearly worried. Apparently he did not like this any more than Marcus did.

"Wait and see," replied Attalos. "I don't want to spoil the surprise."

Lucius scowled briefly before turning back to the arena. By now the dancers had reversed course and were making their way back across the courtyard.

"They're heading to the temple of Cybele," explained Attalos, pointing toward the columned building on the left side of the plaza. As Marcus watched, the musicians and dancers in the center of the square fell in behind the others. Soon the entire party was assembled in front of the temple of Cybele. The tempo and volume of the music slowly increased. The dancers responded with gyrations that were even more frenzied than before, if that were possible. The spectators clapped and shook with the beat. Here and there someone cried out, but their words were unintelligible to Marcus.

Suddenly three of the men broke away from the others and scampered up the steps of the temple, evoking roars from the crowd. At the top of the platform, they ceased dancing and lifted the fronts of their tunics as if showing off their manhood to the goddess.

Marcus was too far away to see what they were doing. For a moment he thought that they were going to urinate on the platform, but the idea was so repugnant that

he pushed it out of his mind. As he continued to watch, the men lifted their right arms toward the temple as if to salute the goddess. Then they reached down toward their groins and doubled over at the waist. A moment later they lifted their arms again, but this time their fists were clinched. The crowd roared its approval.

"They've done it," announced Attalos over the shouts of the bystanders. "They've given their manhood to the goddess."

"Do you mean to say that they—they castrated themselves?" shouted Lucius incredulously.

"That's exactly what I mean," shouted Attalos in return. "I didn't want to tell you earlier because they don't always have someone ready to do the act. In all my years I've never see three of them at once. The goddess will be pleased when they lay their offerings before her statue."

Attalos pointed back toward the temple. Marcus turned around just in time to see the three men disappear into its columns. Several others followed them.

"From what I've heard," explained Attalos, "they'll lie prostrate before the image of the goddess until they lose consciousness. Then the men who followed them into the temple will carry them out and tend to their wounds. But all of that takes place in private; the public celebration is over. See, the rest of the party is already heading for the exit. We can leave as soon as they're gone, but I'd suggest that we wait here for a while until the crowds thin."

Attalos went on commenting about the day's events, but Marcus heard little of what he said. His stomach was churning at the thought of what these three men had done to their bodies, not to mention the patent enthusiasm with which Attalos and the rest of the crowd had greeted their actions. How could they possibly find pleasure in such a gruesome act? Romans were not averse to displays involving bloodshed as long as it was honorable, as in the gladiatorial games. But what these men had done was dishonorable beyond all imagination. To render oneself incapable of enjoying the pleasure of a woman's body—or a man's, if that was what one preferred—was to abandon all claims to manhood. Now he understood why the priests of Cybele dressed in such an effeminate manner—they were no longer men. He shuddered at the thought.

CHAPTER 4

THE SECOND PHASE of the day's activities was scheduled for mid-afternoon. The break was needed to allow the spectators time to return home and get something to eat, since the opening sacrifices were not sufficient to provide food for such a huge congregation. It also gave older people like Lucius time to rest before sitting through another long ceremony.

Lucius was still asleep when Attalos came to the door to escort them to the festivities. Marcus was hesitant to rouse him, but Attalos insisted that it was vital for them to leave early as they were going to a smaller venue where the seating was even more limited.

"If he says that he's too tired," added Attalos, "tell him that he'll be very sorry if he misses this afternoon's event. It's the highlight of the festival. I promise that there won't be any blood this time."

Marcus reluctantly agreed to do as he said, adding that he would bring Lucius to his room as soon as he could get him up and ready. Lucius seemed confused at first, but he grew more alert when Marcus reported what Attalos had said. He was fully awake by the time Marcus led him out to greet his friend.

"So I hear that you have yet further mysteries in store for me today," remarked Lucius as Attalos came to the door. "Can't you give me some idea of what to expect? I don't know if I can handle another event like the one that we witnessed this morning."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," smiled Attalos. "I'm not trying to be difficult," he added, noting the suspicious look on Lucius's face. "It's just that you have to see the place in order to comprehend what happens there. We're heading for the gates of Hades. I'll tell you more as we walk."

Marcus and Attalos took Lucius's arms and led him down the hall and into the street. Attalos explained that they were going to the temple of Pluto, which lay on the same street as the temples that they had visited in the morning but in a separate complex.

"We actually passed the entrance just before we turned onto that side street that led us into the courtyard," he explained. "It's a round building with pools on either side. But it's not very big, and there's no reason why you should have noticed it as we were pushing our way through the crowds."

"I remember when I was young," he went on as they made their way up the street, "wondering why Pluto's temple should stand in a separate precinct from the other gods that the city honored at this festival. My father told me that it was because none of the other gods wanted to associate with Pluto—even they were

cautious of his deadly powers. I've learned since then that it's more complicated than that, but it was enough at the time to put a boy's idle questions to rest."

Attalos paused and smiled at the memory. "Let's take a rest here before we try to cross that busy street," he said abruptly, pointing ahead to the road that had caused them such difficulty in the morning. Already it looked as busy as it had been then. "Once we reach the other side, it's only a short way to the seating area. But it won't be as easy as it was this morning—lots of other people will be going that way also. We'll just have to float with the current until we reach our destination."

For a while they stared silently at the throng of people crossing the intersection. Then Attalos resumed his monologue.

"When we reach the temple," he explained, "you'll understand the real reason for its location. But I can go ahead and tell you now: it was built around a cave that leads directly to Hades, Pluto's infernal home."

Lucius looked dubious. "I had heard that there was a place like that in Hierapolis," he observed, "but I can't say that I believed it. Why would a city be constructed in such an evil place? Wouldn't the citizens be afraid that ghosts and spirits would come out at night and haunt them? Has anyone actually entered Hades through this supposed gate?"

"I think it would be best if you hold such questions for now," remarked Attalos. "Everything will be clearer once you've seen the place. But I can assure you that before this day is over, you will see what happens when someone tries to enter Hades as you suggested. For now, though, we need to keep moving or we'll miss the ceremony."

The three men dived into the flood of bodies and slowly worked their way across the street. It was hard for them to stay together, as no one wanted to make way for three men who were trying to buck the current. But it wasn't far to the side street that led to the temple area, and eventually they succeeded in turning the corner. The pressure of the crowd did not let up, but at least they were moving with the flow now and had only a block to cover.

After a while Attalos, who was several inches taller than either Lucius or Marcus, shouted over the din that the temple area had come into view. Marcus noticed that he was scanning the faces ahead of them as if looking for someone.

"There they are," said Attalos at last. "We need to get over there to where those two big men are standing."

Attalos pointed in the direction that he meant, but Marcus could see nothing but the backs and shoulders of the people around him. Nevertheless, he began pushing and shoving in that direction while shouting for the crowd to part for his master. Most people ignored him until they turned and saw a man in a Roman

toga trudging on his heels, which was enough to motivate a few of them to move aside and open a path to the seating area.

"It's about time you got here," announced Attalos to a burly slave who emerged suddenly from the crowd in front of them. Attalos explained that this man belonged to his friend Apollonios, whom he had asked to reserve seats for them at the afternoon's festivities.

"Take us to our seats," ordered Attalos. The man turned and shoved his way unceremoniously through the remaining crowd. Marcus gave the man a generous tip once they reached the seating area.

Once again Marcus had to endure the evil looks of those around him as he took his seat among the aristocrats, and once again he did his best to ignore them. Not until he was sure that his master had everything that he needed did he glance around to see where they were.

What he observed was unlike any other temple precinct that he had visited. The place where they sat was on the short end of an L-shaped series of stone benches that rose seven or eight rows high on two sides of a narrow rectangular courtyard. The paved surface of the courtyard lay some eight or ten feet below the bottom rank of seats. Across the courtyard stood a rectangular platform that served as the base for a tholos, a round temple encircled by a single row of columns and topped by a conical roof. On either side of this building lay a shallow, square, stone-lined pool of approximately the same breadth and width as the temple. The complex was surrounded on all sides by hordes of onlookers, but the sacred area itself appeared to be empty.

As he peered around at the unusual layout, Marcus overheard Attalos directing Lucius's attention to an arched doorway that stood at ground level on the longer side of the courtyard. From its placement Marcus guessed that it led to some sort of room or passageway that ran beneath the long row of benches.

"That's the gate to Hades," announced Attalos in hushed tones. "Behind that door stands a cave that belches forth the foul stench of the realm of the dead. Any man or beast who breathes those vapors for very long will die—almost anyone, that is. You'll see what I mean later."

"So do you mean to tell me that if I were to climb down into that courtyard right now, I would drop dead?" asked Lucius, incredulous. "If that's the case, why did they build these benches so close to the entrance?"

"You'd be safe if you went down there now," explained Attalos, "because the door is shut. They keep it locked for most of the year in order to prevent children and unwary adults from wandering into the area. They only open it on days like this when they wish to make offerings to Pluto."

"As for your second question," he went on, "I don't know why the vapors don't

affect those of us who are sitting up here on the benches. It could be that the vapors have an affinity for lower spaces and can't rise this high, or perhaps the breezes blow them away before they can reach the spectators. All I know is that I've never heard of anyone suffering any ill effects from sitting up here, if that is what's worrying you."

"I'm not worried," replied Lucius with a hint of annoyance. "I'm just trying to understand what you're telling me."

"Please excuse my poor choice of words," said Attalos deferentially. "I certainly didn't mean to impugn your motivations for asking about the vapors. I just remember being anxious about such things when I came here as a child."

"It's no matter," replied Lucius, flicking his hand in the air as if brushing away a speck of lint. "We all say things that we don't mean from time to time. It happens to the best of friends. Don't let it trouble you." A thin smile creased his lips.

"Thank you for understanding," said Attalos. "I don't deserve to be called your friend, but I'm happy to share with you what I know."

The men sat silently for some time gazing at their surroundings. The crowd on the perimeter of the rectangle had grown so dense by now that there was hardly room to breathe, much less to move. An unexpected nudge would have left some of the spectators sprawling in the courtyard. Marcus understood now why Attalos had been so insistent that they arrive early—any later and even armed guards might have had difficulty forcing a path through the mass of bodies.

Marcus turned to check on his master and saw that his eyes were beginning to droop. The day was not overly warm, but the air around them was still and stuffy and the waiting was growing tedious. The buzz of conversation droned in their ears, but no one made any effort to speak to Lucius. Marcus wondered if he was beginning to regret his decision to come.

Attalos must have noticed also that Lucius was showing signs of weariness as he soon broke the silence. "They should be starting any time now," he remarked. "There's another doorway directly below us through which the priests of Pluto will enter with their sacrifices. That will mark the beginning of the ceremony."

As if on cue, the tones of several flutes began to waft up from below their feet. Here and there people pointed toward the spot where Attalos had said the priests would emerge. People at the rear of the crowd continued to chatter, but those at the front grew silent in anticipation.

"What did I tell you?" whispered Attalos. "Soon you'll see for yourself what I was saying about this being the gate to Hades."

"As you say," observed Lucius somewhat condescendingly. Nevertheless, he was fully alert now and paying attention to the proceedings.

"Here come the priests," said Attalos a few moments later as several men in

stately garb appeared from somewhere below them and began parading decorously around the perimeter of the courtyard. After them came a line of slaves leading the various animals that would be presented to the god in sacrifice. On seeing the animals, Marcus realized for the first time that there were no altars in the courtyard nor, as far as he could see, anywhere else in the temple precinct. He felt confused; how could sacrifices be offered without an altar? He wanted to ask Attalos about it, but he refrained. Even if he had felt free to inquire, he knew that Attalos would only tell him to wait and see.

Eventually the priestly party completed its circuit of the courtyard and halted with the forward ranks standing opposite the doorway that Attalos had pointed out to them earlier. Those behind them arranged themselves along the side wall. The head of the party lifted his arms toward the crowd. He maintained that posture until everyone was silent.

“Now come the sacrifices,” said Attalos in a low voice.

“I can see that,” replied Lucius, sounding annoyed, “but where is the altar?” His voice pierced the silence. Several people shushed him or called for silence. Lucius flushed with embarrassment.

Attalos nodded toward the doorway. Marcus knew by now what that nod meant: “You’ll find out in a moment.”

One of the flute players raised his instrument to his lips and began playing a mournful tune of the type that normally accompanied sacrificial rituals. A moment later, a man who appeared to be the chief priest stepped forward and removed a key from the fold of his garment. He inserted it into the door and turned it, then tugged sharply on the handle. The door swung open. The man hurried back to where his companions stood. All eyes were fixed on the dark maw of the cave.

Marcus shivered at the sight. He had never attended a ceremony for the lord of the dead—the god had no temples in the vicinity of Antioch, and some people considered it bad luck even to speak of him except when telling the story of how he kidnapped Proserpina and forced her to become his queen. The idea of venerating the king of the underworld verged on the macabre to a man like him who held a healthy fear of death and the forces of darkness. The fact that a city would hold a public festival in his honor struck him as bizarre. Still, the sacrifices that were about to be offered would placate the god, so there was no reason to be afraid of him today.

As the flute continued to play, the priest who had opened the door offered the usual round of prayers to the various gods who might be present for the day’s rites. The words were familiar until he came to the part where he addressed Pluto directly. At this point he lowered his head and arms so that his palms faced the god’s

subterranean home. He spoke at length about Pluto's fearsome countenance, his inexorable will, and his irrefragable power over the fates of the dead. The words made Marcus's blood run cold. He made fig signs with his hands to ward off any evil spirits that might be lurking nearby.

When the prayers were done, four slaves came forward carrying birdcages holding pitch-black crows. At a sign from the priest, they reached into their cages and took the birds into their hands. One by one they stepped up to the open doorway and released their charges, then beat a hasty retreat. The first bird dropped to the ground almost immediately and flopped around on the pavement for a few moments before growing still. The others succeeded in flying a few feet before falling similarly to the earth.

Marcus was awestruck. What sort of power could make birds fall from the air and die without touching them?

"What happened to those birds?" he whispered urgently before he realized what he was doing. The expression on Lucius's face suggested that he was about to ask the same thing. Attalos signaled for Marcus and Lucius to lean toward him before he spoke.

"They flew too close to the realm of the dead," explained Attalos, whispering just loudly enough for the two men to hear him. "This is how sacrifices are performed here. No altar or priest is required; the god himself takes their lives. Death comes quickly to birds, more slowly to the larger animals. Even the strongest of men cannot stand for long before the entrance of that cave, and none but the priests of Cybele can enter it and return alive. Keep watching and you'll see."

Marcus wanted to ask more, but Attalos laid a finger on his mouth and pointed toward the place where the priestly party stood. Two black sheep were being led forward with their heads garlanded as if approaching an altar. Each wore a halter and was attended by two slaves. The priests sprinkled barley and water on the animals' heads as if preparing them to be sacrificed. Instead of slitting their throats, however, the slaves led them to the doorway and hurriedly tied their leashes to small hooks that Marcus had not noticed earlier. When they were done, they retreated to the safety of their colleagues. The sheep uttered a few distressed bleats before falling to their knees and then collapsing onto their sides.

When it seemed clear that their life-force had departed, the four slaves rushed back to where their charges lay and cut the knots on their halters, then dragged their carcasses back to where their colleagues stood. Other slaves stepped forward to slice open their bellies so that a priest could examine their entrails. Still other priests and slaves busied themselves with preparing a series of goats, pigs, and bulls for presentation to the infernal power of the cave. All of the animals were black, following the long-standing custom of offering dark-coated sacrifices to gods associated with darkness and the underworld.

The sacrifices of the goats and pigs were handled much like those of the sheep. When the time came for the bulls to be presented, however, there was a lengthy pause while the eyes of everyone in the courtyard turned toward the opening through which they had entered. Marcus wondered what they could possibly be anticipating. He was about to ask Attalos when the heads of four galli emerged from below their feet. They wore the same colorful outfits that had set them apart from the other participants in the morning ritual, but there was none of the lively music or frenetic dancing that had marked their earlier performance. Instead, they paced slowly and somberly around the courtyard until they stopped at the place where the priestly party stood.

At that point the priests of Pluto stepped aside and the galli took over the ceremony. Marcus was surprised until he remembered what Attalos had said about the priests of Cybele being the only ones who could enter the cave. Was it possible that they were about to lead the beasts into the very bowels of the kingdom of death?

Soon it became clear that this was exactly what they intended to do. The galli took the bulls by the halter, two for each bull, and led them toward the doorway. The crowd grew deathly silent; the only sound was the dour music of the flute that accompanied all sacrifices. Marcus watched with bated breath as first the men and then the beasts disappeared into the dark opening. Those seated in the longer rank of benches craned their necks to see what was happening, but the doorway led into the wall below their feet and was therefore beyond their sight. Marcus thanked Lady Fortune for seating them on the short side of the courtyard where they had a clear view of the proceedings.

Time passed and nothing was seen or heard from the cave. The stillness went on for so long that Marcus began to wonder if even the vaunted priests of Cybele might have been overcome by the noxious fumes of the underworld. He glanced anxiously at Attalos, then at Lucius. They, too, were beginning to look worried.

"Where are they?" muttered Attalos to himself. "I've never known them to be gone this long." Similar murmurs could be heard from others around them. A low hum spread across the square.

Suddenly a colorful head emerged from the opening, then another. The spectators burst into raucous cheering and applause as the four galli stumbled into the courtyard dragging a dead bull behind them. Several slaves rushed over to relieve them of their burden. Then, to the astonishment and delight of the spectators, the men turned around and walked back to the cave. A short time later they emerged with the carcass of the second bull. The crowd erupted in jubilation.

Marcus was dumbfounded—how had they done it? Clearly they were not like other men. He thought of how they had continued dancing after slashing their arms with knives and how three of them had walked into the temple of Cybele on their own power after cutting off their manhood. What kind of men could

perform such feats? Were the devotees of Cybele invincible to pain? Or was it the lord of the underworld who was watching over them? Did the act of castration somehow enable them to tolerate the deadly fumes? Or had they simply trained themselves to hold their breath for a long time, or developed some way of collecting air into a bag and breathing from it? Surely Attalos would know the answer. He looked forward to hearing his explanation.

As the crowd cheered, one of the galli fell suddenly to his knees, then forward onto his face. His closest companion bent down to check on him but found himself unable to rise. The other two galli stood staring at their ill-fated comrades and then at one another as if unsure what to do. The crowd grew quiet.

After a moment's hesitation, the chief priest shouted and waved for his slaves to assist the men. Half a dozen men rushed across the courtyard and lifted the two fallen galli from the ground while others seized the elbows of the other two and helped them away from the cave. One of the slaves gave each man a swig from the juglet of water that was left over from the preparation ceremony. Soon all four men were resting safely against the wall of the courtyard. The audience cheered wildly at the slaves' heroics. Even Lucius and Marcus joined in the celebration.

The shouting gradually died down as the bulls were gutted and their entrails inspected, then rose again as the omens were declared favorable. The chief priest signaled for quiet so that he could perform the closing rites. Soon the ceremony was over.

"What a day!" observed Attalos as the men around them began to rise from their seats. "That was the final ceremony, though there's still the feast to come. With so many mouths to feed, it will likely be a couple of hours before the meat is ready to be served. But I ate enough before we came to tide me over until evening. What about you? Do you need to eat something before we go?"

"I—no, thank you," replied Lucius as he rose unsteadily to his feet. Marcus seized an elbow to prevent him from falling while Attalos took the other one. "But I need to find a place to relieve myself soon or I'm going to embarrass myself in front of everyone here."

Marcus turned and stared in the direction from which they had entered. His eyes met a wall of people who showed no signs of moving. He looked to his left and right but saw no openings. Then he noticed a section of the bench area behind his master where most of the guests had already left.

"It looks like we're not going to get out of here any time soon," he said, leaning close to keep his voice from carrying too far. "If you can't wait, we can go over there." He pointed in the direction of the empty benches. "I brought a bowl that you can use."

Lucius turned and looked where he was pointing, then lowered his eyes and

stared blankly at the ground for a long moment. Marcus could not tell whether he was weighing his options or steeling himself for yet another public humiliation. Finally he nodded. Marcus and Attalos guided him slowly down the rank of benches and around a knot of aristocrats who stood chatting at their seats until he reached the far corner of the seating area. Once there, he dug a medium-size bowl out of a bag that he had been carrying over his arm and placed it onto one of the benches. Then he lifted the back of Lucius's toga and tunic as discreetly as he could and he and Attalos lowered him slowly into a squatting position above the bowl.

Soon the familiar sounds and smells of Lucius's discharge were wafting across the seating area. The handful of stragglers who had not yet departed glanced around to locate the source of the noise and then scurried away in obvious disgust. Marcus felt embarrassed for his master, but Lucius showed no evidence of having observed their reaction. Peering down at his face, Marcus saw that his eyes were tightly clinched, a sure sign that he was in pain.

When he was done, Marcus cleaned him up as well as he could. Then he and Attalos led him slowly back to the inn, where he lay down for a much-needed nap.

LATER that day as they lounged together in the hot pool at the inn, Attalos asked Lucius what he thought about the priests of Cybele. "Be honest," he insisted. "As I said earlier, I know that you Romans don't think much of these galli, but I'm curious to know whether your opinion was changed at all by what you saw today."

Attalos's question broke the silence that had prevailed between the two men since they entered the waters. Lucius hesitated for a while before answering—so long, in fact, that Marcus began to wonder if he had heard the question. He was on the verge of repeating Attalos's question when Lucius spoke.

"I don't know what to make of them," he said, gazing up at the cloudless sky as if hoping to find the answer written there. "They're obviously devoted to their divine patron, and I've always been taught that devotion to the gods is the first duty of every mortal. But their way of showing it... To be honest, I found their actions disturbing. That feverish style of dancing made them look as if some wild spirit had taken hold of their bodies, and their so-called music was atrocious. And how could anyone justify all of that cutting, and that barbaric act at the end? Yes, that's the word. It all seemed rather barbaric to me."

"I understand," replied Attalos, staring up at the same spot that Lucius appeared to have in view. "I, too, have my doubts about some of their practices. But who can say what you or I might do under the influence of a divine spirit?"

"And what makes you so sure that it's a divine spirit," queried Lucius, "and not

some dark power or their own reckless enthusiasm?”

“You saw what they did at the cave,” answered Attalos. “I know this place well, and I can assure you that no ordinary man can enter that cave and live. The vapors that it contains are deadly to all living beings. Yet those men did more than merely survive; they conquered a force that was powerful enough to snuff out the lives of two huge bulls and then dragged the victims out by hand. What sort of man can do that without the aid of a divine spirit?”

“If you’re right about the power of the cave,” mused Lucius, “I have to confess that I don’t know what to make of it all. As far as I know, only immortal heroes like Odysseus, Orpheus, and Heracles have ever entered the gates of Hades and returned, and they behaved in ways that were as odd as anything that those priests of Cybele did today. The same is true for other gods—I’m thinking right now of Attis, who castrated himself after he was unable to obtain the love of the goddess Cybele, and Isis, who reassembled the body of her dead husband Osiris after his enemy Mot had scattered his mutilated members to the four winds. But those galli are men, not gods, and the fact that a deity once behaved in a certain way does not make it right for mortals to imitate their actions. Are you sure that there’s not some other way to explain what happened while they were in the cave?”

“That’s a good question,” replied Attalos. “They themselves claim that they receive a portion of the divine nature when they dedicate themselves to the goddess, but others have proposed more mundane explanations—for example, that they have learned how to hold their breath for a long time or find pockets of air within the crevices of the cave. Such things are possible, of course, but I find it hard to believe that they could survive for as long as they do using either of those techniques. And where did they get the strength to drag those dead bulls out of the cave?”

“They almost failed in that task today,” observed Lucius wryly. “How could that have happened under your theory? Was the divine spirit feeling a bit ill today? Or did it simply desert them at the end?” Lucius turned toward him and grinned.

“You shouldn’t mock the gods that way,” replied Attalos defensively. “The power of the gods is not ours to command. Perhaps one of the men had sinned in some way, or perhaps the forces of darkness were especially strong today. Who can say? What matters is that they performed a feat that no ordinary mortal can do, and they did it immediately after professing their undying devotion to the Great Mother. Did you know that they spent all of last night at her shrine?”

“You mean they slept here in the square?” inquire Lucius.

“No,” answered Attalos. “She has a more ancient temple on a hill outside the city. Some people say that’s why the city was built here—so that people could live in safety under her protective oversight. The priests arrive there the evening before the feast and perform secret rituals to prepare them for today’s activities. It’s

during that time that the goddess imparts to them a measure of her spirit.”

Lucius sat quietly for a while with his eyes closed after Attalos ceased speaking. Marcus had been listening to the men’s conversation with interest, and he wondered if his master had been convinced by his friend’s arguments or if he was merely weighing what to say next. Attalos’s explanation sounded credible to him, but he also understood his master’s objections. How was the disparity to be resolved?

“I need to get out before I fall asleep,” said Lucius at last. “Do you want to join me or stay here?”

“I’ll come with you,” replied Attalos. “I’ve not yet heard your opinion about the rest of the day’s activities, nor have I told you what to expect during the next two days of the festival.”

THAT evening the two men were seated together in Lucius’s room enjoying a meal of boiled meat, fresh bread, and assorted condiments that Marcus had collected from the temple square. The entire city had gathered there to celebrate the feast, but Lucius had felt too weary from the day’s activities to go out again, especially if it meant pushing his way through congested streets to reach a courtyard teeming with strangers who would likely ignore his Roman toga and leave him no place but the hard ground on which to sit and eat his food. He could do without the music and entertainment if he could be sure of having a comfortable seat on which to enjoy his meal.

Marcus could hardly wait for the evening to end so that he could visit Miriam. He had not yet found a propitious time to ask for permission to go out, but he felt sure that such a moment would arise before the night was over. He had intended to do so after they returned from the pool, a time when his master would normally be in a good mood, but Lucius had felt a sudden twinge of abdominal pain on his way up the stairs and had lain curled up on his bed for a long time before the poppy extract that Marcus had given him did its work. By then it was time for him to go down to the square and gather up food for his master’s and Attalos’s dinner. Still, he felt reasonably certain that his master would allow him to go when the time came. He was not an unreasonable man, and Marcus rarely made such requests of him.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said this afternoon about the priests of Cybele and the cave,” began Lucius as they were finishing their meal. “You said that no ordinary man could enter the cave and live. How do you know that?”

“I thought that it would be obvious,” replied Attalos. “If its vapors are strong

enough to kill two big bulls, and if smaller animals such as sheep and goats encounter a similar fate merely by standing in front of it, why would you think that humans would be any different?"

"That makes sense," said Lucius. "But isn't it possible that only sacrificial animals are affected by it? Hades always stands open to receive the dead, but I've never heard of Pluto actually killing anyone or accepting humans as sacrifices. What if the priests are simply putting on a show of being weakened by the cave when in reality it does them no harm?"

"That's a good question," answered Attalos, "and quite reasonable in light of what you observed today. But I've been coming here since childhood, and I've heard countless stories of men and women who entered the cave and never came out again. Sometimes it's a visitor from out of town who doesn't believe what he's been told. Sometimes it's a young man seeking to prove his bravery. Sometimes it's a distraught man or woman attempting to reach the underworld and bring back a recently deceased relative. The result is the same in every case—none of them ever returns. Now and then some poor fool is found lying dead in front of the cave, overcome before he could reach the entrance."

"But you don't have to take it on my word," he added, anticipating a possible objection. "Ask around and you'll find that virtually everyone here can tell you a story about someone who tempted the Fates in this manner. That's why they keep the cave locked up the rest of the year; they only open it when the festival is in progress."

"I see," mused Lucius, looking thoughtful. "So is the cave left open for the entire three days of the festival? If so, how do they keep people from trying to enter it?"

"As far as I know, it's left open the whole time," said Attalos. "As you will see tomorrow, people bring their own offerings to the cave during the last two days of the festival, so it's definitely open in the daytime. I've never been there in the evening, but I would guess that the temple guards keep an eye on it. Still, it's unlikely that anyone would go there on their own after dark, as the locals insist that the spirits of the dead come out and haunt the streets at night when the cave is open. I don't know if I believe that, but I do know that most people stay inside on the evenings of the festival because they're afraid of meeting a ghost. I've been told that even beggars and robbers avoid the roads on the nights of the festival, though I expect that it's because there are fewer people for them to prey on. Still, I wouldn't be surprised if some of the bolder ones make a point of going out at this time in hopes of scaring their victims into giving up their possessions. I certainly wouldn't venture out at night during the next three days."

Marcus's heart sank as he listened to Attalos's words. Like most people, he had a healthy fear of ghosts, but he was also desperate to see Miriam again. He thought

that that he could overcome his fears if his master would let him go out; after all, he had never actually known anyone who had been molested by a ghost. But it seemed unlikely that Lucius would risk losing him to some chance encounter on a dark street. He wondered if he should abandon the whole idea and go to Miriam's house tomorrow to explain what had happened.

In the end, however, he decided that he had nothing to lose by asking. Still, he was astonished when his master granted his request with little discussion as he was getting ready for bed.

"I can understand you wanting to see that girl again," he said, "and I'm so tired that I'm likely to sleep for several hours before I have need of you. If you're not bothered by what Attalos said about the spirits of the dead walking the streets this evening, I won't worry about it either. In fact, the streets are probably safer than usual because everyone is afraid to go out. Just don't stay out all night. You know how my stomach can act up after a long day like this."

Marcus quickly agreed to his master's terms. From that moment on, he could think of nothing but his impending visit with Miriam. He had no idea where they might go or what they might do to be alone, since he couldn't possibly take her out into the streets on a night like this. But none of that was important as long as he could be with her.

As he was tucking his master into bed, the old man unexpectedly reached out and seized his hand. Marcus was startled and stopped what he was doing. Lucius stared intently at him for a moment without speaking. His face bore a serious yet kindly expression that seemed more like that of a father than a lord.

"Marcus," he said in a quavering voice, "I want to make sure that you understand how much I've appreciated all that you've done for me, not only during this journey but through all the years that we've been together. You've been a good and faithful servant—in fact, you've been more like a son to me than my own wayward Gaius. I regret that I've not been better at expressing my gratitude to you." His eyes filled with tears.

"Don't say it, sir," replied Marcus, tears rising in his own eyes. "You've treated me far better than other masters, and certainly better than I deserve. If I've done anything to merit your appreciation, you've repaid it many times over in the way you've cared for me. I can assure you that other slaves are jealous when they hear how good you've been to me."

"I've always tried to treat you fairly," observed Lucius. "But I still think that I could have done more to reward your service." His lower lip began to tremble. Marcus averted his gaze in order to spare his master from embarrassment. When he spoke again, his tears were gone.

"I want you to know," he continued, "that I've made provision for you in my

will. I left a copy with my friend Servius. He will make sure that Gaius doesn't cheat you out of your reward. I know that you and Gaius don't like each other, but he will be the master of my household when I'm gone. I hope that you will be patient and assist him as he grows into that responsibility."

"I promise that I will do everything I can to help him succeed," answered Marcus. "But why do you bring these things up now? Has something happened that makes you think that your time is near? I won't go out tonight if it has."

"No, nothing like that," Lucius assured him. "It's just the ramblings of an old man. When one knows as I do that his time is short, he sees the world in a different light. He wants to make things right with those around him so that his conscience is clear when the end does come. Don't you worry about me; go out and enjoy your youth. I'll be fine. Go on."

He released Marcus's hand and waved for him to depart.

"But sir..." Marcus protested.

"Don't talk back to me," ordered Lucius with a smile that belied the seriousness of his words. "You've been watching over me all day; it's time for you to go out and have some fun. That little prick of yours needs some exercise."

Marcus gave an awkward smile that his master repaid with an open grin. "Now go on," he said. "I have everything that I need for now."

"Yes, sir," replied Marcus. He reached out and gave his master's hand an affectionate squeeze before turning and leaving the room.

THE night air was chilly, but Marcus's mind was so occupied by the thought of seeing Miriam and his master's promise of a future reward that he hardly noticed. By the time he reached the end of the street, however, the cold had penetrated his tunic and he was beginning to shiver. He had picked up his cloak as he walked out the door, but he had not yet thought to put it on, so it hung limp on his arm. Now he threw it over his shoulders and wrapped it tightly around him. As he did so, his hand brushed against the hilt of the knife that he had hidden in his pocket before leaving. He had observed it lying on the table where Lucius had left it after cutting his meat and decided on the spur of the moment to take it with him in case he should encounter any trouble. He had no money with him, but he had heard that disappointed robbers sometimes roughed up their victims when they found that they could get nothing from them.

The streets had not been lighted since no one was expected to be out that evening, but the moon was bright enough to allow him to see where he was going. Still, he saw little of his surroundings as he navigated his way up the main street

and through the various turns that lay between the inn and Miriam's house. His mind kept going back to what his master had said to him before he left. Why had he chosen that moment to talk about his appreciation for Marcus's services? Perhaps it was only happenstance, but he could not help wondering if his master had seen some kind of omen or felt a sudden presentiment of his impending death. His words certainly had the ring of a deathbed confession with their admixture of regrets, affirmations, and promises. But they could just as well have been "the ramblings of an old man," as he had put it, the product of a fevered mind troubled by a sudden awareness of its own mortality. After all, he was planning to die in Hierapolis unless Marcus could somehow persuade him to change his mind and go home to his wife and family. Was it surprising that a man in his condition should examine his life from time to time and become keenly aware of his own failings? Still, Marcus was haunted by a nagging suspicion that something else lay behind his master's words. What that might be, however, was beyond his comprehension.

He also wondered what Lucius had meant when he spoke about providing for him in his will. All sorts of possibilities floated through his mind. The most obvious, if only because it was so common, was freedom. Faithful slaves, especially those who like Marcus had developed a close relationship with their masters, were frequently liberated in their masters' wills, and some were given sizeable bequests to allow them to set up households of their own. Was this what his master had in mind? Even if it was, he would still be legally bound as a freedman to perform various services for his master's heir, and he could still be punished if he failed in those duties. But he would no longer have to live under Gaius's thumb; he could have a house and family of his own. The thought sent his spirit soaring. He imagined Miriam sharing a house with him and raising their children as free citizens of Antioch. Was such a thing possible? Or was he simply letting his dreams run away with him? If Lucius had indeed had a premonition of his coming end, he would know soon enough. Until then, it would be wrong—nay, wicked—for him to think about what he might gain from his master's death. He had to find something else to occupy his thoughts.

The matter was decided for him when he suddenly realized that he was nearing Miriam's house and had no clear plans for what to do when he got there. Miriam would not be expecting him since he had not known until the last moment that he would be able to get away, and the porter would likewise know nothing about his coming. The hour was not yet late since Lucius had allowed him to leave while he was still awake, but it was possible that the porter might be asleep or have orders to admit no one on the Jewish holy day. And even if he were awake, the porter had been anything but friendly to him on his previous visit, and he had left his money bag at home out of concern for his safety. What was he to do?

Suddenly a thought came to him. Miriam had probably told the porter that a messenger might be coming for her some time during the day. What if he were to present himself as that messenger? It was worth a try. He strode boldly up to the door and rapped on it three times. A man's gruff voice called out from inside. "What do you want?"

"I have a message for a girl named Miriam who lives here," replied Marcus.

"No one is allowed in the house on the evening of the Sabbath without the master's approval," said the voice. "Go away."

"But I don't want to enter the house," continued Marcus. "I just need to see the girl and give her a message. She's expecting me. Didn't she tell you that a messenger might be coming?"

The voice was silent for a moment. "That's none of your business," he answered at last.

"Oh, but it is my business," insisted Marcus. He was growing impatient with the man, but he had to remain calm or he would never get in. "My master is a friend of your master, and he won't be happy if he finds out that I was denied permission to deliver his message."

"What would your master want with a slave girl?" asked the man suspiciously.

"That's his business," replied Marcus in an officious tone. "I'm only his messenger. And if you don't allow me to do my job, my master will have a word with your master about it tomorrow."

The voice grew silent again. Marcus was tempted to say more in order to fill the vacuum, but he forced himself to remain quiet and wait for the man's reply. If the porter insisted on blocking his entry, there was nothing more that he could do.

"Tell me the message and I'll give it to her," the porter said at last.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that," answered Marcus. "The message is for her ears only. Will you please go and get her? I'm getting cold standing out here."

Marcus heard a murmur of voices inside the house, but he could not make out who was talking or what they were saying. He guessed that the steward or someone else from the household must have heard the porter's voice and come out to learn what was going on. If so, he would know soon whether his ruse had been successful.

A different male voice called out through the door. "Who are you?" the voice asked. "And why have you come here on the evening of the Sabbath?"

Marcus repeated his explanation to the second man and held a similar dialog about his intentions until this voice, too, fell silent, followed by another round of low murmuring. Marcus held his breath in anticipation.

"Wait there and I'll get her," said the second voice at last. Marcus nearly collapsed with relief; his stratagem had worked. He had begun to wonder as he wait-

ed whether it might have been better to tell the man the truth from the beginning and promise to bring him money in the morning for his services. As things now stood, he might very well decide to bar the door to him in the future once he discovered that he had been duped. But he would deal with that problem later. If his assessment of Miriam was correct, she would surely have a means of getting the doorman to do her bidding.

After what seemed like an eternity, he heard the keys rattling in the door. Soon the door opened and Miriam stood before him with a wary look on her face. Her expression turned instantly to joy when she saw him.

"Marcus, it's you!" she cried. "I didn't expect to see you here. They told me I had a messenger."

"Sshhh!" whispered Marcus, placing his finger over his mouth and peering over her shoulder to see if anyone was listening. "I have a message from Lucius Coelius Felix for a girl named Miriam," he announced in his most formal voice. "Are you Miriam?"

Miriam stared at him for a moment looking puzzled, then grinned knowingly. "I am," she replied in a flat tone.

"My master wishes to see you," continued Marcus. "Please get your cloak and come with me."

"It's late," Miriam replied with a smile, "but I can't refuse a summons from a man of his rank. Wait here and I'll be back in a moment."

Marcus overheard snatches of conversation between Miriam and the porter through the half-open door. She seemed to be telling him something about Coelius being her master's friend and how he was ill and alone in the city and needed her to nurse him. Marcus admired her mental agility. Soon she returned wearing her cloak and a small bag of some sort.

"I'll be home as soon as I'm no longer needed," she called over her shoulder as the porter let her out. Marcus stepped back into the shadow as the door opened so that the man would not see his face and recognize him.

As the door closed, he took Miriam by the arm and led her quickly in the direction from which he had come. He said nothing until they were a safe distance from the house. Then he paused and looked at her in the moonlight.

"I think we can talk now," he said.

"Yes, I think we're safe," she replied. "But how did you come up with this ruse? Why didn't you send a message to me earlier so that I could tell the porter that you were coming?"

Marcus quickly explained what had occurred that day to prevent him from following through on their plan. "But I had to see you," he concluded, "and this was the only way that I could think to get you past that oaf. I wasn't at all sure that it would work."

"It was certainly creative, I have to admit," replied Miriam with a sly smile. "It got me out of the house. But what are we to do now?" She glanced around warily.

"I honestly don't know," admitted Marcus. "I had thought that we could walk around the town for a while and perhaps find a place to sit and talk, but that was before I knew how dangerous the streets are likely to be tonight. I can't take you out walking on a night like this."

"Like what?" queried Miriam. "Why is tonight more dangerous than other nights?"

Marcus told her what Attalos had said about the cave of Pluto being left open on the evenings of the festival and the spirits of the dead coming out and wandering the streets at night. Instead of growing somber as Marcus had expected, Miriam smiled benignly as she listened to his story. When he was done, she burst into a fit of giggling. Marcus stared at her in astonishment. She stopped laughing when she saw how serious he looked, but she continued to smile.

"What's so funny?" asked Marcus with a bewildered look.

"I thought that you were teasing me," she replied, "trying to scare me the way little boys often do with girls. But you sounded so serious that I began to think that you actually believed all that stuff about dead people coming back to life and ghosts walking the streets at night. Both possibilities were equally funny, and after a while I couldn't control myself." She began to giggle again, then caught herself and stopped. "I'm sorry if I've offended you."

Marcus stared at her incredulously. "Are you saying that you don't believe such stories?" he asked. "You're not worried about going out on a night like this?"

"We Jews don't believe in ghosts, or in Hades either for that matter," she explained. "Why should I be afraid of something that I don't believe exists? If everyone in this city thinks as you do, the streets are likely to be deserted tonight. Let's go and see. I'm getting cold standing here."

Marcus peered down at the ground, unsure what to do. He didn't want Miriam to think that he was a coward, but he also didn't want to see any harm come to her through her ignorance. He could imagine that the dark spirits might go out of their way to impress their reality on someone like her who claimed not to believe in them. He did not want to be present if something like that were to happen, but he also didn't want to leave her alone. He reached up and rubbed the amulet that he wore under his tunic and muttered a silent prayer to Nox, goddess of the night, and the Lares of his master's household to be merciful to the girl and protect them from harm. Then he lifted his head and took Miriam by the arm. "Let's go, then," he declared with a thin attempt at a smile.

They walked together in silence for a couple of blocks until Miriam finally broke the ice. "I'm truly sorry if I offended you with my giggling," she said. "It's

just the way I am. Everyone tells me that I ought to take things more seriously, but I just can't. I don't want to become one of those slaves who walk around with a glum look on their face like they're carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. As I see it, there's humor in everything if you look hard enough. But not everybody sees things the way I do. Perhaps you'll turn out to be one of those people who dislikes me for it. But if we're going to be friends, you need to know that about me."

Marcus looked at her and smiled. "I wasn't offended," he replied. "Just surprised. I expected you to be afraid and say that you wanted to go home and meet another time. Instead, you laughed. I've never known anyone who reacted that way to danger, and I didn't know what to think of it."

"I think you've misunderstood me," said Miriam. "I can be just as fearful as any girl when the situation calls for it. But in this case I see no reason for fear, and I find it amusing that you do."

"You said 'we Jews' when you spoke earlier," observed Marcus, making an effort to change the subject. "Does that mean that you're a Jew also, like your master? You didn't answer when I asked you about that yesterday."

Miriam took a deep breath. "I guess I did say that, didn't I?" she agreed. "Very well, then. Yes, I'm a Jew like my master, my mistress, and most of the other people in our household. In fact, that's how I ended up there. My master took me in when no one else would."

"What do you mean, 'took you in'?" probed Marcus. "You said yesterday that you haven't been in Hierapolis for very long, but you didn't tell me what happened."

"There's really not much to tell," replied Miriam. "But it's very embarrassing, so I don't like to talk about it."

"You can tell me," said Marcus, stopping and looking her in the face. "I promise that I won't let it affect the way I think of you, whatever it is. I like you too much to let that happen."

"I'll tell you about it some other time," replied Miriam, lowering her eyes. "Let's not ruin a good night talking about my troubles. Tell me about this festival that you attended today."

Marcus stared at her for a moment before responding. He was eager to know more about her, but he could tell from her troubled expression that he would only drive her away if he pushed her to talk. She had promised to tell him about herself some other time, and he would have to take her at her word. For now, the best that he could do was to take up her cue and tell her about the festival.

They wandered through the streets for half an hour as Marcus told her what she had missed. Now and then she slipped a nut or an olive into his mouth from the bag that she carried in her hand. "I picked them up from the kitchen as I was

leaving," she explained when he inquired where she had gotten them. "No use in going hungry on a cold night. I've also got a small flask of wine here if we get cold." She patted the bag and smiled.

When they reached the point where Marcus was describing the priests of Cybele, Miriam began to snigger. Marcus peered sternly at her for a moment and she instantly stopped. Her face wore a guilty expression, like a little girl who had been caught filching a morsel from one of her master's trays before it was served. She looked so funny that Marcus had to laugh. She quickly joined him.

"I have to admit," he said at last, "that those priests of Cybele were funny-looking characters, especially when they danced. You should have seen them." He began flinging his arms and legs around and spinning in a farcical imitation of the priests' dancing. Miriam grinned at him for a moment, then began spinning her own body to mimic what Marcus was doing. They danced and laughed until they collapsed together in a heap on a nearby curb.

"So you do have a sense of humor," exclaimed Miriam when they had caught their breath. "I wasn't sure. You seem so serious."

"I can see how you would think that," answered Marcus with a smile. "My work requires me to be serious, and I tend to carry that with me into the rest of my life. But I like to have fun, too. I just need someone like you to help me."

He stared admiringly into her dark eyes. Miriam returned his gaze for several moments, then abruptly stood up.

"So what did they do next?" she inquired as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired between them. Marcus sat on the curb for a moment feeling disappointed, then rose and continued his narration as they walked on together.

"So you're saying that those animals just dropped dead when they left them in front of the cave?" she asked at one point.

"Yes," replied Marcus, "and that's not all." He proceeded to tell her about the priests leading the bulls into the cave and then dragging them out dead a short while later.

"I've got to see this place for myself," said Miriam when Lucius finished relating how the priests had barely escaped alive. "Can you take me there?"

"Do you mean tonight?" asked Marcus, incredulous.

"Why not?" retorted Miriam. "If I'm not scared, why should you be? Have you seen any ghosts fluttering around us as we've been walking?"

Marcus had to admit that he had not, but he still did not like the thought of entering the temple compound at night. If the dead were lurking anywhere in the city, it would be there. But he could not think of any excuse for staying away that would not make him look foolish in Miriam's eyes.

"Come on, let's go," she said, grabbing his hand and tugging him in the direc-

tion of the square. In that brief moment he realized that he had a vital choice to make: he had to take her to the temple or risk losing her forever.

"I'm coming," he said resignedly. "But only if you let me hold your hand so that I can pull you back if we meet with any trouble. Even if you don't believe in ghosts, there could still be some dangerous characters hiding in the shadows between here and there. I have a dagger in case we need it," he added, patting his side.

Miriam assented, and together they made their way toward the square, hand in hand. Marcus savored the sensation of her small, damp palm in his own. He wanted more than her palm, of course, but he could see that she was going to need time to warm up to him. He could afford to wait—he would be living in Hierapolis until his master decided to return home or joined his ancestors, whichever came first. Either way, he did not expect to be departing soon.

They arrived at the square without incident and Marcus began pointing out the various buildings and noting the location of the crowds and the routing of the procession.

"The cave of Pluto is over there, in a separate complex," he said, pointing in the direction of the Plutonium. "I'll take you there, but you have to promise that you'll stay close to me and keep away from the opening. My master's friend Attalos assured him that its vapors are capable of knocking out a human as easily as a sheep or goat. Every now and then some fool enters the cave thinking to test its powers or to descend to the underworld and bring back a dead relative, but no one other than the priests of Cybele has ever gone in and returned. For the others, it's a one-way trip." He smiled grimly at his own jest.

Miriam agreed to his terms, and soon they were strolling hand-in-hand through the shadows that lay on the right side of the courtyard and across the street into the sacred area surrounding the temple of Pluto. Marcus led her toward the benches where they had watched the day's festivities, explaining along the way what the area had looked like in the daytime. As their eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he saw something that puzzled him.

"That's odd," he remarked as they reached the upper rank of seats. "There's something lying on the ground in front of the cave. I wonder what it could be? Perhaps it's a dog that followed the scent of the animals that were sacrificed today and ended up as a sacrifice itself. Let's move closer and see if we can tell what it is."

He squeezed Miriam's hand and she squeezed back. From the strength of her grip, he guessed that she was finally beginning to feel frightened, though he could not see her face to be sure. Together they climbed down the benches until they were standing on the lowest row.

"By the gods!" exclaimed Marcus suddenly. "It's a man! Miriam, it's a man!" In the faint moonlight he could see that she looked as shocked as he was.

"We've got to do something—we can't just leave him lying there," declared Marcus. "He might still be alive! Look," he said quickly, "you stay here. I'm going to jump down there and drag him out. Don't worry; I'll hold my breath. If for some reason I don't make it, run and get help."

"Wait—I'll come with you," replied Miriam. "It will be easier with two of us."

"No!" shouted Marcus in the sternest voice that he could muster. "One of us needs to stay here in case the other gets caught in the vapors. I'm stronger, so I have to do it. Don't argue with me."

Miriam nodded. Marcus rushed to the far end of the courtyard, which had appeared safe when the priests were making their procession, and leapt down to the pavement. He landed hard, but as far as he could tell he was not injured. Once in the courtyard, he crept slowly toward the cave, fixing his eyes on the body to see if it moved. When he was perhaps twenty feet away, he stopped and took a couple of deep breaths to open up his lungs. Then he sucked in as much air as he could manage and rushed to the man's side. He wore a simple white tunic and lay face down with his head toward the cave, so it was a simple matter for Marcus to grab him by the legs and drag him away from the cave. The man's tunic crept up to his waist as he slid, revealing the wrinkled backside of an elderly man.

When they were a safe distance from the cave, Marcus released his breath and plopped down onto the cold pavement. Miriam had followed him around the seating area and now stood directly above him.

"Are you—are you all right?" she called, her voice quavering with anxiety.

"I'm fine," he replied. "I just need to catch my breath. That man could certainly stand to lose a few pounds." He smiled weakly, but she could not see his face in the shadows.

Suddenly Miriam started. "You didn't check to see if he was still alive!" she exclaimed as she stared down at the body below her. "Check him now! We might still be able to save him."

"I don't think there's much chance of that," replied Marcus. "He didn't show any signs of life as I was pulling him out of there. But I guess I ought to make sure."

Marcus rose to his knees and turned to face the man. He felt the man's neck for a pulse, then grabbed him by the arm and flipped him over so that he could listen to his chest.

Suddenly he fell back in horror. "By Jupiter and all the gods!" he shrieked. "It can't be! I left him..." His voice trailed off as he stared uncomprehendingly into the face before him. There, peering blankly up at him from the pavement, were the eyes of his beloved master.

CHAPTER 5

“AAAARRRGGGHHHH!” BELLOWED MARCUS, lifting his face toward the heavens. The sound echoed off the courtyard walls.

“What is it? What is it?” cried Miriam in a panicked voice. She scrambled onto her chest to gain a better view, but she was afraid to jump down from such a height. Marcus repeated his cry several times, then threw himself down onto the man’s chest and sobbed aloud.

“Marcus, what’s going on down there?” queried Miriam urgently. “It’s too dark for me to see. Who is it? Is it your master’s friend?”

Marcus ignored her at first, but she persisted until he at last felt compelled to answer. “It’s my master!” he cried between sobs. “I left him at home in bed. How did he get here?”

Miriam drew back in stunned silence as Marcus wailed his lament into the night. Even though she had only known Marcus for a short time, she knew how much he valued his master, whom he had described as more like a father than a lord.

“Is he dead?” she called at last. “Have you checked his pulse?” When he did not answer, she repeated her questions, but again received no reply. Screwing up her courage, she stepped over the railing and lowered herself as far as she could reach, then dropped into the courtyard, rolling forward to absorb the fall. Marcus gave no signs of noticing her.

Miriam rushed over to him and knelt to feel Lucius’s pulse. Marcus brushed her arm away. “Leave him alone!” he shouted.

“Marcus!” pleaded Miriam, “we need to make sure that he’s really gone. Let me check for a pulse.”

“It’s no use!” he cried in an agonized voice. “Let him be!”

Ignoring his objection, Miriam lifted the man’s wrist and felt for a heartbeat, but she found it difficult to concentrate over Marcus’s sobbing. Suddenly she had an idea.

“Marcus, let me see him,” she entreated. “You don’t know yet if he’s really dead. If there’s any life left in him, I know how to bring him back.”

She tugged gently on Marcus’s shoulder in an effort to get him to step away and let her do what she could, but he swung his arm wildly toward her and caught her on the jaw. Miriam fell back onto the pavement. She wasn’t hurt, but she was angry. She jumped up and began pounding on his back. Marcus stopped weeping and turned to face her, his fist raised and his face red with anger. Miriam instantly drew back beyond his reach.

"Marcus, don't hit me!" she shouted. "It's me, Miriam! I just want to help!"

Marcus stared blankly at her for a moment, then fell into a heap on the pavement and resumed his sobbing. Miriam crept slowly around him until she reached Lucius's face. She bent down and placed her hand in front of his mouth, but felt nothing. She took a deep breath, placed her mouth over his, and blew hard into his throat. She did this again, and then again.

"What are you doing?" asked Marcus, pausing his weeping long enough to speak.

"It's something that I've seen the midwives do when a child doesn't start breathing on its own," she replied between breaths.

Marcus stopped crying and watched her with a muted sense of hope. For a moment he thought that his master had indeed begun breathing, but then he realized that the rise and fall of his chest was the result of Miriam forcing air into his lungs, not his own activity. Suddenly he had a startling realization.

"Miriam, you need to stop," he said sternly. "He's not coming back, and I'm afraid that you'll be poisoned by the vapors that you're sucking out of his lungs."

"Shut up and help me!" she barked between breaths. "Press down on his chest and force the air out after each of my breaths. It will be more like real breathing."

Marcus saw little hope that it would work, but he was too numb to protest. He did what she asked for several breaths, then stopped.

"Miriam," he said, laying his hand on her arm. "I appreciate what you've done, but you have to stop now. It's no use. He's gone, and there's nothing that we can do to bring him back. It's better this way—his suffering is over. Let him rest in peace."

Miriam stared at him, her face contorted with emotion. Tears flooded her eyes. She turned away from him, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed.

Marcus rose and stepped around his master's fallen body, averting his eyes to avoid looking at it. He knelt down beside Miriam and folded her into his arms. She resisted at first, then fell onto his chest and wept. Soon he was weeping with her.

They sat together and cried in one another's arms until the initial wave of emotion had subsided. Then Marcus began stroking her hair as she rested her head on his shoulder. The pang of loss was still acute, but the necessity of comforting this tender and attractive young woman had softened its edge for now, while the effort drew his mind away from the yawning void.

Suddenly she pulled away from him. "Marcus!" she exclaimed. "He's breathing!"

She pointed toward the body, which she had been facing as she lay in Marcus's arms. "I saw his chest move! I'm sure of it!"

Marcus was stunned by her confident assertion. Could it possibly be true? He turned to look, but saw nothing.

"All I see is a dead man," he said at last. "Your eyes must have been deceived by the shadows."

"No!" she insisted. "There it is again!" She clambered over to Lucius's body and leaned over his face. A moment later a faint ripple of air tousled a few loose strands of her hair.

"There!" she shouted triumphantly. "Did you see that? I could feel it on my hair."

This time Marcus had indeed observed what seemed to be a shallow movement of Lucius's chest. He knelt beside her. Soon he, too, had felt a faint rush of air coming from his master's mouth.

"Miriam, you're a miracle-worker!" he shouted, hugging her tightly to himself and rocking her to and fro. "Surely some god brought you here with me tonight. Thank you, almighty gods!" He raised his hands to the sky in a gesture of devotion.

"We can talk about the gods later," replied Miriam dismissively. "Right now we need to get him some help. He's too heavy for you and I to carry him, and there's no one else here to help. Boost me up to those benches and I'll run home and get my master's litter and some ropes to raise him. We can take him to my house." She rose to her feet.

"But all of his things are at the inn," protested Marcus. "That's where he'd want to go. You stay here with him while I go and find someone who can help me carry him there."

"Listen to me," replied Miriam, seizing his arm. "If anyone was going to come and help us, they would have done so when they heard you bellowing. None of those superstitious fools is going to leave his house on a night like this, especially not after all that ruckus. They probably think that the ghosts are holding some kind of convention down here at the temple." She smiled at her own jest, but Marcus was staring into the distance and seemed not to hear her.

"Perhaps you're right," he said at last. "It wouldn't be safe for me to leave you here alone, and we'd be wasting valuable time if I were unable to find someone to come and help me. If you can bring the litter here, I can get the bearers to help me get him up to his room."

"We'll talk about that later," replied Miriam. "Only my master can say what his litter-bearers will or will not do." She gave Marcus a quick hug, grabbed his hand, and dragged him to the wall. He lifted her onto his shoulders and she clambered back over the rail.

"Be careful!" he shouted after her as she disappeared into the darkness. His voice echoed eerily off the courtyard walls. He spread his cloak over his master's body and lay down beside him to wait.

A half hour later Miriam and four litter-bearers entered the courtyard through the gateway that the priests had used earlier that day. Marcus arose and stared at her in surprise.

“How did you get in here?” he queried.

“The door was open,” she explained as the bearers lifted Lucius’s body gently onto the litter. “There’s a tunnel that runs under the road from the temple area. I thought that I might find something like that when you told me about today’s ceremony, but I didn’t really expect it to be open. That must be how he got in. I doubt that he would have jumped from up there as we did.” She pointed up toward the rows of benches.

“That makes sense,” observed Marcus, “but I never would have thought of it myself. It’s a good thing that it was you rather than me who went for help. I was lying here trying to keep him warm and I must have fallen asleep, since I didn’t hear you coming.”

“That’s all right,” replied Miriam, laying a hand gently on his arm. “You needed the rest after all that’s happened tonight.”

The bearers did their work quickly, covering Lucius’s limp body with a stack of blankets that they had brought with them and hoisting him onto their shoulders. Before Marcus could say anything, they were pacing rapidly through the tunnel, across the temple square, and out into the street that ran between the square and the forum.

“Wait!” he shouted into the darkness. “No one has told you where to take him!”

“You’re too late,” replied Miriam, rushing to keep up with him. “My mistress was awake when I got home, and when I told her where I had been and what had happened, she took me immediately to see my master. When he heard that your master had stayed with his brother in Pergamon and was carrying a letter of recommendation from him, he called the steward and gave orders for him to be brought directly to our house. He also sent for his personal physician to tend to him as soon as he arrives.”

“But...,” Marcus started to protest, but Miriam raised her hand and cut him off. “It’s not your decision,” she explained. “My master has already given the orders. A room is being prepared for your master, and I’m supposed to bring you with me to watch over him. You can arrange for your master’s things to be brought to the house in the morning.”

“But I...,” he tried again. Miriam halted and stared at him.

“Stop!” she commanded. “It’s—not—your—decision.” She emphasized each word as if talking to a child. “You’re a slave, and you can’t override my master’s de-

cree. Now stop talking and come on—we need to catch up with them.” She took his hand and began tugging him in the direction in which the bearers had gone. He resisted for a moment, then followed her.

They reached the main road just in time to see the litter disappear around a corner.

“By Mercury, those guys are fast!” observed Marcus.

“They’re all young and strong,” replied Miriam. “It was all that I could do to keep up with them on our way here. I had to ask them to slow down a couple of times so that I could catch my breath. But the litter was empty then; I’m as surprised as you are at how fast they can move when it’s full. Still, they have to tire some time. We should be able to catch up with them before they reach the house. But we’ll have to walk fast.”

Marcus picked up the pace until he could hear Miriam breathing heavily beside him. “That’s a little too fast,” she puffed at last. “My legs are shorter than yours, so I have to work harder.”

“I’m sorry,” said Marcus. He slackened his steps somewhat until her rate of breathing subsided.

“That’s better,” observed Miriam. They continued together in silence for another block.

“I’m surprised that your master keeps a litter at his house,” said Marcus at last. “Judging from where he lives, I wouldn’t have thought that he could afford such a luxury.”

“I’ve not been with him for long,” replied Miriam, still breathing heavily from the exertion, “but from what I’ve seen, I think he could afford to live anywhere in the city. But like the majority of Jews, he prefers to live among his own people, and they in turn tend to congregate around our prayer houses so as to avoid walking too far on the Sabbath. He’s a modest man, not one of those showy aristocrats; if not for the quality of his clothing, you might not know that he was a wealthy man.”

“I see,” replied Marcus when Miriam paused for a moment to catch her breath. “But when I think of people who keep litters, I think of those ‘showy aristocrats’ that you mentioned who parade around the city with their slaves announcing who they are and pushing people out of their way.”

“Oh, my master isn’t like that at all,” observed Miriam. “He uses a litter because of his health. He had some kind of illness as a child—or perhaps he was born sickly, I forget—and he’s been weak ever since. He can’t walk very far without feeling exhausted, so he uses a litter to get around. That’s why he came here in the first place—for the waters. His family actually lives in Laodicea, where his father owns a big wool business. I’ve heard that they made their fortune selling tents to the Roman armies that swept back and forth through the area during the civil wars. That’s also how they got their Roman citizenship.”

Marcus had known from their three-part Roman name that the Valeriuses were Roman citizens, but he had not heard how they came by the honor. His master would be happy to learn, if he did not know already, that the family did not descend from a line of freedmen as did Theodorus.

"My master owns a dyeing workshop here in the city," Miriam continued, "where the family's best wool is sent for processing. People say that fabrics dyed in the waters of Hierapolis keep their colors longer than those made elsewhere. They also make a purple dye that's favored by the wealthy. That little shop has made the family's cloth famous and my master rich. Of course, he doesn't go there very often; he has slaves to manage everything for him."

As they turned a corner, they caught a glimpse of the litter moving up the street toward the base of the hill ahead of them. "There it is!" shouted Marcus. "I can see it clearly in the moonlight."

"I see it also," agreed Miriam. "I think we're gaining on them."

They caught up with the litter-bearers a couple of blocks before Valerius's house. Marcus came up alongside the litter and tried to pull back the curtain to see how his master was doing, but it was tied shut, presumably to protect him from the chilly evening air. He could not ask the bearers to stop and let him take a look, since they had been ordered to get Lucius to the house as quickly as possible. He took comfort in the knowledge that he would be examined by a physician as soon as they reached the house.

While Marcus walked beside the litter, Miriam ran ahead to tell the porter that they were coming. By the time they arrived at the door, a light had been brought out into the street and a well-dressed man who looked to be the master of the household was standing outside waiting for them. The litter-bearers lowered their load to the ground, then opened the cover and lifted Lucius out on a blanket.

"Take him to the rear bedroom," said the man in a businesslike voice. "My physician is waiting for him there."

Miriam rushed into the house ahead of the bearers, leaving Marcus to follow on his own. No one paid him any attention until Lucius was settled into bed and the physician asked him to recount what had happened.

"And this is how you found him?" inquired the physician, gesturing toward Lucius. "Is this what he looked like?"

Marcus peered down at his master and surveyed his appearance. If he had not known better, he would have sworn that he was merely sleeping. On closer inspection, however, he noticed that Lucius's skin bore a bluish tint, his lips were red, and his abdomen protruded more than usual, probably from the vapors that he had taken in. Otherwise he looked normal.

"I can't say what he looked like when we arrived, since it was dark where he

was lying,” Marcus replied. He explained how he had supposed that Lucius was dead when he found him lying still and not breathing. Then he told how Miriam had breathed life back into his body using a technique that she had seen midwives apply to unresponsive babies.

“That’s quite a tale,” observed the physician when he was done. “I’ve heard plenty of stories of people who died after getting too close to that cave, but I’ve never heard of anyone who came so near to dying and yet survived. He wouldn’t have made it if you two had not happened upon him when you did. You both deserve to be commended.”

“I agree,” said the master of the house in a hearty voice that belied his thin frame. Marcus had not known that he was standing in the doorway behind him, and he peered at him now as if for the first time. He was short, not much taller than Miriam, with dark eyes hooded by thick brows that nearly met above his aquiline nose. His thin black hair lay in curls along a broad forehead that was matched by an equally broad chin. His narrow mouth was turned up at the corners in a smile.

“I thank you both on behalf of my brother’s friend,” he continued, “since he is unable to express his own thanks at the moment. I’m sure that he will add his own gratitude once he is restored to health.”

“Speaking of restoration,” he said, turning to the doctor, “how do you see his current condition?”

“It’s hard to say,” replied the physician. “He seems to be in a deep sleep such as men sometimes experience after receiving a serious blow on the head or drinking too much poppy juice. More often than not such a sleep ends in death, but I’ve known of instances where the person wakes up and recovers as if nothing had happened to them. Until he stirs, all that you can do is keep him warm and move him around from time to time to keep sores from developing on his skin due to lack of movement. You’ll also need to clean his bed regularly, since he won’t be able to control his bodily functions. You can try to feed him some warm broth now and then, but it will probably be a few days before he’s able to take it, if indeed he ever does. I’d also suggest having someone stay with him at all times to monitor his condition. I’ll stop by every day to see how he’s doing, but let me know immediately if you see any notable changes in him, whether for good or for ill.”

“Thank you for the sage advice, Theopompos,” said the master. “How long do you think it will be before we know the outcome?”

“It’s impossible to say,” explained the physician. “Sometimes they’re gone in a day or two while at other times they hang on for weeks or even months. If he’s going to recover, we should know within a couple of weeks.”

“That’s helpful to know,” remarked the master. “We will follow your instruc-

tions scrupulously. His slave can stay here with him, and I'll put Miriam in charge of tending to his needs and giving him the kind of care that only a woman can provide. She nursed her previous mistress through her dying days, so she knows something about caring for the sick. Do either of you have any questions for the physician?"

"No, sir," they said in unison. Marcus gave Miriam a quick smile as her master turned to have a parting word with the physician. He could not believe his luck. Not only would he be able to stay close to his master and monitor his condition, but he also had an excuse to spend time with Miriam on a daily basis. He uttered a silent prayer to Lady Fortune to favor his efforts with the young woman. Only later did he think to add a petition for the goddess to restore his master's health.

THE next morning Marcus made arrangements for Miriam to sit with his master while he went to the inn to pack up Lucius's belongings for delivery to their new home. There was no need to rush, since the Jewish rule against working on the Sabbath meant that nothing of substance could be brought into the house until the following day. And even if he had been in a hurry, rushing would have been impossible due to the crowds that were thronging to the theater to enjoy a day of festal competitions. Still, Marcus was eager to have everything ready when their new host's slaves arrived the next day to help him carry Lucius's things to their new residence.

Before he commenced packing, however, he stopped by Attalos's room to inform him what had occurred. He was entitled to know not only because he was Lucius's only friend in Hierapolis but also because he was expecting Lucius to join him for some of the day's activities. Attalos found it difficult at first to accept what Marcus was saying; after all, Lucius had seemed quite normal when they parted the previous day, if perhaps a bit pensive.

"Now I understand why he was asking me all those questions about the cave," remarked Attalos as he pondered the matter. "It seems that he had it in his mind at the time but didn't want to tell me. Or could I have given him the idea by calling so much attention to the cave? Either way, I feel responsible, since he probably would not have gone to the festival if not for me. I have to see him and find out."

Marcus explained that his master was in no state to answer questions, but he promised to call on Attalos when he was ready to leave and take him to see Lucius.

Upon reaching his master's room, Marcus sat down at the small desk in his master's room, pulled out an inkwell, a reed pen, and a sheet of papyrus, and wrote a long letter to Lucius's friend Servius Frugi relating everything that had happened.

He thought about writing to Selena also but decided against it, not only because Lucius had expressly forbidden him to do so but also because he thought it unwise to alarm her in her current condition.

He began his letter by explaining what had happened at the Askleion and how it had affected Lucius's mental state, including his stated intention to die at Hierapolis rather than returning to Antioch. Then he narrated what had occurred at the cave, including Lucius's apparent attempt to end his life and his present uncertain status.

He thought about omitting the part about Lucius trying to kill himself, but he decided that Servius needed the full story in order to understand where things stood at present and to gauge what he should do next. After all, there was no shame in what Lucius had done; most Romans accepted suicide as a means of avoiding the indignities of a slow, painful death such as Lucius would inevitably have experienced. In fact, now that he thought about it, Marcus was surprised that his master had not mentioned the possibility long ago. Perhaps he had been hinting at it when he spoke so confidently of ending his life at Hierapolis, though if that had been his intention Marcus had never understood it. He wondered what he would have done if Lucius had informed him of his plan: would he have tried to stop him, or would he have accepted it as a graceful exit from a painful and humiliating situation? He couldn't decide. Fortunately for him, he had not been required to face that question.

He closed the letter with an urgent appeal for Servius to come to Hierapolis or send someone in his place to bring Lucius back to Antioch. If he lived, he could finish his days in the care of his family; if he died, he could be buried with his ancestors in his home city. He left it to Servius to judge how much to tell Selena, but he implied that it might be better to relate only the broad outlines of Lucius's story so as not to upset her. He also left open the question of whether Selena should accompany Servius or his agent to Hierapolis, since he himself was unsure what was best in that case. If she were here and Lucius were to regain consciousness, she could either persuade him to return home or care for him in his dying days. But there was also the possibility that the long trip or the shock of seeing Lucius in his present state—or worse yet, the discovery that he had died before she could reach him—might cause her to lose the baby. Marcus would not want to be responsible for such a dread occurrence, especially when that child would be Lucius's last gift to his young bride and a lasting reminder of his love for her.

When he was done, he rolled up the letter, softened a nub of wax in the wick of his lamp, affixed the wax to the seam of the roll, and used Lucius's sealing ring to authorize the document. Then he began sorting out his master's possessions and packing everything into the various chests and boxes in which they had ar-

rived. This took longer than he had expected, so he was not surprised when Attalos knocked on the door while he was working to find out if he was still there. Marcus reassured him that he would stop by his room and get him before he left.

It was nearly midday by the time he was done. He made his way to Attalos's apartment and told him about the letter. Attalos would be leaving in a few days, and Marcus wanted him to carry it with him as far as the road to Antioch and find someone to deliver it.

"I'm happy to help," replied Attalos when Marcus presented his request. "If I can't find someone going that way, I'll send one of my own slaves to Antioch to ensure that the letter reaches its destination. It's the least that I can do for my friend, especially since I'm at least partly responsible for his inability to return home on his own."

Marcus assured him for the second time that his master had stated his intention to end his life at Hierapolis before he met Attalos and suggested—perhaps more strongly than he felt—that he would have found some other way to do it if he had not heard about the cave. Attalos seemed to take comfort in these words, but he was still eager to see Lucius. Marcus returned to his room and picked up the few items that he had laid out to take with him—a fresh tunic, a few toiletry implements, Lucius's portable shrine—then left with Attalos for Valerius's house.

As they turned onto the main street, Marcus was surprised to see that the streets were not at all crowded as they had been in the morning. Attalos explained that most of the citizens were at the theater watching the athletic and musical contests that marked the second day of the festival. The theater stood on the hillside above the cemetery where Marcus and Lucius had entered the city, so most of the traffic problems would occur around the gate at the end of town today. Marcus was glad that they would not have to force their way through a mob as they had done the previous day when the streets were full of festival-goers.

When they arrived at their destination, Attalos was shown immediately into Valerius's office while Marcus went to check on his master.

"How is he?" he asked Miriam as he entered the room. She was sitting on the floor beside the bed with some sewing materials on her lap.

"The same," she replied as she rose to greet him. "I've been with him the whole morning and he hasn't moved. It's odd—he looks so peaceful, like he's just taking a nap, but he doesn't respond to touch or sound and he wouldn't take any food. I shifted him around a bit as the physician ordered, but he was as limp as a wet rag. I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither have I," echoed Marcus. "But the physician did say that it could be a while before he wakes up—if he ever does." Marcus paused, overwhelmed by a sudden surge of tears. Miriam stepped up and slid her arms around him, and he

embraced her in return. There was nothing sensual in the act; it felt more like a mother holding her child after it had fallen and scraped its knee. Still, the feeling was so warm and pleasant that Marcus did not want it to end.

Suddenly he caught the sound of two men talking in the hallway. He pulled back from Miriam just in time to avoid being observed by Valerius and Attalos as they entered the room.

"How is he?" asked Attalos. Miriam repeated what she had told Marcus, then stepped back from the bed so that he and Valerius could examine Lucius for themselves. The two men stood beside the bed for some time discussing his condition and lamenting the loss to his family if he were to die in Hierapolis. Attalos related what he knew about Lucius's history while Marcus filled in additional details when asked. When the subject was exhausted, they stood together in silence for a long while and gazed at him.

"I can see that my friend is in good hands," said Attalos at last, "so I'm going to leave you now. But if you don't mind, I'll check in on him over the next few days before I head home to Aphrodisias."

"You're welcome to return any time," replied Valerius. "It seems that you're the only person in Hierapolis who knows him other than this young man here." He waved his hand toward Marcus, who made a mental note to look for an opportunity to remind him of his name. "When one is so far from home, one needs all the friends that one can get."

The two men departed, leaving Marcus and Miriam alone together again. Miriam asked how the packing had gone and Marcus told her about the letter that he had written and given to Attalos.

"It will be interesting to see how he responds," said Miriam, referring to the addressee of the letter. "Do you really think he'll come and take you and your master home?"

"I think he'll try," replied Marcus. "But it's possible that he won't get here in time. There's a high mountain ridge between here and Antioch, and it's not uncommon to see snow on the hills above my city this time of year. He might have to wait for a stretch of warmer weather, or he might even be forced to give up entirely until spring. I won't be surprised if I receive a letter from him a few weeks from now saying that he can't make it. And even if he tries, I doubt that he'll get here before...." His voice trailed off and his eyes fell to the floor, leaving the end of his sentence floating on the air.

"So you don't think your master is going to recover?" probed Miriam cautiously.

"He's going to die one way or the other," answered Marcus, looking her squarely in the eye. "It would be easier for him if his spirit were to depart while he's asleep

than to endure the suffering that that accursed illness will inflict upon him before he is released. I was thinking this morning that I might have actually done him a disservice by rescuing him from that cave. He knew what he was doing, and it might have been better if I had accepted his decision and allowed him to die.”

“But Marcus,” Miriam objected, “you couldn’t have left him lying there.” She laid her hand on his arm as she spoke. “You did what any decent person would have done in your place—you saw a man in distress and you saved him. You were a hero. You can’t blame yourself for preserving your master’s life against his will—after all, you didn’t even know that it was him when you acted.”

“That’s true,” replied Marcus after a moment’s thought. “I guess I feel like I’ve been the victim of some cruel joke. It’s like one of the gods wanted my master to suffer and used my good intentions to thwart him from escaping his torment. Sometimes the gods are like that, you know.”

“Perhaps your gods are like that, but not ours,” replied Miriam defiantly. “The god of Israel is never arbitrary or cruel. Sometimes he sends suffering upon us as a form of discipline or to test our faith, but he doesn’t enjoy watching us suffer. His judgments are righteous, but his mercy is sure. His love endures forever.”

“You sound like some of the people that I heard when we were in Pergamon,” said Marcus. “We actually visited one of your prayer houses a couple of times. It was odd—there were no sacrifices, only prayers and readings from their holy book followed by a philosophical-sounding lecture. I didn’t follow most of it, but I got the impression that everyone there believed that their god was the only god and that he cared for the Jews more than for other people. That impression was reinforced later when I overheard my master conversing with your master’s brother. I’d never heard anything like it, though I guess I knew in broad terms that this was what Jews believed. Have you always been a Jew?”

Marcus had been working hard all morning, and he was growing tired of standing. Sensing that this was likely to turn into a lengthy conversation, he sat down on the floor and waved for Miriam to sit down next to him. She smiled and accepted his invitation.

“Yes, I was born of a Jewish mother,” replied Miriam when she had made herself comfortable. “That’s what makes a person a Jew, not who the father was. That’s convenient for us slaves, since we often don’t know who our fathers are. Did you know your father?”

“No, I never knew either of my parents,” answered Marcus. He was tempted to tell her what he had learned at Pergamon about his mother, but he refrained. He wasn’t sure yet if he wanted Miriam to know about his past, since she might start pressing him to become—or rather, live like—a Jew, and her insistence could drive a wedge between them. Instead, he told her what little he remembered about his

early years in Lucius's household. Then she returned the favor.

"My mother was a slave in the household of a wealthy citizen of Philadelphia," she began. "She served the mistress of the family her entire life, and she taught me her skills so that I could do the same for her daughter. The daughter was around my age, so we grew up together in the household. Since she was the only girl in the family, we became very close—almost like sisters."

"My mistress, whose name was Prima, had been betrothed to the son of a local nobleman when she was very young," she continued. "Unlike many such marriages, they actually liked each other, and she was happy when her wedding day arrived. I, of course, went with her to her new home, where she made me her chief attendant. Everything went well for the first few months of their marriage."

Miriam paused for a moment and peered at Marcus, then lowered her eyes to the floor. When she raised it again, there were tears in her eyes.

"This is where the story gets difficult," she continued, rubbing her eyes with her fingers. "That's why I didn't want to tell you about it when you asked me earlier; it's painful for me to talk about it, and rather embarrassing, too." She peered down at the floor again.

"You don't have to tell me right now," said Marcus, laying his hand on the leg that lay closest to him. "We'll have plenty of time together in the coming days."

"Now is as good a time as any," she replied, smiling gratefully at this expression of concern. "It won't get any easier, and your master doesn't appear to need us at the moment." She raised herself up on her knees and peeked at Lucius's face as if to verify the truth of her statement, then lowered herself back to the ground and continued.

"About a year into their marriage, my mistress grew ill. The family physician was called in, and he determined that she was with child. He attributed her illness to the pregnancy and assured her that she would feel better in a few weeks. But weeks turned into months and she remained weak. Her belly also hurt more than usual as it grew larger. Other physicians were called in, but they all disagreed about what was going on and none of their medicines did her any good. At last my master decided to bring her here to see if the waters could help her. He had an uncle in Hierapolis, so we stayed at his house."

"I nursed her through her illness," she continued, her eyes again brimming with tears, "and I saw how it wore her down. Even though she was not a Jew, I had taught her a few prayers in Hebrew when we were children, and we prayed them together from time to time when the pain was especially great. I also gave her a couple of amulets that I borrowed from Jewish friends that were supposed to ward off evil spirits and protect a woman during pregnancy. They were shaped like little tablets and contained Hebrew words copied from our Scriptures. I can't tell you

what they said because I never learned how to read, but people told me that they were powerful. She wore them around her neck. My master wasn't fond of having a Jew caring for his wife, but he put up with me for her sake, and he never tried to prevent her from appealing to the god of Israel along with the gods of the family when she prayed for healing. He loved her very much, and he was willing to try anything that might restore her health and give him a healthy heir."

"One day, not long after we arrived at his uncle's house, his aunt heard the two of us praying and came in to see what was going on. She was horrified to discover her niece clutching a strange amulet and praying in an unknown language as she lay on her sickbed. She reported it to her husband, who accused me of practicing Jewish magic and ordered me to stop. When my mistress defended me, he..."

Miriam broke off her narrative, overcome by emotion. Marcus patted her leg with his hand.

"You don't have to go on," he said. "I don't want to cause you pain."

"Thank you," replied Miriam, wiping her eyes, "but I have to keep going or I'll never get it out. I need to tell someone what happened, and I think that I can trust you."

"As I was saying," she resumed, struggling to keep her voice under control, "my master's uncle accused me of practicing Jewish magic—as if I know anything about such matters—and my mistress tried to defend me. That only made him angrier; he's one of those men who can't stand women talking back to him. He went to my master and told him that I was the source of her sickness—that I had used magic to take control over both of their minds and that I meant to kill her and her child and marry him myself. He also insinuated that I would do the same to him eventually in order to take possession of all his goods."

She paused for a moment, closing her eyes and squeezing her fists to control her anger, then went on. "I felt sick when my mistress told me what he had said, and I assured both her and her husband that there wasn't a shred of truth in the story. My master seemed to accept my explanation of what we were doing, but his aunt and uncle continued to poison his mind against me. As my mistress grew worse, he began to speak of sending me away. But she refused to let me go and defended me to her death, which came a couple of months after we arrived here."

She paused again to bring her emotions under control. Marcus rubbed her leg and sat silently waiting for her to continue.

"I was heartbroken," she said at last, "but her poor husband was distraught beyond measure. At first he raged against the gods for ignoring his prayers and the many offerings that he had made on her behalf. Then he turned on me. He accused me of murdering her—as if I could possibly do anything to hurt my dearest friend!—and ordered me out of his house, telling me never to return. He wouldn't

even let me pack up my few possessions, much less give me the money that my mistress had set aside for me over the years in the household account. I was left with nothing—absolutely nothing.”

Her voice suddenly broke; she could no longer hold back the tears. Marcus threw an arm around her and drew her close to him. She leaned on his shoulder and wept softly for a while, then wiped her eyes on his sleeve and pulled away.

“There’s not much more to the story,” she said, peering blankly at the floor tiles as she spoke. “I had visited one of the local Jewish prayer houses a couple of times after we arrived here, and since I knew no one else in the city, I made my way there in the hope that I might bump into someone who could help me. When I reached it, however, the doors were locked. I felt so wretched that I threw myself down on the curb in front of the building and sobbed.”

“An older woman who happened to be walking by recognized me from the prayer house,” she went on, “and she stopped to ask me what was wrong. When I told her what had happened and all that I had lost, she felt sorry for me and took me home with her. She was a kitchen slave in the house where I live now. She took me in to see her mistress, and when she heard my story, she promised to take me in, stating that she couldn’t possibly leave a young Jewish girl homeless on the street. That was back in the early summer, and I’ve lived there ever since.” She looked up at Marcus and smiled weakly to mark the end of her story.

“That’s quite a tale,” observed Marcus when she was done. “You’re lucky that that old woman happened to be passing by when you needed help. Lady Fortune was surely watching over you.”

“No,” she objected, “it was the God of Israel who sent her to me. He hears the cries of the needy and performs justice for those who are abused. Remember, I was sitting on the steps of his house when it happened.”

“Yes, I had forgotten that point,” agreed Marcus. “If you think that it was your people’s god who helped you, who am I to argue? There are so many gods in the universe that I suppose there could be one who watches especially over your people as you say.”

“That’s not what we believe,” said Miriam, forgetting her sorrow in her eagerness to defend her people. “Our Scriptures tell us that there is only one god over all the nations. Where people like you see a host of gods at work in the universe, causing the sun to move across the sky, the seasons to change, the earth to bear fruit, and everything else that is good and pleasant, we see the hand of a single almighty god who rules over all. Where you see dark forces and angry deities causing suffering and evil in the world, we see the hand of a loving father who disciplines us for our good, though we also recognize that some suffering results from our own wrongful actions or those of others. It is this all-powerful and all-loving god who

watches over the people of Israel, not some minor deity in a vast pantheon of gods whose will can be thwarted by other gods or even by humans. The lord of the universe has no equals and brooks no opposition.” Miriam’s face was defiant by the time she completed her oration.

Marcus was speechless for a moment. He had heard similar ideas from the other Valerius with whom they had stayed in Pergamon, but he was surprised that an uneducated slave girl like Miriam could offer such an articulate defense of her faith. Where had she learned such things? She certainly could not have read them in a book. Did the Jews provide schooling for women at those prayer houses of theirs?

“You speak well,” he said at last, hoping to avert a lengthy discussion with a compliment. “I can see that this is a subject that we will have to discuss at greater length in the days ahead. But if you don’t mind, I’d like to go back to the end of your story and ask you to clarify something for me. What is your present status in your master’s household? I had thought that you were his slave, but it seems now that he never purchased you from your previous master. Yet I doubt seriously that a wealthy man like him would treat you as a guest. You’re not a runaway, since your former master threw you out of the house and told you never to return, then left the city. But as far as I am aware, that alone is not enough to give you your freedom. Where does that leave you?”

“I’m not sure myself,” admitted Miriam. “It seems to me that I still belong to my old master. When a man lends one of his slaves to his friend for a season, the slave doesn’t stop being the first man’s property. If my old master were to return to Hierapolis and claim me, I suspect that my new master—if it’s proper for me to call him that—would have to hand me over. But then I think of how exposed babies, whether slave-born or free, become the property of the person who finds and rears them, and I wonder if my case is more like theirs. After all, I was abandoned just as they are. I really don’t know.”

“In practice, however,” she pressed on before Marcus could venture his opinion, “I don’t think it matters. For now, I live and work in Valerius’s house and I do what I’m told, just as if I were one of his slaves. But could I leave if I wanted? Could he send a slave-catcher after me if I ran away? I don’t think so unless he were to lie about being my owner, and he’s not that kind of person. Still, I see no reason to test him. He’s given me a place to stay, food to eat, and clothes to wear, and I’m happy to serve him in return, even if he can’t legally compel me to stay. I’d much rather live under the roof of a fellow Jew than a gentile, especially after what I experienced before coming here.”

“I understand,” said Marcus. “It seems to me that free citizens always prefer to live with people who share their customs and language, while we slaves have no choice but to live wherever our masters take us. I met a slave in Pergamon—a

farmhand belonging to Valerius's brother, a red-haired giant of a man—who came from Britain, and he would dearly love to return to his homeland and his people. From what he said, I gathered that their customs are very different than ours, and his Greek wasn't very good, either. But unless he happens to meet another Briton one of these day, he's doomed to spend his entire life around people like us. If you have a chance to be with your own people, I can understand why you would want to hold onto it. Would you also want to return to your homeland if you had the chance?"

"Philadelphia is the only place that I know other than Hierapolis," answered Miriam. "I can't imagine living anywhere else. Sometimes, when I hear stories about our ancient ancestors living in the land of Israel, I wonder what it would be like to live there now. They call it Judea today. I've heard members of our community talk about what it was like to visit the temple there—they say it's one of the great wonders of the world—and during those times I've occasionally dreamed about going there myself. But it's never been a burning passion for me, most likely because I knew that it could never happen. It's different if you've actually lived in a place and been taken away from it, like your friend in Pergamon."

"I'm sure you're right," agreed Marcus. "I never had any desire to travel beyond my home city until my master brought me with him on this trip. Now that I've seen more of the world, my outlook has changed; I'll never be the same again. For example, I never would have guessed that I would be sitting here talking with a pretty Jewish girl and enjoying it so much."

Marcus grinned and patted Miriam's leg as he said these words. She blushed and lowered her eyes, but he could see that she was smiling. He slid his hand further up her leg.

"I really need to go now," said Miriam, jumping suddenly to her feet and brushing him away. "My mistress told me to come and see her after you returned to the house, and she's surely heard by now that you are here. She's going to be wondering where I am."

Marcus was perplexed by her sudden change of tone. "If you have to go, then go," he said, trying his best to control his annoyance. "From the look of things"—here he glanced at his master—"I think we will have plenty of time to talk in the days ahead. You mentioned several things that I'd like to follow up on at some point."

"That will be—pleasant," said Miriam, blushing again. "Now I must go. I'll check back later in the afternoon to see how he's doing."

"You're always welcome here," replied Marcus as she strode toward the doorway. She paused for a moment, turned her head, and gave him a quick smile before disappearing behind the frame.

Marcus stared after her, willing her to return, but she did not. He knew that he would see her again that afternoon and every subsequent day until his master either recovered or died, but he still felt pain in the parting. He could not comprehend why this should be so—he had known many girls in his day, and none of them had touched him as Miriam had. He wondered for a moment if there might be some truth in that story about Jewish magic, but he quickly dismissed the thought.

At last he pulled a chair to where he could see Lucius's face and sat down. As he watched his master's slow, rhythmic breathing, his mind drifted to an image of himself and Miriam living together in a little hut in her homeland of Judea. He had no idea what Judea looked like—indeed, he was not even sure where it was except that it was somewhere off in the east—but he could still imagine. He saw them eating, sleeping, working, and raising children together. He saw them going together to visit the great temple that she had mentioned and participating in its rituals surrounded by their family. He saw them growing old together and being buried there in the land of her ancestors. Slowly the room around him began to fade until it dissolved entirely into the world of his dreams.